Alexander Pope at Twickenham
Also by Alan Wall:

*Poetry*

Jacob  
Chronicle  
Lenses  
Gilgamesh

*Fiction*

Curved Light  
Bless the Thief  
Silent Conversations  
The Lightning Cage  
The School of Night  
Richard Dadd in Bedlam  
China  
Sylvie’s Riddle

*Non-fiction*

Writing Fiction
Alexander Pope at Twickenham

Alan Wall

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Mandelstam in Exile

It was a time of blizzards over transit camps
   When the age screwed tight its eyes
Raw from rubbing away the light. A time of
   Villages with disappearing names
Scattered like salt in the north. Wolf years
   Behind whose grin lay nothing
But the scorched earth of amnesia. A hunger
   Cold enough to eat the wind.
So this Dante once more paced the metre of his exile
   As Guelph and Ghibelline
Between them divided the days. In Voronezh
   His teeth crunched the bread’s
Forgiving snow and, as the crust was torn,
   His emblematic tongue gave
Benediction. But night intruded and prevailed:
   A black hood gathered gently
Over the axeman’s eyes. Night, that ransacked
   The apartment, turning up
Those beautiful equations discrediting paradise—
   Catalogued and packed away in boxes
They were shifted to the centre of the zone.
   There the temperature was zero,
The population nil, and famished verses drifted
   Over squares so dead
Euclid would have wept. There an iron lung
   Hushed with grey breath
The calendar’s progress. A spider manoeuvred
   Round her frail necropolis.
Into the gauze mesh of her eye, stars disappeared
   As the weather told lies
To blindfold icons razored out of mute cathedrals.
Frosted acres out of which a spadeful of glistening
Black earth protested.
A solid lake of milk on which a raven landed.
Vladivostok. December. 1938.
THE FLASH AT GRESFORD

To Goronwy Tudor Jones

In the Gresford Colliery disaster of September 1934, 266 miners lost their lives. Almost all the men’s bodies were sealed into the pit and never recovered. At the subsequent inquiry no owner ever appeared. Half a century later a memorial was erected to the memory of these men. It is all that now remains of the Gresford Colliery.

The Flash is the name of the nearby lake, where miners would sometimes walk with their families.

1

A flash.
Past meets present
In an instant.
Each photograph halts time.
Faces are for ever thus.
There is no photograph of this.

Marshlight firedamp carburetted hydrogen methane,
A miner’s litany of menace.
If aisles and alleys
Are not sprinkled with stonedust then coaldust
Ignites beyond any warning glow
Of Davy Lamp or Geordie Lamp
Ringing bells or running feet
The screams of men
Who know this final shift will not be ending.

Those the explosion doesn’t take
Carbon monoxide does.
A cough into sleep
From which there is no awakening.
266 men.  
September 1934. 
Gresford Colliery. 
Sealed in their underground seam. 
The price of coal.

2

A Davy Lamp like a tamed owl
Hangs from a collier’s hand
Wings retracted in metal sleekness
An Egyptian god surfacing from time’s deposits
A falcon of industry
Eyes welded together into one steady glow.

When it jumps, jerks and brightens into blue.

A flash
(The Gresford flash)
The flash Sir Humphrey dreamed
His lamp might draw a line beneath
The living on one side
On the other, only black fossilised carbon.

One inquisitive atom
Spearing its beak into another –
That’s all it takes –
Making 166 widows
229 orphans
One flat mining day in September.
Look around you, visitor;  
Revenant from the curious future.  
Not many have come back to see.  
This is not Persephone’s second home  
The blazing halls of Dis  
Through which a god strides, shouting orders.  
Dirt corridors 2000 feet underground  
Held up by crooked pit-props  
Where a man must satisfy his needs  
In sundry corners. The cage  
Does not go up and down at your pleasure.

Matter simplifies itself at the first opportunity.  
Bonding its atoms more tightly, then  
Expressing the difference between first state  
And second  
As energy.  
Gas, for example. Luminescent gas.

Such differences.

Women lay heads on pillows  
As wives  
To wake hours later as widows.
At the inquiry
Hartley Shawcross spoke for the owners
And took his fee.
Stafford Cripps waived his,
To speak for the miners.
None of the owners ever turned up.
Some men go down into darkness
So others might live in the light.
They worked for nine shillings a day.

Half a century later
The memorial
Made out of blue and grey slate
Welsh slate that’s leached the mist from the air
As it does to this day in Blaenau Ffestiniog.
Perfect stone for rooftop and grave
The world’s rain, it seems, already solid inside it.

(Always a curse to go down there
So said the myths
So many mouths
Full of earth
Eyes turning white with the darkness.
One thin seam is graveyard enough to swallow the sun.)

A pit wheel stands upright
As salvage from the enterprise
Stationary
As the others are now
And always, each day, flowers in vases.
No messages any more
Only fresh flowers in glassware.
Placed with such care
By fingers from somewhere.

5

Half a mile away is the Flash
A little lake
Pitmen would stroll around.

Why Flash?
‘A pool, a marshy place,’ the OED informs us,
Though in miners’ usage there’s always
Been the sense of a rapid subsidence
From workings underground
Like that other flash:
‘A sudden outburst or issuing forth of flame or light’;
And of a hydro-carbon: ‘To give forth vapour at a temperature
At which it will ignite’;
And lastly (the Dictionary speaks dispassionately):
‘To scorch with a burst of hot vapour’.
Hard to read that without seeing faces.

266 faces.

The Flash is a great place for birds
Gulls black-backed and black-headed
In the briefest of migrations from the Dee.
Flutter of warm snow above glinting water.
Air feathers itself into brief commotions
Before they settle down again and the water
Rings them in widening circles.

The nearby fields afford such a variety.
Lapwings with their peewit treble
tweezering the air.
Blue tits, robins, goldfinches,
Blackbirds, rooks and the occasional raptor.

How many colliers observed these birds each Sunday
Staring at the light all around them that would be gone again
Come Monday morning?

6

Two minutes walk away,
Wrexham and District Model Engineers Society
Steams up its painted miniatures.
The engineering skills
That built the mines and worked them once,
Scaled down now since the days of Brunel.

Boilers heat. Valved pressure hisses.
A whistle announces
One train ready at last for its tiny journey.
1

London
THOMAS MORE IN CHELSEA

This gilded face looks out on the embankment, expressionless
noting the sleeker bodies of the Japanese saloons —
My statue silts here at the margin of their progress.

Behind me the Old Church chapel where I knelt in prayer
restored since the night in 1941 when four hundred
Bombers targeted London with pentecostal fire:

A thousand bodies counted, two thousand others wounded
(what’s my head weighed in gold compared to that
Or this mouse-whisper of my breath, these eyes long-blinded?)

Say that I’m made of bronze, of books and prayer-cards, a bust
at the dingy end of red-brick sanctuaries
Paired up with Saint John Fisher, both veiled with dust

We thought we had escaped forever, bending to His will
kneeling before the block and praying
Christ come quickly beneath the scaffolding on Tower Hill.

Thomas More, chancellor, author of Utopia, a laughter-driven
tract Karl Kautsky recommended as part-Bolshevik.
A black feather on the frozen Thames, dropped by a raven.

Say I’m the prayer of everyone these last four centuries
sent to me (care of heaven) from a thousand cells
Where men with steel smiles and syringes shoot disease

Into the veins of hope, say I’m nothing but an emblem
faith calls to account, faith smiling before kings
For which each paternoster audit’s richer than a dukedom.
Join me at the sharpening edge of the King’s displeasure
although our hospitality and table grow exiguous
And Alice mutters ceaselessly Only a fool and his treasure

Could separate so swiftly on a point of disputation —
even Meg stares at me, wanly curious
To ponder the unaccountable extent of my misprision

For between the lion and his wrath’s no place of peace,
my prayers Saint Jerome answered with a smile:
The paw he pulled a thorn from bore no royal fringe of lace.

Henry’s anger quells my lords, would indeed quell me
did I not fear God’s wrath a little more than his
(The judgement one of them bestows is final, gospels tell me.)

Yet now in this our time of tribulation I grow merry
each meal a eucharist of bread, though seldom wine.
Son Roper’s quit his heresy, confessing himself sorry

For the Lutheran rant I once found so tormenting,
affairs of state slide off like golden chains
Since I have seen where Harry’s heart is bending.

He’ll have his new queen and he’ll have a son
if the cost is laying half the nation waste
Or taking an axe to necks he recently laid kisses on.

But English shires won’t rouse from drizzled torpor
though beckoned by the saints at lattices.
Anne gleams on in the frozen silver of her mirror.
Revelling, or ditched in sleep to quench his light
outside his lawns are splashed with roses. Come dawn
you’ll see the red ones blaze among the white.

Mistress Alice frets and swoops and claws away my plate
her face pinched ferret-tightly as she goes.
Wooden plates, for cheese, dark bread and rabbit meat.

She liked it better when her mighty lord once held
England’s laws, a diamond turning on his finger.
For now her finery is pawned, her rooms grow cold

Whose fires have warmed ambassadors and poets, their wit
fresh out of Europe might have skimmed her scalp
But she knew well enough the cost of entertaining it.

Once I laughed so loud against Erasmus whooping, Holbein
dropped his brushes in the bowl and filled his glass.
He said to limn hyenas mating he might need more wine.

Now beneath the scalding acid of my wife’s sharp tongue
lurks the apothecary, fear. Praying out of earshot
She senses menace even in the shadows that I move among.

(And I’ll have time there to repent the heart’s diseases
in the vermin cloister of a cell, before I’m put
Beneath the ancient haunting-ground of English mercies)

Why will you not bend, she says, as have your elders?
Divines and scholars daily shift their ground
Remarking how their heads stand tickle on their shoulders
For Henry will never let me be, she understands.
He doesn’t want my silence but acclaim,
A kiss of absolution for the jewels on both hands.

But if my worldly prince assume such priestly graces
then will he be lord of all that he surveys
Heaven and hell mapped out as royal hunting-places.

He’d have my mind. If that’s impossible, then instead
despite a love for me he pledged and once intended
He’ll take, for his bleak consolation prize, my head

Together with whatever laws might query its removal. Now
see Son Roper rush back breathless, close to tears.
The field that has lain fallow must receive the plough

To yield the hidden pearl that costs a man his kingdom.
Officers from Lambeth moor their barge. On their return
They’d be obliged, they say, should I accompany them.