

BRUCE TELOPA

Tuning Keys, 2013
Oil on Canvas 30 x 42 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

A couple of the Rodrigues look at me in shock, but Horse Teeth just bows his head in subservience to his presiding officer. If I were in his shoes, I'd be screaming my sun-blistered head off at him, you can be sure of that. But I'm not going to risk my neck for this guy's sake if he doesn't have the stones to at least protest. The ship is overcome with jubilation at the sight of land, but Horse Teeth just stands there, barely able to muster a fake grin.

Flanked by the Niña and the Pinta, we shorten sail to wait out the night, and now it's clear that there's some kind of land mass on the horizon. Nobody's sleeping. The boys are buzzing with relief and excitement. Just yesterday, the Salami had to do some real tap dancing to keep his spooked beasts from hurling him into the briny. Hell, I probably would have been tossed in behind him.

But now all that tension is gone. The Rodrigues are grinning and hollering and talking about warehouses and wild game. I'm the one who's uneasy now. I had counted on Columbus's predictions to be total horseshit. Even as stupid as I am, I knew there's no way in heaven or hell that we're remotely close to Asia. Frankly, I was gearing up for a full-on mutiny, and the way I saw it, Columbus would almost certainly be run through—then probably barbecued: trust me, there is no barbarism too gruesome for berserk seamen—then two of the ships would turn back with the crybabies, and hopefully there would be enough real men to press on in the last ship. I would consider it an act of heroism to die out here in a place where no man in the history of the earth had ever lived or died. But I'm weird that way.

This, though, I didn't see coming. The admiral, jowly and pompous, announces to the crew that we've probably reached the shores of Japan and that he, along with his translators and the Pinzon brothers—the captains of the other two boats—would venture forth at dawn to present the queen's standard.

As the sky purples into dawn, the shore begins to come into clearer focus; and by the time the sun's rays knife over the eastern horizon, we see another wondrous sight—people. “Well, hang me to die,” exclaims one of the older Rodrigues, “but I believe these ones are naked as day!” The Salami peers through the looking glass for an eternal minute. Then he holds up the glass, offering it to others. It is like throwing a carcass to a pack of starving dogs.

I say it before I even think about it. “It's something else, some in-between, undiscovered land. It's a new world.”

As we watch Columbus's party drift to the surf in the longboat, flying the Spanish standard, I take advantage of the lull in the conversation to blurt out my suspicions.

“Fellas, I'm sorry, but there ain't no way this is Japan.”

“And what do you know of Japan, you scoundrel?” says the one bald Rodrigo who hates me the most.

“Nothing. But this doesn't smell right. Look, I doubt you fools know any of this, but back in Europe, Columbus couldn't find one mathematician who would confirm his theory that he could reach Asia by boat before we ran out of supplies. Not one. In Portugal, Britain, Spain, everybody told him the earth was much bigger than he thought it was.”

The old diseased Rodrigo laughs, “Well, what's before your very eyes, then? A mirage?”

I say it before I even think about it. “It's something else, some in-between, undiscovered land. It's a new world.”

“New world?” someone howls, and then the whole crew dissolves in laughter. I wonder, what the hell is so funny? Is the idea of an undiscovered continent in the middle of the Atlantic that ridiculous? Idiots! Here we are at maybe a turning point in world history and I'm surrounded by chuckleheads.

As we wait for Columbus's signal to swim ashore, something astonishing happens. We watch as several of the naked natives jump into the surf and begin swimming out toward us. In a surprisingly short time, we see several heads bobbing in the water around us, grinning and shouting incomprehensible syllables.