

a selection from

Bright Advent

by Robert Strong

Marie Alexander Poetry Series, No. 21, published by White Pine Press, 2017

Founded in 1996 by Robert Alexander, the Marie Alexander Poetry Series is dedicated to promoting the appreciation, enjoyment, and understanding of American prose poetry. An imprint of White Pine Press, the Series publishes one to two books annually. It is our mission to publish the very best contemporary prose poetry and to carry the rich tradition of this hybrid form on into the 21st century.

SETTING AND CHARACTERS:

The Bright Advent: In the 1600s, many Puritan colonists in Massachusetts Bay believed they labored during the Bright Advent, a period immediately prior to Christ's corporeal return to earth, when "the brightness of his coming" was bringing a terrific surge of supernatural power and human effort to revolutionize the course of world events. Thinking the Native Americans to be one of the lost tribes of Israel—who are prophesied to be converted to Christianity before Christ's second coming—some Puritans set about to hasten the Apocalypse by translating the entire Bible into Algonquian, training native preachers, and establishing "Praying Indian" towns.

Reverend John Eliot (1604-1690): Known as the Apostle to the Indians, Eliot was the chief colonial strategist for the missionary effort in Massachusetts Bay. He helped found thirteen "Praying Indian" towns and printed the so-called Indian Bible, the first published in the colonies in any language. The conversion of the Indians became his life's work.

John Sassamon (c.1620-1675): A gifted, orphaned Massachusetts 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 by agents of the Indian leader Metacom (Philip), precipitated King Philip's War.

Metacom (King Philip) (c.1638-1676): Sachem of the Massachusetts Pokanoket. The real roots of the war that bears Philip's name lay in the ongoing land grab by the English and the cultural and political pressures they inflicted on tribes. Additionally, Philip had reason to believe that his brother Alexander (Wamsutta), who died while in English custody, was poisoned. At the end of the war, Philip was shot dead, his wife and child were sold into slavery in the Caribbean, and his head was stuck on a pike in Plymouth—the village where his father, Massasoit, had celebrated what some today call the "first Thanksgiving."

Grace Indian: An invented character. She belongs to Metacom's people.

Robert Boyle (1627-1691): One of the founders 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.

NOTE: all source material is from the seventeenth century and appears in single quotation marks.

[Eliot: of Sciatic Pain & Paralysis, of the Work, of finding Sassamon]

Limping August to November,
the condition going over, 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,
so this feeble wheel of mine feels

afire from His mere token & reminder: Up,
and be doing, and the Lord will be with thee.
But removing earth's under-pressure
(fallen back in the latitude of dull sleep)

this loving torture abates, leaving me
as a plain man in this world.
To think, to stay speechless, to take

that next step & taste the light
wrought across my very eyes
with 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

pasturage taken up into me: Pain.

I pray heaven shall be similar
but wholly pleasant & populated.

Thus His message is no horses,
walk slow, sit only
with rigid attention, covet not
your body, harvest words & souls only the most light difficult matter no heavy coarse grain, unwrap
every moment from only its own perception, from its own side, do not make mental constructions of
some guessed future when it is only the Lord's unturned pages writ as the past is writ for what you
know not nor should worry in guessing, love thy wife for she is a helpmeet unto you —Oh Anne,—
in all activity
bend at the knee making
every duty prayer. Do not be
a plain unpained man.

One particular remedy I have found for the insensate uselessness of the leg is to cinch breeches
about that ankle and fill the leg with nettles. This total attack to the sense of that part appears to
draw down a larger and functioning awareness.

So I become an iatromechanic for the lame conveyance of my own soul.

And still the work is a continual calling unto me with its signs and provisions, for 'there is also a
Blackmoor maid, that hath long lived at Dorchester in New England, unto whom God hath so
blessed the public and private means of grace that she is not only indued with a competent measure
of knowledge in the mysteries of God, and conviction of her miserable estate of sin; but hath also
experience of a saving work of grace in her heart, and a sweet savour of Christ breathing in her' who
'hath with tears exhorted some other of the Indians that live with us to embrace Jesus Christ,
declaring how willing he would be to receive them, even as he had received her.'

'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.'

[Anne Eliot: of Eliot, the Work, her Work]

My love for the work and duty
of loving this intrepid limping library
my yokefellow Eliot is too much.
Yet I am a seal to his work,
he says, and take off his secular cares
so that he might fix the hearts
of the Indians etc. A hard morsel to chew,
with domestical duties
soiling what luster wherewith nature's
Nature decks our loving parts.
Our real and most mutual
affection is the minor piece
of his foundation, and yet still more
than I deserve. Even in marriage
we are not let loose to pursue
what brutish pleasures would
toil for at the expense of spirit.
Lord, when will you glue my heart
to God above all things,
above my husband? To stir up
lust for my love of him
is itself effeminate. His strong restraint
and supplication are a saint-like
conformity to our mutual duties,
which want in their muting
of my own forward and frothy thoughts.
His obligation, though, is not my right.
As childbirth gives us
ten months to seek comfort
in Christ if he will take us
to him in death that day, this marriage
is my opening text to eternal
meditations. And the groaning
beer of salvation is more
than yet I taste. Eliot is espoused
first to Christ and reborn through him—
a more motherly birthing

than I ever.
So it is mine
to seek wool and flax,
work willingly with my hands,
lay them to spindle and distaff.
Rising while it is still night
to have the flummery or soft samp
hot for dawn. The fire, the sponge
and barm, are but more children to me,
warming and feeding us lovingly
if I can but attend their continuity
while they try me with their fickles
of tempetuous yeast or simpering
embers. I must bridge dearth
to bounty—bacon flitch in the chimney,
souse in the barrel. If any small
quiet moment creeps to me,
God finds me with a gentle reminder
by the singing of the cider.

[Eliot: of The Interpreter]

Thus, Sassamon will be well-used—he sees words.
In the air of it. To shapechange,
to translate one
or some is simple: breathe
words in, to the meaning
(keeping that inside lungs)
and the tune
(keeping that simply singing)
that another language likes
—this divergent mix enters unto
some obscure process
of organic formation—
and press that out his mouth! This new breath
then fills into the old meaning. 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 a larger
more constant space of Massachusetts “understanding” (itself as an atmosphere). All this, he sees
within his visual consciousness.

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

He tells me: *This is simple if you don't stop doing when the papoose is loosened and you are let out (thinking) into
your own breath. We are lazy with what we think we have and strive always for what is just beyond. Few master even
their immediate surroundings. None do. Your impression on a still day—out of doors—travels no further than the
branches from a small tree's trunk.*

See that, he says, see what you make on this world.

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. Gusting tempests (as do 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. The proximity of the ocean also being to the liking of Sassamon’s genius
and skill for some light-giving properties it has for (being reflective under) the low sky we live within.

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.

Long after some meeting he interpreted, he may sit there watching the room settle back to its original shape and meaning.

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.

[Sassamon: of Communication]

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. The birds and animals don't word, don't talk of death. Void themselves of their young, lick the blood, move food to mouths without hands. Another difference between us and them is glass. You can see through the hole you cut to pull the guts out will be where you slip inside them for warmth.

For you've made a coat of the world's parts.

There are animals larger than any man.

Trees, and projections of earth.

We take one step back

and lay a little word

to each thing. Lay our mouth on it in a layer

and say it to others who don't ever remain silent so the wood becomes full of such half-sense—the gutted and cured hides of our minds draped over everything that ignores cold and snow.

Suffocating. When summer runs long I hide on the island for days to gather distance and then swim into it and cry like an English woman dying just to be alive in one real moment of silence. Finding great relief each year in my surprise that this simple and deliberate mechanism remains effective.

I come ashore and return to work.

[Grace Indian—a girl]

The girl did not talk. It was an accident to her head. She did hear. Her tongue was articulate against teeth and mouth but made no usual sound. Or it was, from her very birth, silent. Or she suffered some young stroke under the sun of her own accord, or. Or. Or. Bright. Hands like mother birds in motion keeping eyes off the open nest her mouth. Mother birds cleaning, feeding the air around a small brown body.

People think they are silent when they shut their mouths.
But the ocean keeps flowing
against the shore of them. This girl,
Grace Indian, is a seal
unseen in the ocean against their shore.

Food, sleep, attention—her mouth works differently around these, does not need.

Grace Indian does not speak,
Grace Indian hides corn in the cold fire,
Grace Indian goes swimming,
indicates the air around her face or fingers,
grabs a rifle with both hands from the wrong direction,
ties many many red leaves together and sends them down river to bend like a blood-arm over the
waterfall,
covers the fire rocks in mud,
weaves green grass around the whole trunk of a birch tree,
attracts always small swarms of children,
makes a headdress of dandelions for the horse,
tries to kill who tries to cut her hair,
covers the floor with cranberries,
rings the firepit with dead butterflies,
closes her eyes and walks across the bridge, forearms level to the water, fingers spread,
makes snow with cattail cotton,
writes 'God' on the road to Boston with five dead snakes,
walks English,
stacks 23 shark jaws like hats and fights off all comers,
builds a small Boston of high tide ice,
arrives naked, her dress a sack of oysters,
makes rope from spider webs,
Grace Indian
gets five lashes by King Philip's order.

[English Parliament, 1649]

‘Act for the promoting and Propagating of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in New England’

‘Whereas the Commons of England assembled in Parliament have received certain intelligence, by the testimonial of diverse faithful and godly Ministers, and others in New-England, that diverse the Heathen Natives of that country, through the blessing of God upon the pious care and pains of some godly English of this Nation, who preach the Gospel to them in their own Indian Language, who not only of Barbarous are become Civil, but many of them forsaking their accustomed Charms and Sorceries, and other Satanical Delusions, do now call upon the Name of the Lord . . . with tears lamenting their mis-spent lives, teaching their Children what they are instructed in themselves, being careful to place their said Children in godly English families, and to put them to English Schools, betaking themselves to one wife, putting away the rest, and by their constant prayers to Almighty God morning and evening in their families . . . it is hereby Enacted by this present Parliament, and by the authority thereof, that for the furthering so good a work, and for the purposes aforesaid, from henceforth there shall be a Corporation in England.’

[LORD'S PRAYER, Matthew 6: 9-13]

Our father <i>Nooshun</i>	heaven in <i>kesukqut,</i>	hallowed <i>quttianatamunach</i>
thy name <i>koonesuonk.</i>	come <i>peyaumooutch</i>	thy kingdom <i>kukketassootamoonk,</i>
thy will <i>Kuttenantamoonk</i>	done earth on <i>ne n nach obkeit</i>	
as <i>neane</i>	heaven in <i>kesukqut.</i>	our food <i>Nummeetsuongsab</i>
daily <i>asekesukokish</i>	give us <i>assamaimean</i>	this this <i>yeuyeu</i>
and <i>Kab</i>	forgive us <i>abquontamaiinean</i>	our <i>nummatch-</i>
sins <i>eseongsab</i>	as <i>neane</i>	wicked-doers <i>matchebukqueagig</i>
we forgive <i>nutabquontamounnonog.</i>	them	also lead <i>Abque sagkom-</i>
	us not <i>pagunaiinean en</i>	temptation in <i>qutchbuaonganit,</i>
oh <i>webe</i>	deliver us <i>pobquobwussinnean</i>	evil <i>wutch</i>
from <i>matchitut.</i>	for <i>Newutche</i>	thine <i>kutabtaun</i>
	kingdom <i>ketassootamoonk,</i>	
and <i>kab</i>	power <i>menubkesuonk,</i>	and glory <i>kab sohsumoonk</i>
forever <i>micheme.</i>	Amen. <i>Amen.'</i>	

[Robert Boyle: to John Eliot, April 1664]

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