souls, (it is said these had the most knowledge of good and evil). The good mind now accomplishes the works of creation, notwithstanding the imaginations of the bad mind were continually-evil; and he attempted to enclose all the animals of game in the earth, so as to deprive them from mankind; but the good mind released them from confinement, (the animals were dispersed, and traces of them were made on the rocks near the cave where it was closed). The good mind experiences that his brother was at variance with the works of creation, and feels not disposed to favor any of his proceedings, but gives admonitions of his future state. Afterwards the good mind requested his brother to accompany him, as he was proposed to inspect the game, etc., but when a short distance from their monastical residence, the bad mind became so unmanly that he could not conduct his brother any more. The bad mind offered a challenge to his brother and resolved that who gains the victory should govern the universe; and appointed a day to meet the contest. The good mind was willing to submit to the offer, and he enters the reconciliation with his brother; which falsely mentions that by whipping with flags would destroy his temporal life; and he earnestly solicited his brother also to notice the instrument of death, which he manifestly relates by the use of deer horns, beating his body he would expire. On the day appointed the engagement commenced, which lasted for two days: after pulling up the trees and mountains as the track of a terrible whirlwind, at last the good mind gained the victory by using the horns, as mentioned the instrument of death, which he succeeded in deceiving his brother and he crushed him in the earth; and the last words uttered from the bad mind were, that he would have equal power over the souls of mankind after death; and he sinks down to eternal doom, and became the Evil Spirit. After this tumult the good mind repaired to the battle ground, and then visited the people and retires from the earth.

1. Cusick perhaps means nominal, their named or designated residence.
2. I.e., the Evil Twin became so rude and obnoxious that the Good Twin could not lead (conduct) his brother to the appointed place any longer.
3. The Good Twin tells his brother that he can be killed by being beaten with corn stalks, rushes, reeds, or cattails. Cusick calls this a deception; other accounts treat it as a confession of weakness. Next, the Evil Twin admits that he would die if beaten with the antlers of deer.
4. This may reflect an awareness of the Christian belief in the devil as the evil spirit, ruler over the lower depths.
5. Other versions go on to say that the Good Twin teaches the people how to grow corn and how to avoid harm by means of prayer and ritual.

7. More commonly, the Good Twin is called Tharonwahagen (Sky-Grasper, Creator, or Upholder of the Heavens), and the Evil Twin is named Tawiscuron (Evil-Minded, Flite, Ice, Patron of Winter, and other disasters). Cusick's Enigoria is a rough translation of the Tuscarora word for "good-minded" into Mohawk, and his Enigoration is an equally rough translation into Seneca, Onondaga, or Cayuga of the Tuscarora word for "bad-minded." Cusick has probably changed the Tuscarora words best known to him into these other Iroquois languages because they were considered to be more prestigious than Tuscarora, the Tuscaroras having only recently joined the Iroquois Confederacy.
8. Humans. "Ea-gwe-howe". Tuscarora term used by speakers of all the languages of the Six Nations; today, it simply means Indian, or Indians.
9. Cusick may have seen an ape or a depiction of apes (there are no apes native to the New World) and decided to name them as the creatures made by the Evil Twin in contrast to the humans made by the Good Twin. John Buck and Chief John Gibson, in their later renditions of the Iroquois creation narrative, also refer to apes at this point in the narrative.
Athebaskan speakers), and it was from the Spanish that the Navajo acquired livestock, the most important of which were sheep. The Navajo Nation today is the second most populous indigenous group in the United States, outnumbered only by the Cherokees.

The Navajo story of the creation is ancient and complex, a story of the "emergence" of the People and their establishment of life as we know it today. Although the main lines of the story are fairly consistent in the variants of which we have records, details differ: for example, some versions speak of four not five worlds, the last of which is the "glittering world," the world we inhabit now. So far as there is a dominant theme in the Navajo creation story, it is the establishment of harmony and balance among the gods, the People, and all other sentient beings. Especially important is the attainment of a relationship of harmony and balance between husband and wife.

One of the earliest and most complete versions of the creation story is that of Washington Matthews, an army doctor stationed at Fort Wingate, near present-day Gallup, New Mexico, in the late nineteenth century. Matthews heard some of the story from a man known as Old Torlino. Another lengthy version is that of Hosteen Klah, who worked with Mary Wheelwright until his death in the 1930s. The literary scholar Paul Zeljzdrac published a substantial and well-annotated compilation and translation of the creation story in 1984, and there are others. Printed here is a contemporary retelling of the story by the Navajo teacher and writer Irving Morris. It is the first chapter of his book From the Glittering World, and he begins with the creation story as a way of providing some sense of the world he inhabits—a world that will not be familiar to the non-Navajo reader. Although Morris is the "author" of this particular version, authorship here, as with all oral storytelling, is a matter not of invention, certainly not of ownership, but, rather, of performance. This is Morris's telling of an ancient tale that is neither an artifact nor a relic but something powerful to him and the Dine'te today.

Born in 1958, Irving Morris is a member of the Tobaahi, or Water's Edge clan of the Navajo Nation. Recipient of an MFA in creative writing from Cornell and a doctorate in American Indian Studies, he teaches at Din'e College in Tsail, Arizona.

Hajinie't3
(The Emergence)

Alkidadí jimi.2 It happened a long time ago, they say. In the beginning there was only darkness, with sky above and water below. Then by some mysterious and holy means, sky and water came together. When they touched, that's when everything began. That was the First World, which was like an island floating in a sea of mist. It was red in color and it was an ancient place. There were no people living there, only Dine'é, who existed in spiritual form. They could travel like the wind. There were also Hashchíí Dine'é, the Holy People, whose form and beauty we have inherited. There was no sun or moon, and there were no stars. The only source of light was the sky, which comprised four sacred colors and glowed with a different hue and lit the world from a different direction according to the time of day. When the eastern sky glowed white, it was considered dawn, and the Dine'é would awaken and begin to stir in preparation for the day. When the southern sky glowed blue, it was considered day, and the Dine'é went about their daily activities. When the western sky was yellow, it was considered evening, and the Dine'é put away their work and amusements. When the northern sky turned black, it was considered night, and the Dine'é lay down and went to sleep. At the center of that First World, there was a place called Tóhbaliesx'iet4 where water welled up out of the ground in a great fountain, which was the source of three rivers flowing toward the east, south, and west. No river flowed toward the north, the direction of death and darkness. There were twelve groups of Dine'é dwelling in twelve places in that First World, with four groups living in each of the three directions. No one lived to the north. These Dine'é had lived there from the very beginning. They were called ants, dragonflies, beetles, bats, and locusts, but they were spiritual beings, not insects or animals. The waters surrounding their world were inhabited by four powerful guardians, Tóhbaliesx'iet the Water Monster) to the east, Dédjtsi doot'ilizh (White Heron) to the south, Ch'äl (Frog) to the west, and B'í'ídziligai (White Mountain Thunder) to the north. These spiritual beings had lived peacefully and amicably in that world for a long time; but after a while trouble arose, and it was because of adultery.5 The First World was a holy place, and the immoral behavior of the Dine'é angered the water guardians, who didn't like what they saw. They didn't like the deceit, jealousy, and turmoil that resulted from the debauchery. "Do you not like living here?" the guardians scolded. "Do you not value this place? If you cannot behave properly, then you must leave." Three times they were warned by the guardians, but the Dine'é did not listen. When they corrupted themselves a fourth time, B'í'ídziligai, the guardian from the north, who hadn't spoken before, said, "Because you do not listen, you must depart at once!" But the Dine'é were lost in their wickedness and did not heed. Seeing this, the guardians were outraged and turned their backs on them; they refused to listen to excuses or pleas for forgiveness. The Dine'é had to be punished. One morning they saw something on the horizon. It looked like a ring of snowy mountains surrounding them, an unbroken wall of white higher and wider than they could fly across. When it came closer, they saw what it was. The water guardians had sent a great flood. Frightened, the Dine'é sought into the air and flew in circles until they reached the sky, but then they discovered that it was smooth and solid. They tried to break through the rigid surface, but they could not even make a scratch. Just as they were ready to give up in despair, a strange blue head emerged from the sky. "Go to the east," it said. The Dine'é went to the east and flew through the narrow opening into a blue world, the Second World. There they looked around and saw that the land was barren and flat. They did not see anyone living nearby. Scouts were sent out to see if there were others like themselves further out,

1. The text is from chapter 1 of Irving Morris, From the Glittering World (1997).
2. A long time ago, they say, or it is said. Morris begins his written performance of the creation story with this traditional opening to remind his readers that he is telling a story told many times before. The editor is indebted to Irving Morris for help with the annotations to this text.
3. Supernatural or spiritual beings associated with wind or air.
4. Place where streams come together; an elevated place such as a hill or mound, perhaps suggesting a raised fountain.
5. Even for spiritual beings, adultery destroys the harmony between husbands and wives, a harmony that will remain to be achieved.
6. Four, sometimes as two pairs of two, is an important pattern number for the Navajos, signifying completion or wholeness.
but after two days they returned saying they could find no one. But then, one morning, a small group of blue beings appeared. The *Nîch’i Dinë* saw that these blue beings were like themselves—with legs, feet, bodies, and wings like theirs—and they realized that they could understand their language. The blue beings, who were *Swallows,* welcomed the newcomers and addressed them as kinsmen. They promised to be friends and allies forever, but before long one of the *Nîch’i Dinë* took liberties with the head *Swallow’s* wife. That treachery was quickly discovered, and bad feelings immediately arose. "Traitors!" the *Swallows* cried. "We took you in as friends and relatives, and this is how you repay us? Could this be why you were asked to leave the lower world?" The *Swallows* demanded that they leave immediately, and once again the *Nîch’i Dinë* took flight. Once again they encountered a solid sky and could not find an entrance. Just when they were about to give up, a white head mysteriously appeared. "Go to the south," it said. There the locusts led them into the Third World, which was white, through a crooked opening. Again the scouts went out, and again they found nothing. But in time they discovered that this world was inhabited by Grasshoppers.8 The *Nîch’i Dinë* begged the Grasshoppers to let them stay. As before, the hosts addressed the *Nîch’i Dinë* as friends and kin and mingled with them. All went well for a while, but then one of the *Nîch’i Dinë* grew weak and committed adultery with the wife of a Grasshopper. The Grasshoppers were incensed and told the *Nîch’i Dinë* to leave. This time, when they encountered the impenetrable sky, a red head materialized. "Go to the west," it said. When they entered into the Fourth World through a winding entrance hole in the west, they saw that it was black and white. No one greeted them. The land appeared empty. But they saw four great snow-capped mountains in the distance: one to the east, another to the south, a third to the west, and the fourth to the north. The scouts were dispatched to see if anyone lived on those mountains, but they failed to reach the first three. When they went to the northern mountain, however, they returned with fascinating news. A strange group of beings lived there, dwelling in holes in the ground. These were *Kiis’iinan,* the Pueblo peoples, who were living in pit-houses.9 The *Nîch’i Dinë* immediately set out to greet the inhabitants of this new land, who welcomed them and prepared a feast of corn, squash, pumpkins, and beans.1 This time, the *Nîch’i Dinë* resolved to behave themselves. And true to their word, they conducted themselves well, and their days passed uneventfully. Then one day a voice was heard calling from the east. Three times the voice called, each time coming closer. Upon the fourth call, four mysterious beings appeared. They were Holy People: White Body, who is called *Hashk’ehooghan* (Talking God); Blue Body, known as *Toseinili* (Water Sprinkler); Yellow Body, called *Haschëdësitai* (Calling God); and Black Body, referred to as *Hashch’ikzin* (Fire God). These Holy People did not speak, but they tried to communicate with motions and gestures. However, the *Nîch’i Dinë* did not understand them. Thus the Holy People appeared, four times over four days. On the fourth day, when the *Nîch’i Dinë* still could not understand the signs, Black Body finally spoke: "We want to make more people, but in forms that are more pleasing to us," he said. "You have bodies like us, but you also have the teeth, feet, and claws of insects and four-leggeds. And you smell bad. But first, you must purify yourselves before we return." And so the *Nîch’i Dinë* washed themselves and dried their limbs with sacred cornmeal, white for men and yellow for women. On the twelfth day the deities returned, bringing with them two buckskins and two ears of corn. Blue Body and Black Body carried two buckskins, one of which they laid on the ground. Yellow Body carried two perfec: ears of corn, white and yellow, and laid them on the buckskin. The second buckskin was placed over the corn and the *Nîch’i Dinë* were told to stand back, and the sacred wind entered between the buckskins. As the wind blew, Mirage People appeared and walked around the buckskins. On the fourth turn, the ears of corn moved. When the buckskin was lifted, a man and woman lay where the ears of corn had been. The white ear had been turned into a man and the yellow ear had been turned into a woman. These were *Alstë Hastin* and *Alstë Asdzaaän,* First Man and First Woman. These were the first real people, five-fingered beings, and they were made in the image of the Holy People. The Holy People then instructed these new people to build a shelter. First Man and First Woman entered the shelter and thus became husband and wife. First Man was given a rock crystal—the symbol of clear thought—to burn for fire, and First Woman was given turquoise—which represents the power of speech—to burn. In four days a pair of twins were born to them, and these first children were *Nâdléeh,* those who have the spirit of both male and female.2 Only the first pair were like that. In four days another pair of twins were born, and so on. In all, five pairs of twins were born to them. Four days after the birth of the pair of twins, the Holy People took First Man and First Woman away to the east, to the sacred mountains where they dwelt. There, First Man and First Woman remained for four days. When they returned, the Holy People then took all their children to the east and kept them for four days too. It is during this time that they all received instructions from the Holy People. They learned how to live a good life and to conduct themselves in a manner befitting their divine origins. But because the Holy People were capable of good and evil, they also learned about the terrible secrets of witchcraft as well. After they returned, First Man and First Woman were occasionally seen wearing masks resembling *Hashchëdësitai* and *Hashchëdësitii.*3 While thus attired they were holy and they prayed for good things for the people: long life, ample rain, and abundant harvests. Those ceremonies were passed on to the rest of the world to protect future generations; the prayers, songs, and rituals have not changed from that time. When it came time to marry, the children of First Man and First Woman joined with the *Kiis’iinan* and the children of the Mirage People and others. In four days, children were born to these couples, and in four days those descendants bore offspring also. Soon the land was populated with the growing progeny of First Man and First Woman. They planted great fields of corn and other crops. They also built an earthen dam, and the *Nâdléeh* were appointed to be its guardians; while they watched over the dam they created beautiful and useful things, pottery and basketry, and the people praised these inventions. For eight years they lived in comfort.

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7. Supernaturals of the earliest times, who were precursors of the birds we know today.
8. Supernaturals who were the precursors of today's insects.
9. The term *Kiis’iinan* actually translates as "People Who Live in Upright Houses."
1. It is historically accurate that the Navajo learned agriculture from the Pueblo peoples.
2. They are either Hermaphrodites or men performing what was regarded as women's work, for which they are in no way stigmatized.
3. House God and Talking God, respectively, although other names for them are also sometimes used.
and peace. Their days passed uneventfully. Then one day, they saw a strange thing: they saw the sky reach down, while at the same time the earth rose up to meet it. From the point of their union sprang two beings now known as Coyote and Badger, the children of the sky. Their arrival portended both good and bad things for the people. The people prospered for many years, but one day First Woman and First Man had an argument. First Man was a great hunter and provided much food, but First Woman made an ungrateful remark that insulted and greatly angered First Man. She left her and went to the other side of the fire and remained there all night. In the morning First Man called together all the men and told them about First Woman’s insult. “Let’s teach the women a lesson,” he said. “We shall gather our tools and belongings and move away. They’ll learn they can’t get along without us after all.” The men agreed and gathered up their tools and all the things they had made. First Man, recalling the industriousness of the Nadleeh, invited them to come along, and they brought their grinding stones, baskets, cooking utensils, and other useful implements. The men crossed the river and quickly set up a new camp. They cut brush and built new shelters and hunted. When they were hungry, the Nadleeh cooked for them. Across the river, the Nadleeh cooked for them. Soon the women harvested corn and other crops and made ready for the winter.

Their harvest was abundant and they ate well. They pitied the men, who had to do without fresh corn, squash, and beans. In the evenings, they came down to the river and called to the men and taunted them. “How are you getting along over there? Do you remember the taste of roasted corn?”

The men had brought seeds with them, but since it was so late in the season, they had not planted. That winter they ate mostly cakes and mush made from the cornmeal that the Nadleeh had brought along. The following spring, however, the men planted fields larger than those planted by the women. And this time, without the men’s help in the fields, the women’s harvest was not as plentiful as before. That winter they did not taunt the men. By the fourth year, the men could not eat all the food they grew, and most of it was left in the fields. The women, however, began to run short of food and soon were facing starvation. They had also begun to miss the company of men. The more brazen used objects such as cacti and smooth stones to satisfy themselves, and some say the monsters that later plagued the people were the result of that practice. In time, First Man realized that they could not live apart forever. He realized that the people were in danger of dying out if they did not reproduce. One evening he called to First Woman and they talked about this. They decided that unless they became one person again they would disappear. So the women crossed the river on rafts and joined the men again, and there was great rejoicing and feasting. However, it was soon discovered that three women were missing, a woman and her two daughters. The people thought they had drowned, but they had been captured instead by the Water Monster, Téélholtsóódi. The people called to the Holy People for help, and White Body and Blue Body appeared with two shells. They set these shells on the water and caused them to spin, and the water underneath the spinning shell opened up to reveal the four-chambered dwelling where the monster lived. Accompanied by Coyote, a man and woman descended to the dwelling and searched the chambers—first the one to the east, which was a room of dark waters, then the one to the south, which was made of blue waters; then the one to the west, which was made of yellow waters—and found nothing. Then they entered the north chamber, which was the one made of waters of all colors, and saw the women in there with Téélholtsóódi. They also saw the children of Water Monster scurrying about. The rescue party claimed the women and left, but unbeknownst to them Coyote stole one of the Water Monster’s children and tucked it under his robe. When they returned, they were greeted joyously and the people feasted again. The following morning, however, the people noticed something disturbing. They saw many animals running past as if fleeing something. All day this went on, and by the third day the commotion had greatly increased. On the morning of the fourth day, they noticed a white light shining up from the horizon. They sent Locust to investigate and he returned with startling news. The strange light was coming from a wall of water that was converging on them from all sides. The people fled to a nearby hill and thought about what they should do. They cried and proclaimed that this was surely their doom. Then one of the people suggested they plant the seed of a tree so they might climb on it and escape the danger. Squirrel produced two seeds, juniper and piñon, and planted them. The seeds sprouted and grew quickly, but the trees soon began to branch out and flattened into squat shapes. Then Weasel produced two seeds also, pine and spruce, and planted them. The seeds grew into tall trees, but they soon tapered into points and stopped growing. The people waited in despair. But then someone called out that two people were approaching, an old man and a young man. These men went directly to the summit and did not speak but sat down facing east, the young man first and the old man behind him. The old man then produced seven buckskin bags and spoke: “I have gathered soil from the seven sacred mountains in these bundles and I shall give them to you, but I cannot help you further.” The people turned to the young man and he said, “I will help you, but you must not watch what I do.” So the people left him and waited at a distance. When the young man finally called them, they saw that he had spread out the contents of the bags of soil and planted in it thirty-two reeds with thirty-two joints. He began to sing, and as he did the reeds began to grow, sending roots deep into the earth. The thirty-two reeds fused into one great reed, which soon towered into the sky. The young man told them to enter a hole that appeared on the east side of the reed. As the floodwaters crashed togetherside, the hole closed up and sealed tightly. The reed commenced to grow quickly, lifting the people above the rising water. The Holy People accompanied them. When the reed had reached the sky, Black Body secured the reed against the sky with a plume from his headress. This sky was solid and there was no opening in its surface, so Locust, who was good at making holes, began to scratch and dig. Eventually he broke through, and the people rejoiced. Turkey was the last to climb out, and his white-tipped tail feathers

4. Other versions of the story make clear that First Woman’s remark is quite bawdy and has to do with her suggestion that not he but joosh (the vagina) is, by her indirect reasoning, responsible for successful hunting and the provision of food. First Man’s response, however, is excessive, representing an unfortunate loss of self control.

5. Or Moři, both a powerful and godlike being and a constant troublemaker.

6. The threat to the world by flood appears in many Native American creation stories and pre-codes awareness of the account in Genesis.

7. Other versions of the story have Squirrel and his wife providing help.
made to dwell there. Ak'dahmástání was fastened to the earth with a Mirage Stone, ornamented with black clouds and male rain, and guarded by Mirage Stone Boy and Red Coral Girl. In the Fifth World, as in the lower worlds, the people lived in accordance with the daily cycles of the four changing colors of the sky. But now more light was needed, so the sun and the moon were created. The old man who had helped them escape from the flood in the lower world was given the honor of bearing the sun across the sky, and the young man who had also helped them escape was given the privilege of carrying the moon at night. In return for their sacrifice and labor, they were given immortality and powerful sacred names. In the Fifth World, the people began filling the land and many places were named. The land was rich and the people prospered upon it, but the land soon grew dangerous. Naayé'ë, monsters, were roaming the land, and they were hunting and eating the people. In time there were only a few people left. These monsters were the offspring of stones and cacti, the result of some women's conduct during the separation of the sexes: Deel'géd, the horned monster; Tskítá'adahwéetézi, who kicked people off cliffs; Binán'á'ee 'aghánii, who killed with his eyes; and Tséinhálílité', the flying monster who lived atop Téhít'a'. In time there were only four people left in the world. These people took refuge near Tsél'gai, White Rock. First Man went out to pray every day at dawn. One morning he heard a strange sound like the cries of a baby coming from atop Chíól'tí. For three mornings when he went out to pray he heard the sounds coming from atop the cloud-shrouded peak. On the fourth morning, Talking God appeared and instructed him to ascend the mountain. Atop the highest peak First Man found an infant who was Asdzán Nádéeléhí, Changing Woman, the most beloved of all the deities. He took her home, and because she was holy, she reached maturity in four days. After a time, Changing Woman left to live on Dzhínéézódi. While she was living there she bathed in a waterfall and basked in the Sun. In four days, she bathed to twin boys, who were the sons of the waterfall and the Sun. They were Tóbágístchíini (Born-For-Water), and Naayé'ë'neizghání (Monster Slayer). They quickly grew to maturity also. With the help of the Spider Woman, Jóhaná'áh, and other helpers, the Twins rid the land of the monsters. Naayé'ë'neizghání went out and slew the monsters, while Tóbágístchíini remained home and conducted protection ceremonies to ensure victory. One of the last monsters to perish was Yéítsoh, the Giant. He was also a son of the Sun; however, because he was killing people the Sun decided to help the Twins to stop him. Jóhaná'áh gave the Twins weapons made of lightning, and he taught them magic that enabled them to travel high over the land on the arching rainbow, which is the road used by the Holy People. After the defeat of the Giant only four monsters remained, Old Age, Poverty, Hunger, and Cold, but the Twins spared these creatures so the people would not grow complacent as immortals. When the land was safe, the Sun asked Changing Woman to become his wife. She did not consent at first, but after the Sun made promises that she would not be leaving her people forever, she agreed. He built a beautiful house for her to dwell in, on an island in the western sea. Before she left, she made more people by rubbing skin from under her arms and from under her breasts. These were the four original clans: Honágháahnni, 8. Coyote's responsibility for the fact that humans will eventually die is stated in many Native American stories. 4. Mountain around Which Things Happened, or Travelers Circle, with suggestions of the continuity of life. 5. The English meaning is not entirely clear. Ck'o means "sprue," but it can also refer to directionality or looking outward. Morris suggests it refers to a vantage point from which one can look out and see everything. 6. Butte-Piled-on-a-Butte.
B'italnii, Hashilt'ishni, and Tódích'i'inii. Changing Woman took some of these people to live with her, but they soon grew lonesome and they left her home in the western sea to return to Dinétah. The Twins left this world to dwell with the Holy People when their work was finished. They left this world from a place where two great rivers meet. They promised that they would always keep watch over the people; it is said that they can still be seen sometimes, floating in the mist above the spot where the waters converge. The Holy People also returned to their home, but they are always within reach through the songs and prayers they gave us. Lastly, a sacred rainbow was placed around Dinét bikéyah, our homeland, for protection and as a blessing and a reminder of the sacredness of this land. It is said that so long as Dinét remain within this boundary, we will have the blessings and protection of the Holy People. So long as we remain within these boundaries we will be living in the manner that the Holy People prescribed for us.

7. There are a great many Navajo clans, but these are the four original clans created from Changing Woman's body: "Honeghw'álìinii", the One-Walk-Around-You clan. "B'italnii": the Folded Arms People or the Leaf clan or Under-His-Cover clan. "Hashilt'ishni": the Mud clan. "Tódích'i'inii": the Bitter Water People.

CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS
1451–1506

Born into a family of wool workers near the once supreme Mediterranean port of Genoa, Christopher Columbus turned to the sea as a young man, developed a plan to find a commercially viable Atlantic route to Asia, and in 1492 won the support of the Spanish monarchs, Ferdinand and Isabella, for this “enterprise of the Indies.” His series of four voyages between 1492 and 1504 produced a brief moment of wonder followed by a long series of disasters and disappointments. Apparently friendly relations with the Taíno Indians on the island of Hispaniola in 1492 turned sour as the settlers Columbus left behind demanded gold and sexual partners from their hosts; on his return there in 1494, none of the Europeans were alive. A new settlement established on the island after this discovery fell into such disorder during the absence of Columbus in Cuba and Jamaica that in 1496 he was forced to return to Spain to clear his name of politically motivated charges made against him by other Europeans in the West Indies. A third voyage, begun in 1498, took him for the first time to the South American mainland. The lushness of nature there made him believe himself near paradise, but that illusion vanished when, on his return to Hispaniola, he encountered Spanish settlers there in open rebellion against his authority. Able to reach a truce only at the expense of the Taíno Indians, who were to be virtually enslaved by the rebels, Columbus soon found himself under arrest, sent in chains to Spain in 1500 to answer yet more charges. His last voyage, intended to recoup his tarnished reputation, resulted in a long period of suffering in Panama and shipwreck in Jamaica, and these outer woes were accompanied by nearly delusional periods as Columbus underwent a virtual breakdown. Rescued at last from this extremity, he returned to Europe, where soon afterward he died. The West Indies, as his discoveries were called, remained disordered and bloody.

Several documents regarding the four voyages survive from Columbus’s hand. The supposed Journal of his first voyage is actually a summary prepared by the cleric and reformer Bartolomé de las Casas. A letter sent by Columbus to Luis de Santangel, a royal official and an early supporter of his venture, provides a more authentic account and served as the basis for the first printed description of America, issued in 1493 in Spain and widely translated and reprinted across Europe. A memorandum regarding the second voyage, intended by Columbus for the Spanish monarchs (whose responses to each point also survive), offers useful insights into the emerging ambiguities and problems of the colony on Hispaniola. For the third and fourth voyages, three letters from Columbus, two sent to the Crown and one to a woman of the Spanish court, detail his deepening worldly and spiritual troubles.

The texts are from Select Documents Illustrating the Four Voyages of Columbus, translated and edited by Cecil Jane (1930–33).

From Letter to Luis de Santangel Regarding the First Voyage

[At sea, February 15, 1493]

Sir,

As I know that you will be pleased at the great victory with which Our Lord has crowned my voyage, I write this to you, from which you will learn how in thirty-three days, I passed from the Canary Islands to the Indies with the fleet which the most illustrious king and queen our sovereigns gave to me. And there I found very many islands filled with people innumerable, and of them all I have taken possession for their highnesses, by proclamation made and with the royal standard unfurled, and no opposition was offered to me. To the first island which I found I gave the name San Salvador, in remembrance of the Divine Majesty, Who has marvelously bestowed all this; the Indians call it “Guanañani.” To the second I gave the name Isla de Santa María de Concepción; to the third, Fernandina; to the fourth, Isabella; to the fifth, Isla Juana, and so to each one I gave a new name.

When I reached Juana I followed its coast to the westward, and I found it to be so extensive that I thought that it must be the mainland, the province of Catayo. And since there were neither towns nor villages on the seashore, but only small hamlets, with the people of which I could not have speech because they all fled immediately, I went forward on the same course, thinking that I should not fail to find great cities and towns. And at the end of many leagues, seeing that there was no change and that the coast was bearing me northwards, which I wished to avoid since winter was already beginning and I proposed to make from it to the south, and as moreover the wind was

1. A former merchant and a court official since 1478 who had supported Columbus’s proposal to the Spanish Crown and had helped secure financing for the first voyage.
2. The precise identity of the Bahaman island Columbus named San Salvador is not known today, although many theories have been put forward, most posit ing that Watling Island is the likeliest site.
3. Of these four islands, only the identity of Juana (Cuba) is today certain.
4. I.e., China (or “Catay”).
5. Renaissance units of measurement were inexact. Columbus’s “league” was probably about four miles.