Doctor Placebo
Also by Alan Wall:

Poetry
Jacob
Chronicle
Lenses
Gilgamesh
Alexander Pope at Twickenham

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
Myth, Metaphor and Science
Acknowledgements

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The Ring  
Placebo's December  
Bibliophile Placebo  
Fittest  
Placebo Thinks Darkly of John Ruskin  
20th Century Elegy  
Placebo's Guardian Departs  
Insomniac Placebo  
Placebo's Lifeline  
Imitation of Life  
Placebo's Midrash  
Placebo Pedagogical  
Placebo and the Entrails  
Placebo's Forebear  
Bonjour Placebo  
Placebo Under the Sign of Saturn  
Placebo's Last Orders  

Part 2: Ruskin and Sesame  

Part 3: Labyrinth and Trivium
To

Ann and David Denham
PART ONE

DOCTOR PLACEBO
The Doctor

1

Doctor Placebo was asked
If he could vouchsafe
One true thing at least.

I have abandoned certainties, he said
Or perhaps they have abandoned me.
The speed of light remains constant
In a vacuum, of that I am reasonably certain
Though disproof is still possible
At the unreached edges of the universe.

And there’s mortality, of course.

Charles Péguy remarked in Clio
That History constitutes dark reflections
Upon falling things.
Shortly afterwards History assassinated him
For this impertinence.
DIY

Placebo operated on himself
Several times.

These manoeuvres at least
Alerted him to the heart’s attentiveness
When probed.

Its red alert on encountering
A foreign body.

He also acknowledged at last
(As he administered rigorous post-operative care)
The value of accurate stitching,
An art he had once thought
Merely womanish.
Placebo’s Relics

Medieval remnants of the true cross
Marilyn’s dress

A fragment of James Dean’s last car
Elvis’s guitar

An image, however contrived, of the Cottingley Fairies
The Hitler Diaries

A first edition of Sigmund Freud: Collected Works
Pip and Joe Gargery’s larks

A photograph of Eva Braun’s false teeth
Propped up by the Hippocratic Oath
Oculist Placebo

In *La Bête Humaine* Severin says to Jean Gabin:
‘Don’t look as hard as that at me:
You’ll wear your eyes out.’
And when Leo Stein handed his book of engravings
To the youthful Pablo Picasso, the Spaniard
Stared so fiercely at them, Leo declared
Himself surprised there was anything left on the page
Once he’d finished.

One of my patients peered at me anxiously
Awaiting my diagnosis.

‘It’s a pathogenic metaphor,’ I announced
‘Which has taken over your life.
‘It’s all you’ll ever see now
‘Even with the curtains drawn and your eyes closed.’
Now He Attends to the Blind

Like Gloucester in *King Lear* or Milton
My patient underwent the gnosis of a blinding.
Eyeless then in Gaza or in Chalfont St Giles,
On the road to Dover, up against
The sweatstink of an evil hearth
Or merely Placebo’s book-lined surgery in Bermondsey
The blind speak Tiresias’s lingo, the sightless
Orienteering of the seer.

Hölderlin thought Oedipus’s crime
Was to stare into the darkness of the gods,

Their *nefas*. Thus did he answer the Sphinx’s riddle
Guaranteeing his self-blinding later.
One of the Doctor’s Favourites

When Doctor Placebo considered Spinoza
He witnessed a man grinding lenses
In the age of lenses.

Staring into the glass he saw
The Milky Way (unspeakably vast)
Through another lens he saw a flea
Its armadillo armour articulating
Movements through a microcosmic world.

Through the last lens he ever ground
Glass sedimenting his lungs
He saw God, in all the glory
Of His quantum states
With only the mildest hint
Of chromatic diffraction.
**Placebo Astray**

A minute cloud in the left-hand corner of a sky
Otherwise insultingly blue

The beach is a Möbius Strip, neverending
As you flip the mind first this way then that

I think a shark appeared yesterday salted with composure
While I sat dryly here

And last night I woke badly from a dream
In which an old enemy, a successful sailor, called me Robinson

From the prow of his boat and shouted
‘Do you never open your emails any more?’