



Christopher Columbus has words from the other side of death for Captain John Whyte...

I know something about names, Captain.

Those who conquer must always have a name ready.
Even before the sword, before the gun.

I saw the island and called it San Salvador.
San Salvador because we had been saved.

I did not ask the natives
they were friendly, they were almost naked, they were brown under the
tropical sun I did not ask them what they called that place themselves
I did not ask them what they called their home

And I did not tell them that they would all die
I did not tell them that nobody would ever know
what they spoke
how they spoke
the words would be swallowed
 like boats are swallowed in the tempest
 of a sad sea
like bodies are swallowed in a mine

Now they teach me their words and their songs
here in the dark of forever
I study what they called the moon and love and good-bye
I listen to their Carib whispers
and I purse my lips and I whistle and I soften the air
with the language no one has spoken on that island
for over five hundred years

This is my penance

And then Quechua and then Maya and then Tzotzil
and then the thousand and ten tongues that were once alive
in the lands that would not be called my name
that would be called by someone else's name
Amerigo America
and then the learning will go on
Navajo and Guaraní and Nahuatl
and the sounds that once filled the ears
of lovely maidens
to bring forth the crops
and no one today even knows their name
learning learning
until they have taught me to pronounce each last word



how do you say friend
how do you say death
how do you say forever

how do you say penance

they will teach me how they say penance
in their thousand and ten tongues

your penance, Captain?
what awaits you?

You said you came to bring freedom

Freedom. When another can decide for himself.

You said you came to bring democracy.

Democracy. When another can control for herself.

You said you came with liberation.

Liberation. When the people who made the world
name that world and themselves.

Freedom. Democracy. Liberation.

Words.

Your words, the words of your leaders.

And then you called the airport by another name.
It is ours. We took it. We're here.
We killed the men who called it by that other name.
We can call it now what we will.
Under a sky full of bombs another name.
Baghdad now. Not Saddam.

Saddam Airport.

Not a name I like, we like, here on the other side.
a name cursed in the cellars
where the fingers are crushed
where the head is split
where the teeth are pulled

rooted out

the roots of that name Saddam
the striker of the blow
the one who resists
the one who gives grief
the one who prohibits



all all all crying out inside that name

but not for you, Captain,
to change
not for you to decide

your penance?

they wait for you, John Whyte,
here in the glorious dust of words
they once scrolled on paper parchment stone
here in the dark light of death

they wait for you
the poets of Iraq

Abu Nuwas and Hariri
Mutanabbi and Buhturi
waiting like the rugs they used to sit on
waiting like the founts they used to drink from

all the words you did not think to use
Captain John Whyte
all the names you did not know
not even your own
white barakah
barakah related to barak blessing

you will have to learn
pronounce as I have had to pronounce
word for word

the Arabic you did not care to know
like the Nahuatl I never knew
like the Cherokee I never knew

you will have to learn

starting with the hundred words
that pour forth from Allah

Rahman The Compassionate
Rahim The Merciful

Rahman International Airport



Rahim International Airport

can you hear them
even now as you advance towards Baghdad
can you hear their voices

Rahman the Compassionate
Rahim the Merciful

Rahman Rahim
and Salam

Salam
Peace

one of the attributes of God

your penance
John Whyte John Barakah
did you never think

they will treat you with mercy
on the other side

that the people of Iraq
might want to call their land
with the names of Salam
the many names of peace?

your penance
oh white one

it will take you and your leaders
forever
 and forever
 and forever
it will take you forever

to learn the word for peace

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