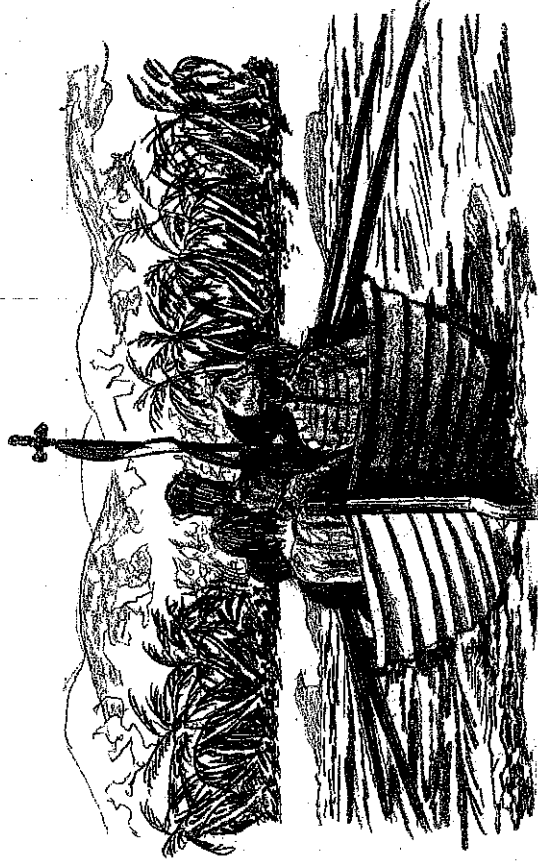


land. Tomorrow our feet will touch soil, and I can assure my dear mother in the hills of Spain that no one will get much sleep on board the *Santa María* tonight!

October 12

A lush green island was there in the morning, and our three ships approached it carefully, maneuvering through breakers and a threatening barrier reef. We could see clear down to the reef in the sparkling blue waters as we sailed through. And, ah, it is truly land, truly earth, here so far from Spain. The *Santa María* led the way into the sheltered bay of the island and got a mark of only five fathoms' depth. We anchored there and barely paused to admire the breathtaking beauty. Small boats were prepared, armed, and lowered, and in these some of us went ashore. Out of respect, all waited while Christopher Columbus leaped out of the boat, his feet the first to touch this new land. (I wondered what my mother would say if she knew her son had lost the 10,000 maravedis to the Captain, who claimed it for himself.)

The Captain carried the royal banner of our king



and queen, and as everyone else scrambled out of the boats and secured them in the white sand, he thrust the banner into the earth and then sank down to his knees and said a prayer of thanksgiving for our safe arrival in India. Others dropped to their knees around him. Diego was beside me, and he clapped his hand on my shoulder. I knew he was happy to be on land again. I was, too, although I have been at sea so long that even on land the ground seems to buckle and sway beneath my feet.

The Captain made a solemn ceremony and formally took possession of the land for the king and queen, naming it San Salvador. We all witnessed this, and then little by little we noticed something else—there were people stepping out from the trees, beautiful, strong, naked people, with tanned skin and straight black hair. My mother would have lowered her eyes or looked away, as I have seen her do in our home when someone dresses, but I could not take my eyes off them. Some had boldly painted their bodies or their faces, some only their eyes, some their noses. They were so beautiful and gentle. They walked towards us slowly but without fear, smiling and reaching out their hands.

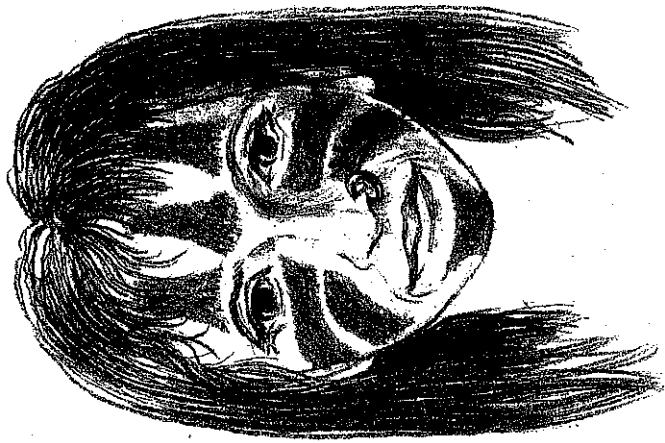
The sailors watched them in wonder, and when these people came near, the crew gave them coins, little red caps, whatever they had in their pockets. Columbus himself showed one native his sword, and the native, never having seen such an instrument before, slid his fingers along the sharp edge and looked startled at his fingers that dripped blood into the sand.

Everyone was smiling and so friendly. Close up, we could see how clear and gentle their eyes were, how broad and unusual their foreheads. The Captain especially noted and said to one of his men, "See the gold in that one's nose? See how docile they are? They will be easy. We will take six back with us to Spain."

I think at this, too, my mother would have lowered her eyes.

October 16

So much has happened. There is so much to remember and record, and so much I do not think I want to tell my mother. Perhaps I will keep these letters to myself after all. The natives think that we are angels from God. They swim out to us, wave,



throw themselves in the sand, hold their hands and faces to the sky, and sing and call to us. The crew loves it, and no one loves it better than Columbus. He lifts his open palms to them like a priest at mass. I sometimes wonder if he doesn't believe these natives himself just a little bit.

They come right out to the ship in swift dugouts that sit forty men, and sometimes as they approach us the dugout tips, but in minutes they right it and begin bailing it out with hollow gourds. All day

long the Indians row out to see us, bringing gifts of cotton thread, shell-tipped spears, and even brightly colored parrots that sit on our shoulders and cry out in human voices. For their trouble we give them more worthless beads, bells, and tastes of honey, which they marvel at.

The six native men Columbus has taken aboard are not very happy. One by one they are escaping, which I cannot help but say I am happy for. One jumped overboard and swam away, and another jumped overboard when a dugout came up alongside us in the darkness. Some of the crew seized another man coming alongside in a dugout and forced him on board. Columbus tried to convince him of our good intentions through sign language and broken words and more gifts of glass beads and junk, and the man rowed back to some people on the shore. They stood talking to each other and pointing at our ship. Columbus smiled and was convinced they know we are from God. Me, I am not so sure they will believe it for much longer.



October 23

I do not like all the parrots that are on board now. Even Diego has taken a liking to one that sits on his shoulder all day and calls out the names of Spanish ports. Fortunately, this is the only parrot that does not try to bite my ear as I pass.

Our days are spent exploring the coast of San Salvador and the nearby islands. Every time we set foot on new land, Columbus drives his staff into the sand and names the place. He is like Adam in the Bible, naming the animals. Actually there are no



animals here, just fish and birds. And some strange serpents. One day I saw what I thought was a snake, with snakelike skin, and when I drew close, it rose up on feet and walked away. Birds are everywhere,

and the water is so clear and blue that when you look down into it you can see the fish swimming through the waters, fish as colorful as the birds.

And the natives will do anything for us, from carrying our water to trading their few possessions for pieces of broken glass. I traded a small bowl for a spear that had a seashell at its tip and carvings down its shaft. I'll take it home to my mother.

Once I was walking with the Captain through a village when we met a man wearing nothing but a string about his waist and a plug in his nose that was clearly made of gold. The Captain stared and stared at it. In signs he asked the man for it, even offering his belt in exchange, but the man waved his hands at us in refusal. I was glad the Captain did not force the matter. As we walked away he whispered to me, "Did you see? There was Japanese writing on that piece of gold. We must be close to Japan."

So in the morning we set sail for Japan.

October 29

The wind was so slight that Columbus put up every sail we had—the main course with her two bonnets, the main topsail, the fore course, spritsail

under the bowsprit, lateen mizzen, and even a bonaventure mizzen on the poop, but as we approached a new island at dark, we had to strip to bare poles for fear of sailing wildly into a reef or shoals that are invisible to us.

At dawn we could see the lush palm trees, and when we rowed ashore we saw the large huts where many families lived together. We saw their fishing nets woven from palm threads, and fishhooks and harpoons made from bones. And some of the crew tried something quite bizarre. The natives showed them *tobacos*. Dry leaves are rolled up and lit with a flame, and then the smoke is inhaled into the nostril. While the natives seem to really enjoy doing this, it made some of the crew cough and retch.

That aside, the crew is quite happy. The Indian girls are very pretty and sport freely with them. At sundown prayers they gather with us on the beach and add their voices to our *Ave Maria* even though they don't know the words. Columbus is charmed when they imitate making the sign of the cross. He is sure they will make good subjects for the king.

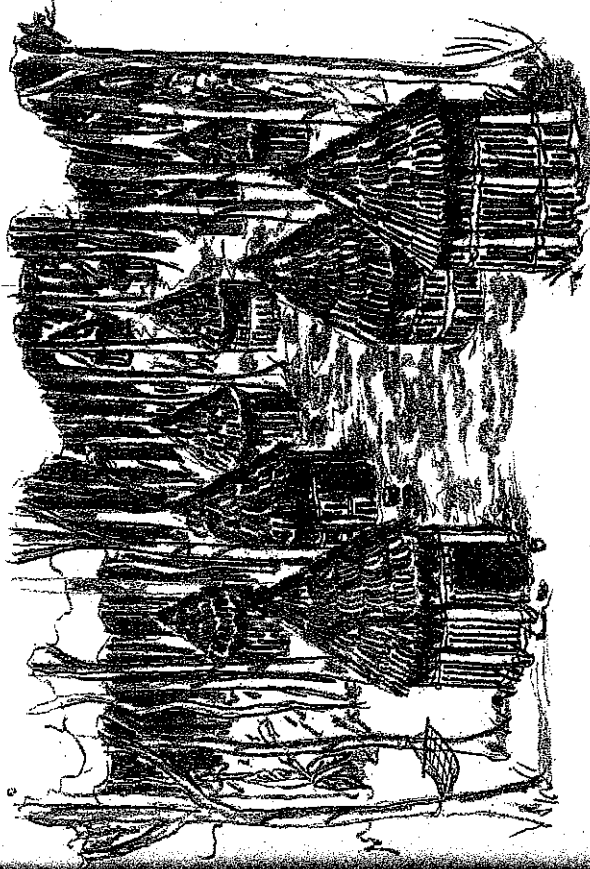
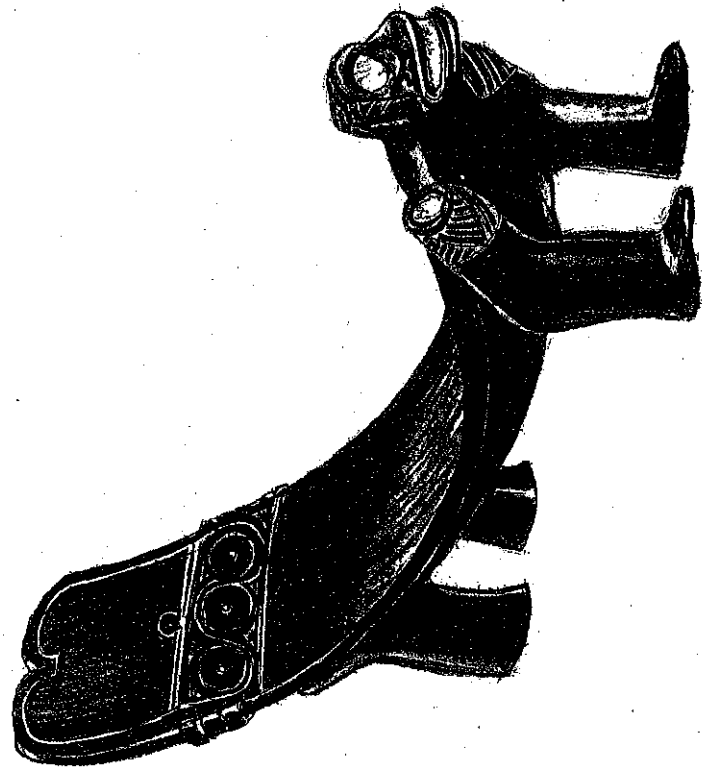
But where is this Japan? Where are the splendid cities with marble jetties and stone bridges? Where are the temples, and the spices? Where are we?

November 6

While the *Santa Maria* was beached to have her hull scrubbed, the Captain sent an embassy of us led by Rodrigo into the interior of this island. It is difficult for the natives to understand us and for us to know if they are hearing us correctly. When they were asked about gold and the emperor of China, they pointed inland and offered to lead us there. It was a long, difficult trek through dense jungle and cover. Instead of a city of pavilions and temples, we were taken to a village where there were many friendly people and about fifty large palm huts. These people too thought we were angels from God, and after feeding us and letting us sit in a special chair—a strange carved seat with legs and arms, a tail, and a face—they wanted the women and children to kiss our hands and feet. I did not let them do this to me. I am too young for such honors. Rodrigo is too old for such honors, and if I were to admit the truth, there was no one in our embassy worthy of such adoration. I couldn't wait to get back to the *Santa Maria*.

When we finally returned she was in the water again but hardly a haven for me from seeing things

that make me uncomfortable. While we were gone five more young native men were detained, and word is they will be converted and taken back to Spain as servants.



November 19

I think being lost at sea with no end to our journey was better than this. If I had only known this is what awaited us, I would have gladly sailed on and on through kingdom come, and my mother would have understood.

Shame fills me like wine in a leather flask, swelling me from inside and sealing my heart in its darkness. I remember the summer my mother's goat bore two tawny kids, and how my mother let them suckle and