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.  
Words.  
Your words, the words of your leaders.