

Endtimes

ALSO BY ALAN WALL:

POETRY

Jacob
Chronicle
Lenses
Gilgamesh
Alexander Pope at Twickenham
Doctor Placebo
Raven

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

Endtimes

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Raven first appeared as a chapbook
from Shearsman Books in 2012.

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To Tony Rudolf

Endtimes

Part One

Those Tombs in Ephesus

Dionysius insisted there were the tombs of two Johns in Ephesus, and that is true: I am in both of them. I spent some time on Patmos, then came back here finally. Though written in various cellars of persecution, on an insignificant island, my words commanded attention.

If my Greek is wayward and odd
my Aramaic was a wonder to them all, believe me.
That's how I wrote the gospel
which some redactor cast into the other tongue.
The original lost by Clío's copyists.
Now through the window in the rain
the moon is weeping.
Stars are quicksilver spheres on a black silk windingsheet.

Don't believe the Turin shroud—his was black
woven by the Magdalena
from the anthracite coat of a panther
through countless Gethsemane nights.
She knew her beloved Lord would lie inside it
shortly.

If it's evidence of chronology you need
read these gospels
each authentically carbon-dated
by our grief. Taste
the acrid stink of desolation's cellar.
Penned in that catacomb each hides inside himself.

My words have resurrected him
as he dictated. My work now is
writing his life, tending his mother.

Never a tear from her
since that day on Golgotha.

Should they fall they'd not be
salt water, but atoms, weapons-grade
plutonium, angry enough to eat the whole of Ephesus
leaving it void and smoking.
She keeps a drawer full of resurrection name-tags.

Revise.

Dead man rising in his rags
to stare incredulous into a saviour's face.
And now they say that in the colosseums
lions feed upon his testament.
(Should *Hegemon* be used, I wonder,
in the passages concerning Pilate?)
Beloved disciple
a man hunted and haunted from Palestine to Patmos
half-insane with emblems, symbols,
eschaton's venom.

This world will end one day
he said: never attempt to compute it.
She says almost nothing now.
With the boy at last outside her womb
she knew the end of the world had begun.
Such a calm here finally
sharing our endings in Ephesus.

This afternoon as I wrote
she spent two hours staring
at a dead sparrow on the windowsill.
An invisible hand will surely
come to revive it, but when?
I place a cup of red wine in her palms
she looks down
as if at blood.
Who needs reminding of its colour?

She thinks she might have left some trinkets
on the dark side of the moon—
old CDs; an album of photographs—
a young boy learning the rudiments of carpentry
from his earthly father. Her son, she says,
will collect them for her
once he gets back home and picks up his messages.
The journey turned out longer than we'd thought.

(There is a tradition that, after the crucifixion, the disciple John went to Ephesus accompanied by Mary. There they both lived to a great age. An early account held that the author of *The Gospel According to John* was one and the same as the author of *Revelation*. This has been disputed for centuries. The texts are so different. But written in different languages, different genres, different times, might they still claim a single author? No one actually knows. In any case, you can't always choose your redactor. History assigns them. One thing we do know: after the original document was written, it has never ceased to be re-written, in accordance with each new generation's millenarian expectations. Apocalyptic visions born at the heart of the Empire.)

Part Two

Patmos, Jerusalem, Rome...

We also have to work the dark side. We've got to spend time in the shadows...

—Dick Cheney, 2001

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In dawnlight this page flashes suddenly
as if the God had settled on it.

First begotten of the dead
the authorities had worked the dark side.

In Rome a senator yawns as news is read out.
All bad. He summons a slave to massage him.
Chi-Rhos and cartoon fishes daubed on catacomb walls.
One more mischievous sect.

And in a cellar on Patmos
a nib scratches over parchment
to uncover the nature of things;
which great machine is thrumming
in the black hole
at the centre of Apocalypse?

Samizdat
scattering electrons from a metal sheet
the vagrant light invaded.

Where and when is this light
that has the dark outside it?

At the top of a monochrome hill
surrounding Halifax or Bradford.
Wind and rain between them have darkened
millstone grit till it's black as the times and almost as cold.
Here the chapel stands
translating Gothic weather to wintry redemption.
Upright stones above corpses
bearing inscriptions from the Book of Revelation.
A miscegenation of living and dead
around these parts—
John the Revelator
shines bright enough to penetrate our northern darkness.
Handlooms in cottages fall silent;
still these words carry through millennia.
Whose though?
Give us provenance and taxonomy
you confident sectarians of the glowing faces.

Hölderlin in Tübingen
fastened in his Tower
travels back and forth to Patmos.
Occasional pilgrims stare in at him
spectators at a Bedlam spectacle
torn sheets, wrecked pupa
vacant as the grim northeasterlies.
A sound of wings, lighter than wind, furred and flurried,
not his necessarily.
He is revising *Patmos*,
unintelligible, of course, as was his *Oedipus*.
The darkness of the gods displaying as usual
their *nefas*.