

John Agard was born in British Guyana (West Indies) in 1949. He moved to England in 1977.

Remember the Ship

As citizen
of the English tongue

I say remember
the ship
5 in citizenship

for language
is the baggage
we bring -

a weight
10 of words to ground
and give us wing –

as millennial waters
beckon wide

and love's anchor
15 waiting to be cast
will the ghost of race
become the albatross
we shoot at our cost?

I'm here to navigate –
20 not flagellate
with a whip of the past

but again I say remember
the ship
in citizenship
25 for is not each member
of the human race –
a ship on two legs

charting life's tidal
rise and fall

30 as the ship
of the sun
unloads its light
and the ship
of night

35 its cargo of stars
again I say remember
the ship
in citizenship

and diversity

40 shall sound its trumpet
outside the bigot's wall

and citizenship shall be
a call
to kinship

45 that knows
no boundary
of skin

and the heart
offer its wide harbours

50 for Europe's new voyage

to begin

Annotations:

¹² **millennial** – the poem was written in 1998 and published two years later

¹⁷ **albatross** – here allusion to S. Coleridge's poem Rime of the Ancient Mariner (1798): a mariner shoots the albatross that has shown his ship the way out of dangerous waters; the other sailors on board think this leads to a curse that will kill all of them

^{40f.} **sound its trumpet outside the bigot's wall** – here allusion to the biblical story where the Hebrews destroy the walls of the city of Jericho only with the sound of trumpets

⁴⁹ **offer** – here shall offer