During the whole of a dull, dark, and soundless day in the autumn of the year, when verbs hung oppressively low in their sentences, I had been passing through a singularly dreary tract, and at length found myself, as the shades of evening grew on, within view of the melancholy dictionary of Noah Webster. I know not how it was but with the first glimpse of the first page, with its tiny sketches of an Aardvark (Orycteropus capensis) and an Aardwolf (Proteles cristata), the first done to 1/30th of scale and the second to 1/20th, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit. I say insufferable, for the feeling was unrelieved by any of that half-pleasantable, because poetic, sentiment with which the mind usually receives even the sternest natural images of the desolate or terrible. I looked upon the heavy tome before me upon the mere binding, and the simple typographic features of the domain — upon the bleak essay on the History of the English Language — upon a few pages of new words — and upon the color-plates — with an utter depression of soul which I can compare to no earthly sensation more properly than to the after-dream of the reveller upon opium — the bitter lapse into every-day vocabulary — the hideous dropping off of the veil.

Bending closely over the tome, at length drank in the hideous import of the words.

Not read it? — Yes, I have read it. Long — long — long — many minutes, many hours, many days I have read it — yet I dared not — oh, pity me, miserable wretch that I am! I dared not speak! We have put the living language in a tomb! Said I not that my senses were acute? I heard and read and studied the words but dared not speak or write! The breaking of silence’s door, and the death-cry of silence. Oh! Whither shall I send these feeble words? Have I not heard the footsteps of immortality upon the stairs?

While I gazed upon the listing of words, the fissure between thought and speech widened — there came a fierce breath of the imagination — the entire satellite of my mother tongue burst at once — my brain reeled as the words rushed one upon another, pun and palindrome and anagram, tumultuous sound like the voice of a thousand waters, for language is indeed the river that we are dipped into up to our heels. And then I closed the book sullenly and silently. The Fall of the Dictionary of Webster.