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Tibi Retribuetur Enim Tibi in Resurrectione¹

“Great Christians and most excellent and most powerful Princes, King and Queen of the regions of Spain and the isles of the sea, our lords, in this present year of 1494² I write to your majesties to inform you of my happenstance.” Columbus puts his scribing tool down and looks at his sores. He could hardly concentrate on writing and stop shaking long enough to write this short sentence. His vision seemed blurry and his body was mutilated by the countless sores that appear as tiny tomatoes under his skin trying to burst through³. The tremors of his fingers and lips scarcely ceased as once more attempted to write. “I am ill of an unknown cause and I am not sure when the Lord will see fit to receive my soul. My situation is desolate and forlorn beyond measure. My crew abandoned me and probably considers me dead after our land incursion on the day of 14th of January in the year of our Lord 1494. As the Lord saw fit, our ship the Santa María to run aground and as she could not be unstuck, we used her destruction as an opportunity to build a trading post with the natives. We labored unceasingly to make use of all its goods to build

¹ Part of the verse from Luke 14:14 as contained in the Latin Vulgate. It appears translated as “thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection” in the King James translation of the Holy Bible. I have chosen this title in Latin rather use the English translation to maintain the language Christopher Columbus would have known this verse from the Bible.

² An adaptation and reference to Las Casas, Bartolomé. *Diario de a bordo de Cristóbal Colon: Primer viaje*. Colección España Heroica. Ed. Arcadia (Barcelona), 7.

³ Symptoms of syphilis include: Personality changes, such as confusion and irritability. Vision problems. Decreased ability to concentrate. Memory loss. Tremor of the fingers and lips. Muscle pain. Joint destruction because of lack of sensation. Inability to control urine or stool. <http://www.webmd.com/brain/neurosyphilis>

what we called in honor of our Lord the settlement of the Villa de la Navidad⁴. While the remainder of your majesty's ships returned to our lands for supply and to bear the good news of my discovery of a new route to the Indies, I decided to show leadership and remain here until the ships return. I have thus done as your majesties commanded and read the *Requerimiento* to the natives, took control as the first governor of the Villa de la Navidad, and started trading with the natives. As initially our trade with the Indians did not yield much gold, I saw fit to capture some of the Indians⁵ and have them learn our language and customs. We were planning to have them translate and aid us trade with the rest of the tribes. Furthermore, in seeing that many of them wore small pieces of gold pierced to their noses, lips, or ears, we thought it necessary and just to capture them so they can lead us to their deposits of gold⁶." Again his hands shook, he looked confused. He seemed not to know where he was. He cried and shouted something I did not understand. He looked towards my direction and called me to him.

– “Gueycan⁷, Gueycan, Gueycan”, his voice softened and he coughed, he was clearly delirious “¡ven!” he called again. What could he possibly need of me? I am in no better shape than he is, I too will join my ancestors soon because of the heat that I feel in my body. My bones hurt tremendously, and I too bear the rashes⁸ that killed most of my tribe. Now Columbus and I are locked away in this room for our sins. I for serving the demon and for having the mark of

⁴ First settlement that Columbus left behind on the isle of Hispaniola after the Santa María ship ran aground and could not be saved. 39 men were left behind at the Villa de la Navidad to trade with the natives. The settlement and all the men were later found killed.

⁵ The practice of capturing the natives and use them as translators is not portrayed as an unjust act. See Columbus, “Letter to Luis de Santangel,” in *Select Letters of Christopher Columbus*, 2nd ed., edited and translated by R.H. Major (London: Hakluyt Society, 1870), 3, 14, 15.

⁶ The infatuation with gold and silver by the colonists is borderline insatiable. To see such examples of cruelty caused by this greed see Bartolomé de las Casas, *An Account, Much Abbreviated, of the Destruction of the Indies*, translated by Andrew Hurley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2003), 1-21, 86-88.

⁷ Name of a Taíno Indian Columbus returned to Spain with to show King Fernand and Queen Isabel. Name acquired from <http://www.taino-tribe.org/jatibonicu-flagstory.htm>.

⁸ Symptoms of influenza. Disease that killed a large percentage of Native Americans.

death that the men from the sea cursed us with. Columbus, on the other hand, is a prisoner. He would have been killed immediately, but was spared instant death to suffer the pains that the demons have infected him. Only few of us show this fleshly weakness after being with the women of a tribe after a conflict.

– “¡Veen!... eenn” Columbus exhausts. I do not respond... he can wait, I think. Columbus tried to teach me his language, about his God, and his caciques from over the seas. I tried to tell him such matters do not concern us but he did not listen. He talked to me like one would to a child, and kept repeating things about his gods and lords.

– “What do you want” I attempted to speak to him by dividing my tongue with his speech and mine while gesturing incredulously to him.

– “Agua, I want water. Go fetch me some!” The strength in his hands ran dry and he collapsed once more to the ground. There he continued to mumble something about this hellish place. “Hellish” I thought... why would he call this place hellish? I learned that Hell is the place my tribe went and where I’ll gladly choose go in peace. I want no part of what they call heaven, the place where good Christians go. I have seen these men and they are nothing but murderers. I want to be as far away from them as possible and if that means going to hell, then to hell I’ll go⁹. What nerve to ask of me “Water”... Water ... they came on water. What a day that was, the Christians drank the sea to come to us and they still want water. On that marvelous day, my friend called to me: “The prophecy, the Yukiú are coming!” I ran as fast as I could with all my family. We stood at the shore and observed in awe. What we saw I could not explain and yet I’ll try. “They came as if large coconut halves, a marvel, a reef that travels, a pregnant cloud that

⁹ Hatuey, an indian Cacique from the island of Hispaniola, professed that he preferred to go to hell rather than heaven where the Christians would go to be away from them. Reference found in Bartolomé de las Casas, *An Account, Much Abbreviated, of the Destruction of the Indies*, translated by Andrew Hurley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2003), 19.

thirstily descends without a storm to drink the sea, a seagoing fish with upright wings, but I am wrong, how could it be a fish with wings; it must have been a bird that swam. A monster of such strangeness where people inside lived¹⁰. We heard them shout with sounds we never heard before. They had pale skin and hairy faces”. They surely were Yukiyú¹¹ ... or so we thought.

– “There is none”, I retort, “You will have to wait until the village elders return”.

Columbus turns away from me and picks up his writing tool and pens: “From January to September I have trained my tiny band of Indians to do our bidding. They are a beautiful race, without guile and all younger than 30 years old¹². They surely would make great servants to thee and with the aid of these friars they would be good Christians too. They are most fearful creatures on the face of the earth and weak as to the strength of men beyond measure. Nevertheless, there are other bad Indians, that do bear arms and are experts in the use of the bow and arrow. They also are cannibals¹³ and eat their own children when they hunger exceedingly. It is to them that we have declared war and have destroyed their village. The rest of the Indians now listen and help us in all our needs. Some of our ‘tongue’¹⁴ Indians left to rejoin their families and we let them as a symbol of good will. They have not yet returned but we await still”. Columbus looks as if he has exhausted all his strength. He picks up his parchment and examines it by holding it very closely to his face. The evil spirit that is causing his red bumps must be very strong.

¹⁰ Description of the boats that Columbus sailed in. The description is an adaptation of a text from Calderon de la Barca's play *La aurora en Copacabana*.

¹¹ Yukiyú is the taino word for spirit or god. He represents a benevolent god. See

<http://www.prboriken.com/taino.htm>.

¹² Las Casas, Bartolomé. *Diario de a bordo de Cristóbal Colon: Primer viaje*. Colección España Heroica. Ed. Arcadia (Barcelona), 29.

¹³ Cannibalism is a practice reported by some travelers to the early colonial America but heavily disputed by some scholars like Gina Kolata, "Anthropologists Suggest Cannibalism is a Myth," *Science*, new series, vol. 232, no. 4757 (June 20, 1986): 1497-1500.

¹⁴ Tongue – *lengua* was the term used by early conquistadores to refer to translators and interpreters. See Hernán Cortés *Segunda Carta-Relación* p44

After a night of dreamless sleep I wake up early in the morning to the run-down moans of Columbus. The warriors in my tribe told me they were going to attack the Christians that night. They explained that too often have they killed our brethren, took all that we had, and stolen our women and children. A few tribes got together, and secretly attacked and burned all that remains of their village. I discovered that morning that the last bearded man in our land was Columbus. Not much is left of him. The room fills with warriors. They are wearing on their heads Christian pots and some wear bloodied carapaces taken from Christian the dead. They are yelling and dancing. Suddenly, they surround Columbus and being prodding him with their arrows and spears. They wake him up. He jumps to his feet and then suddenly collapses to the ground. He doesn't have the strength to fight. The men understand he is not well and do not slash him with their maquahuitls¹⁵ but rather taunt to frighten him. Columbus scoots towards a wall of reeds, he's shouting in his language. I can't understand at all what he says for he speaks too fast and his voice is as if of another. The more scared Columbus looks the more empowered the warriors feel. They chant even louder and taunt him while dancing impassionedly.

One of the leaders of my brethren squats next to Christopher put his face next to his face and recites in our tongue: "Juracán¹⁶!. You came over the sea floating in your houses. You used your hard carapaces to strengthen your weak bodies but you did not prosper. You are cruel and use your magic to kill us from a distance. Your fire and your thundering cause much damage but Yukiyú was not on your side. You enslave, murder, take, and never give back." I wonder if Columbus understands anything my leader tells him. I have only taught him very few words. The warrior then takes the head of a Christian out of his bag and shoves it Columbus' face.

¹⁵ Reference to the famous Aztec weapon. Similar to a sword. It is made of a club that is fitted with obsidian or flint sharp stones. It is said that these weapons could decapitate a horse in one blow. The weapon appears in Hernán Cortés *Segunda Carta-Relación*

¹⁶ Evil Taíno god <http://www.prboriken.com/taino.htm>. Binary opposite to Yukiyú.

– Columbus rages: “Diego de Arana¹⁷, how has this happened? You savages, you will pay for this, you and all the generations that follow you! My ships will come back, and when they do, all of you will be wiped out. Not one of you that does not convert and follow the King and Queen of the Spanish lands will survive. I read the *requerimiento* to you and have done all I could to live by the just terms of our contract. You have chosen your path. Free me now!” His words fly in prophetic anger, yet fall as the sounds of a crying baby in the ears of the warrior that can’t understand his speech. When Columbus sees the puzzled face of the leader of my people, he puts his hands in front of his eyes, closes them, and weeps for his fate.

– “Ju-ra-cán! Ju-ra-cán! Ju-ra-cán!” the men sing while stomping the ground. The air becomes dusty and the cold breeze of the morning is replaced by heat and flies that come in attracted by the blood of on the weapons of my warriors. They brought with them appendages taken from the Christians. They will undoubtedly remain with our tribe as evidence of our strength for generations to come.

When the men tire, they leave the hut. Inside they leave us and their trophies for us to admire. We are still alive. Columbus hasn’t moved from the wall. He is still with his eyes closed, but now he has curled in an infant position. He has forgotten about the demons that lacerate his body and is trembling from head to toe in fear for his life.

Not even a few moons pass. My condition worsens and I can’t stand up anymore. Unexpectedly, I hear great commotion outside. Everybody is screaming and running away. Great lightings and thundering occur without a single storm cloud. Are the gods angry? The earth shakes and in an instant the roof of our hut disappears like the top of a mountain would when a

¹⁷ The historical Diego de Arana was the man that Columbus left in charge of the Villa de Navidad before embarking to Spain. He along all the other Spaniards left behind were found dead when Columbus returned for his second trip.

volcano erupts. “My eyes!” I can’t see anything anymore. I can feel pieces of the hut falling down on us. Stranger still, I hear a mad laughter. Why is Columbus laughing?

– “Ja ja ja, bienvenidos amigos, les estaba esperando. No habrían podido esperar ni un minuto más. Ja ja ja. Bienvenidos al paraíso. Habrá mucho oro y especias que encontrar. Está toda la isla llena de riquezas. ¡Venid! Ja ja ja¹⁸.” I have no idea what he is talking about. I can’t understand his speech. He hasn’t been himself since my brothers killed the Christians. After a while, I hear footsteps come in. They are as heavy as they make the sound of spears hitting the ground¹⁹. I feel a great hand land on the back of my head. I feel lifted up and thrown to the ground. What pain! I can hardly move and I can’t see. How could I fight back now? “¡Colón! ¿Qué os ha pasado?²⁰” My assailant mumbles after he is convinced I am not a threat.

– Not lifting up from the lack of nourishment and the immense deformities of his body, Columbus utters: “Diego de Arana, my friend, the air is as soft as that of Seville in April, and so fragrant that it is delicious to breathe it”.

– The Christian appears perplexed, “Has the devil taken possession of your soul? Cross yourself!”

– “The cross... the holy sacraments... Jesus... gold... silver... governance... land...”

– “¡Llevalos, están locos!²¹” hands abruptly fall on me and lift me by my leg. My face drags in the dirt. I hear Columbus next to me dragged just like me. He continues to murmur the same continuous and unending series of words: “The cross... the holy sacraments... Jesus... gold... silver... governance... land...” My hands get tied to a wooden pole and I feel a man I

¹⁸ Spanish for: Ha ha ha, welcome friends, I had been waiting for you. You couldn’t have come a minute later. Ha ha ha. Welcome to paradise. There is much gold and spices to be had. All the island is filled with ritches. Come! Ha ha ha.

¹⁹ The sound of boots hitting the ground is foreign to the natives.

²⁰ Spanish for: Columbus, what has happened to you.

²¹ Spanish for: Take them away, they are insane.

think is a Christian priest sprinkle water on me. The man is asking of me something I can't fully understand. I guess the word Christ. While I think he's a Christian he speaks a different tongue²² than Christopher. "Tibi retribuetur enim tibi in resurrectione" he utters. I don't answer anything as I don't know what to say. I then hear a chorus of "Amen" all around me. An intense smell starts to make sense to me. I had been smelling it for a while now, but never fully realized what it might have been. Burned hair and flesh. I feel heat from a place not too distant. I start screaming. So does Columbus²³.

²² Reference to Latin the liturgical language of the time.

²³ Columbus is killed by the men that were supposed to rescue him. When they found Columbus in a state of utter madness and in a physical condition of utter disrepair, they found no better way to take care of him then to kill him. He would have been too great a burden to take care of and to have to respond to his leadership on the island as he had the highest rank. The easier way was to dispose of him and so they did along those Indians that resisted the conquest.