

from “Bright Advent”

'These seen Gen.I, 1-2.

'Yeush naumukish Gen.I, 1-2.

These words are single notions
Yeush kuttiwongash siyeumoe wahittumiash.

God, created, in beginning,
God, ayum, weskekutchissik,

heaven, earth:, earth, not formed
kesuk, ohke: ohke, matta kukkenauuneunkquttinno,

nothing in it; darkness, upon deep:
monteagwuninno; pohkennum, woskeche moonoe:

the spirit of God moved upon waters.
Nashauanit, popomhau, woskeche, nippekontu.

These words binding words:
Yeush kuttowongash moappissue kuttiwongash:

And, was, or, again, but,
Kah, mo, asuh, wonk, qut,

another, like, for, but,
onkatuk, netatup, newutche, webe,

as, in, so, the, for this cause is it, &c. ...
neane, ut, nemehkuh, ne, newaj sun, &c. ...

All single Notions are Pairs
Wame siyeumie wahittumiash nequtayittumiash

which inlighten each other,
nish wequohtoadtumiash,

& them only:
& nish webe:'

[The Historical Cast]

Reverend John Eliot (1604-1690)—Known as the Apostle to the Indians, Eliot helped found thirteen towns for “Praying Indians” and printed the Indian Bible. The conversion and protection of the Indians near Massachusetts Bay became his life’s work.

John Sassamon (c.1625-1675)—Massachusett Indian and translator for Eliot. He

served as an interpreter and soldier for the puritan colonists in the Pequot War, attended Harvard, translated the entire Bible into Algonquian with Eliot, and became a Christian minister. His murder, allegedly at the order of the Indian Sachem Philip, precipitated King Philip's War.

Robert Boyle (1627-1691)—Considered by many to be the founder of modern chemistry, he is best known today for Boyle's Law of Gasses. A wealthy and influential man who helped found The Royal Society, Boyle was also a devoted Christian who became president of The Corporation for the Propagation of the Gospel in New England, which funded Eliot's mission.

[Eliot, of Sassamon]

'God first put into my heart a compassion over their poor Souls, and a desire to teach them to know Christ, and to bring them into his Kingdom. Then presently I found out (by God's wise providence) a *pregnant witted young man*, who had been a Servant in an English house, who pretty well understood our Language, better than he could speak it, and well understood his own Language, and hath a clear pronounciation: Him I made my *Interpreter*. By his help I translated the *Commandments*, the *Lord's Prayer*, and many *Texts of Scripture*. Also I compiled both *Exhortations* and *Prayers* by his help.' He is well-used— he sees words

in the air of it. To change one or some is simple, he says: breathe words in, to the meaning (keeping that inside lungs) and the tune another language likes (keeping that simply singing) —this divergent mix enters unto some obscure process of organic formation— and press that out his mouth! This air then fills the air. You will notice Sassamon's position, in interpreting, is always upwind. This air, these two languages in two forms moves toward a third. By example, as I understand it, a body mass of understood English words (approaches unto in the air) a larger more firm (though airie) space of Massachusetts "understanding" (itself as a form). All this, he sees within his visual consciousness.

The known words drift toward the understanding and, as tide to a shore, form to its shape. This formation appears to him as the words interpreted. The sounds interpreted. Though in a way other than letters. More, I deduce, like an air-made landscape or map of meaning.

Thus, many scenes of desired interpretation have been given over for bad weather, winds, etc. He likes nothing better than a most gentle and constant zephyr. A still day tends to infuriate as a stubborn mule would. Airy tempests (as can sometimes favor our new coast) put a cold stop to any adventure, even within a good wigwam. These acting, I deduce, like a disappearing of ink or rather a constant hand scraping the slate. Firesmoke is not unpleasant to this

miraculous conversation of currents.

As I have my *Light Appearing More and More Towards the Perfect Day*, he says, so he can hope for air appearing more and more towards the perfect translation of that, the Bible of our Massachusett language.

He looks to books because they affect not the air, but also they have none. A thing he desires and fears.

I am working to proceed with his ideas, being as they are a cause or by-product of his particular genius, and only know to start here: Breath indeed is the prayer of a new creature.

[*Logic Primer*]

'Syllogism
'Ogusanukoowaonk

Third positive form, when both Propositions alike
Nishwe ponamoe wuttinniyuonk neeswe pakodtittumooongash netatuppe

begin, because the Argument is the Subject in both
kutchissinuhettit, newutche wequohtoonek ne teagoonoo ut naneese

Propositions:
Pakodtittumooonganit:

Some poor in this world shall be saved in heaven
Nawhutche matchekuog yeu ut muttaohket pish wadchanoog kesukquit.

The Argument: because they believe.'
Wequohtoonek: newutche wunamptamwog.'

[*Eliot*]

And these Indians, 'musical sounds they also have, and perfect Harmony, but they differ from us in sound.

There be four several sorts of Sounds or Tones uttered by Mankind.

1. Articulation in Speech.
2. Laughter.
3. Laetation and Joy: of which kind of sounds our Music and Song is made.
4. Ululation, Howling, Yelling, or Mourning: and of that kind of sound is their Music and Song made.'

And I only mourn. As we work, my children,
my wife and children, die.
One by one they fall, they go, they rise.
I see them like trees. In their absence
from the field around me,

the field of vision
I labor in, I set my mind
to a new frame: making the firebrand

God's own hand from hip to toe
showing me to know Him in this burning
numb forerunner of heaven. A missive

only into mine own mind—the seal
inward for no man to see
or them to feel though I am struck

to the ground by it, such is His call
that our eyes cannot look upon Him.
This feeble wheel of mine feels

afire from His mere token & reminder: 'Up,
and be doing, and the Lord will be with thee.'

To take that next step & taste the light
wrought across my very eyes
by the Lord's electric storm

down my right side shaking even
my teeth. My comings & goings
secretly mapped—a geography

of sensation I inwardly diagram
by loving attention—grown of
a sort of metallic hum of empty

what is not as once there. The new clear space
hardly innominate. Gone. But what was that space
before their passed presences? Any blank
is God. They were all there once. One by one until but Anne and the one boy.
Gone. Space, their presence in it, their absence from it, Godspace. Until but
the one boy—Joseph, like a holy but half-used father to me. Oh Anne. She will
not return to me, but I will go unto her. 'My desire was that they should serve
God on earth; but if God will choose rather to have them serve him in heaven, I
have nothing to object against it, his will be done
to take my family to himself' and I
will bear the metal tooth
gnashing time about me, the work
unfinished, the field wide open and white
but a want of workers.
We must finish.

[Sassamon]

One word becomes another by suffocation across whatever is the virgin,
inviolable concept. One wallowing becomes another wallowing—the way men will
die the same but make different noises to do it. Guttural resistant clicks or
that nice rounded resignation, blood and meaning pool in the throat
to push out pure air. We take
one step back
and lay a little word
to each thing. Suffocating.
When summer runs long
I hide on the island for days to gather distance
and then swim into it crying out like an English woman dying just to live in
one real moment of silence. Finding great relief each year in my surprise that
this simple and deliberate mechanism remains effective.
I swim ashore and return to work. The work.

[Eliot, to the Corporation
for the Propagation of the Gospel]

I have sent the commissioners of the colony 'my requests for some help of some
great charges this year; but *they are pleased to answer me with silence, as it
is wont to be* ... and my humble request is that it may be paid, and then I shall
be out of debt; but if it should be refused, than *my hands are tied, I can do
little; yet I am resolved through the grace of Christ, I will never give over
the work so long as I have legs to go*. I am at a dead lift in the work; if the
Lord stir up the hearts of men to help me, blessed be his name, and blessed be
they that help me; if no man help me. ... There be many things lie before me,
wherein I might promote the work, and fix the hearts of the Indians, but I
cannot come at them for want of means. ... Messengers and instruments look for
their pay, and if that fail, the whole moves very heavily and will quickly
stand still. ... My humble request unto yourselves the honorable corporation is,
that you would put me into such an order or way, that I may know where to pay
such instruments as I set on work. If instruments fail, the work will fail.
Instruments are the wheels of our motion, and if they want oil they will soon
want power of motion. I could employ a great revenue in promoting the work.'

[Robert Boyle,
scientist and president of the Corporation,
a personal note to Eliot]

Honorable Reverend in Christ— As we both seek the improvement of souls by our
clear faculties I fear lest our conversation become dull mortal money matters.
Your work is the only answer of truth—and by that I proceed. You shall be
supported. I enclose humble notes toward my latest work, *A General History of
Air*, building from and toward fresh experiments, as I know our godly educated
ministers of New England to be interested what experience and experiment can
deduce of God's many gifts to us... I hope these notes may also serve the learned

notions of your once savage translator...

[Sassamon]

I swim toward the point, which is to remain underwater. The point is to remain. To remain separate from my self: if you find heaven under there, you will first experience it in fleeting only ached moments. But you can train yourself slow to remain longer without which keeps you out of heaven. And, like the grampus, you need only rise briefly into hell for a breath. And with keeping the ears out of the air. Just lungs lifting upward, eyes closed.

[Boyle]

'Wherefore the Air, being a Body so important in our Speculations of Nature, and so necessary to the Continuance of our Lives, I could not but think it deserv'd, that we should solicitously inquire, whether it may or may not be produc'd by Art; for if it can be so by any, not very uneasily practicable ways, the Discovery may not only help us to explicate some difficult Phenomena of Nature, but may afford us, among several other Uses, that of enabling us to supply diverse, if not also submarine Navigators with fresh Air produced under Water, and thereby lengthen their staying in Places, where the Continuance of it may be of great Use both speculative and practical.' 'I shall offer to your Consideration the Accidents that often happen to Men, by the mere Air, as Convulsions, Cramps, Blastings, Lameness, Colds, many of which indure a Man's Life-time; and which (with many bitter Infirmities that sometimes seize upon a Man, while standing, walking, or lying in the Air) are rarely or never felt or discerned at the Instant of their Approach or Insults upon a Man.'

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nothing in it; darkness, upon deep:
monteagwuninno; pohkennum, woskeche moonoe:

the spirit of God moved upon waters.
Nashauanit, popomhau, woskeche, nippekontu.

These words binding words:
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And, was, or, again, but,
Kah, mo, asuh, wonk, qut,

another, like, for, but,
onkatuk, netatup, newutche, webe,

as, in, so, the, for this cause is it, &c. ...
neane, ut, nemehkuh, ne, newaj sun, &c. ...

All single Notions are Pairs
Wame siyeumie wahittumiash nequtayittumiash

which inlighten each other,
nish wequohtoadtumiash,

& them only:'

& nish webe:'

[Sassamon, of
Printing the Bible]

These pages indeed require a new attempt at binding by us.
We have not made something
this big, never yet everything.
The binding inlightens the Word
into word order, His order, Ordo Salutis. The Old Testament three years in the
press my arm forcing the devil's arm over and down pressing paper ink metal for
three years. We have smoothed over the imposing stone with our endless literal
sweat. Our bled letter'd fingertips. The inkballs making ink seemingly from
their swinging through air I see the entire Bible writ there in reversed
letters.

At night my eyes close backward
on verse I sleep
outside myself for looking back
down upon p & q
upon me as I hope the Lord
reads what's impressed
into my very vision.

Hand-justified, writ out from one pen each letter set after getting clean in my
ear air eye as Eliot reads aloud.

I dream: inside shut covers the volume of it is His eternal void & ocean the
words swim meaning endlessly and then—we open it—and His divine direction falls
the words to our senses.

To see the tongue done and bound like this as in billable columns—one two three
four to find it thus arranged four frozen waterfalls of eternally.

Imagine our earth thus pressed
if each holy page contains eternities
is the book shut then
rejoicing or otherwise?
Ink sewing itself into the rag'd paper, pulped
from what people have worn about
are these imprints a worldly making
of the inbetween subterranean and heavenly—
type form, tympan—
the captured air words of just above
our heads grabbed down and pressed
to paper—as retrieved
saints to the gravestone,
what limited immortalization
we are capable of with this press
taking language of all God's intermediaries
we have deduced
and designed to our own designs
this bookblock as the
compressed aviary for captured
prophets— yet most sense not
the tension in binding these pages.

Like a native tongue (to your mouth)
laid out babbling from God's beginning of time
even running past you to Revelation—such a totality of noise.
And where do we stand?

Between the last page of Jude and the first of Revelation!

We are right now two inches of un-inked paper. Good luck and God bide you.

We do indeed need two praying hands to hold it—such divine design.

It looks lovely.
I want to breathe it.

[Boyle, to John Eliot]

‘I waited this day upon the King with your translation of the Bible.’

Statement of Poetic Research

My first book of poems, *Puritan Spectacle*, used the language and *oomph* of puritan conversion narratives to write “American common prayers” for Big Macs, cheerleaders, mall food courts, interstate highways, etc. The idea was to find real meaning in our factual (not imagined) landscape. I picture my works of poetry and history as think tanks on America: get all the brightest voices and minds together (in the case of *Bright Advent*, from seventeenth-century Massachusetts), give them some excellent materials to interact with, and stand back. Then jump in and edit them. Then stand back again.

I completed the research for *Bright Advent* during a creative research fellowship at the American Antiquarian Society. I’d been working for some time on a book-length treatment of the events and people involved in the lead-up to King Philip’s War: the seventeenth-century translation of the entire Bible into Algonquian; the Reverend John Eliot and his Indian translator John Sassamon; the Praying Indian towns; and the puritan (and Indian) conversion narrative. The rough “plot” of this book of poetry was in place when I began my formal research; however, the project was full of gaps, both historical and literary.

For example, Sassamon’s apparent genius as a linguist and translator had emerged, in the imaginative space of my pages, as a sort of gift for visualizing language that occurs in the very air around his head. I enjoyed this conceit, and it was generating great “scenes,” but it remained unconnected to anything in the larger book. One of the great discoveries for my research, then, was that scientist Robert Boyle served as the president of the Corporation for the Propagation of the Gospel in New England (the main funding agency for Eliot’s mission and translation work). Among Boyle’s many works (we know him best for his Law of Gases) is the posthumous collection of his ongoing investigation, *A General History of Air*. We also have—and I read in the archives—some of his communications with Eliot during the time period on which I was focusing.

This connection between a historical fact—Boyle’s experiments on the properties of air—and my imagined cause for another historical fact—John Sassamon’s gift for translating “in the air”—illustrates the serendipity of creative research.

Poets often find that historical and imagined material stitch together with uncanny, synergistic ease to reveal “truths,” in sum, that are greater than their parts.

In addition to my introduction to Boyle’s work on air, my research also introduced me to many of the items that appear in the pages presented here: the mechanisms of colonial printing (which I was able to both read about and observe); the feel and heft of an actual copy of the “Indian Bible”; the fact that Eliot suffered from paralyzing bouts of sciatic pain; and, of course, a wealth of stunning source material that I use in this manuscript as part of the “voice” of my “characters.” Readers will note how the source material from my research influenced the look of my work on the page as lyric verse lines mingle with prose chunks. This pressure on formal arrangement, in many ways, was the most profound effect of the historical source on this manuscript: to coax my pages away from being verse that happened to have history in it; to permit the historical record to build a version of its own truth with poetry.