

TOMÁS DE LA TORRE (d. 1567)

FROM SALAMANCA, SPAIN TO CIUDAD REAL, CHIAPAS (1544–1545)

. . . we raised sails and with perfectly dry eyes lost sight of our Spain. The wind was good but weak. The sea quickly gave us to understand that it was not meant to be the habitation of men, and we all became so deathly sick that nothing in the world could move us from where we lay.

When we left Spain the war with France was at its height, so we departed in great fear of the enemy. On the afternoon of that day those who could raise their heads saw sixteen sails. They feared that they were Frenchmen, and all that night the fleet was much alarmed, although the enemy had greater reason to fear us, because of our superior numbers. But in the morning nothing could be seen, so we decided it was a fleet coming from the Indies . . . In the evening our stomachs quieted down and we did not vomit, but the heat, especially below deck, was intolerable.

Saturday morning we saw a large boat, and, thinking it was a French spy, a ship went after it. The bark began to escape, when the ship fired a shot, whereupon the bark lowered its sails, was recognized as Spanish, and was permitted to go in peace. The crews of the vessels that heard the shot thought that we had run into Frenchmen and that the ships were firing at each other. When we below deck heard the noise of arms being got ready, we were alarmed and suddenly recovered enough to say a litany; some even confessed themselves.

So that those who do not know the sea may understand the suffering one endures there, especially at the beginning of a voyage, I shall describe some things that are well known to anyone who has sailed on it. First, a ship is a secure prison, from which no one may escape, even though he wears neither shackles nor irons; so cruel is this prison that it makes no distinctions among its inmates but makes them all suffer alike. The heat, the stuffiness, and the sense of confinement are sometimes overpowering. The bed is ordinarily the floor. Some bring a few small mattresses; ours were very poor, small, and hard, stuffed with dog hairs; to cover us we had some extremely poor blankets of goat's wool. Add to this the general nausea and poor health; most passengers go about as if out of their minds and in great torment – some longer than others, and a few for the entire voyage. There is very little desire to eat, and sweet things do not go down well; there is an incredible thirst, sharpened by a diet of hardtack and salt beef. The water ration is half an *azumbre* [2.52 litres] daily; if you want wine you must bring your own. There are infinite numbers of lice, which eat men alive, and you cannot wash clothing because the sea water shrinks it. There is an evil stink, especially below deck, that becomes intolerable throughout the ship . . . These and other hardships are common on board ship, but we felt them more because they were so foreign to our usual way of living. . . The most disturbing thing of all is to have death constantly staring you in the face . . .

Tomás de la Torre, "On the Sea-Road to the Indies," in *Latin American Civilization: History & Society, 1492 to the Present*, ed. Benjamin Keen (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 87–89.