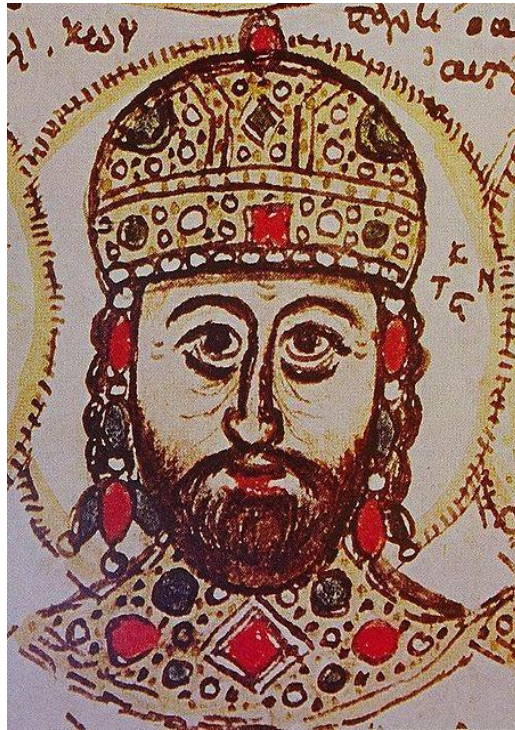


# Travels of the Last Emperor

Rogan Wolf



*Kōnstantinos XI Dragasēs Palaiologos*

## Background

*Travels of the Last Emperor* is a series of five poems written over a period of around 20 years. The central figure is the last Emperor of Byzantium, Kōnstantinos XI Dragasēs Palaiologos.

Byzantium, of course, was a continuation into the Middle Ages of the Roman Empire, whose capital was moved from Rome to Constantinople by the Emperor Constantine the Great in 327 AD. Between them the two empires lasted almost two thousand years and ensured the inheritance of Ancient Greece and Rome remains prominent in, and fundamental to, the culture of much of present-day Europe and beyond.

In 1453, the Turks conquered Constantinople and Constantine XI was killed on the city walls. Byzantium disappeared. Constantinople became Istanbul, capital of another great civilisation and empire.

For the first poem, I stay with recorded history, but for the remainder I have imagined that the last emperor did not die on the city walls after all, but went wandering, a perpetual outsider, stranger and fugitive, the world he was born to now disappeared, the walls which had protected him now broken.

Does this series of poems speak in any way to our present time? I am bound to think it does and remember a speech by the late Basil Hume in 1990, as Head of the Roman Catholic Church in Great Britain. Another wall had just fallen, the Berlin Wall, dividing East Berlin from West. That event somehow symbolised the fall of the Communist Bloc as a whole. But Hume did not see it in terms of victory for one “side” against another. Opening the 1990 Ampleforth Conference, he assessed the relative merits of East and West as follows : “[Capitalism and Communism] ... are economic, political and social systems that have failed signally to befriend humanity and to reverence and respect individual dignity. At the same time, and consistently, they have adopted similar attitudes towards nature and the environment. They have been aggressive, insensitive and short-sighted...”

Perhaps in our own time, each one of us is the last emperor, our walls broken, our way of life undone. We seek a new city, a new way of life, one that will befriend and reverence Creation before it is too late.

*Rogan Wolf*

# The Emperor's way to Constantinople

(written August 1990)

*In 1449, Kōnstantinos XI Dragasēs Palaiologos, the last Byzantine emperor, was crowned at Mystras in mainland Greece. He then travelled south by land to the great Byzantine port of Monemvássia. From there he embarked for the capital, Constantinople. By now, this city was almost all that remained of the Byzantine Empire, and was itself reduced largely to a shell, having been gutted in 1204 by the Crusaders. Four years later, the City fell to the Turks and the emperor was killed on the walls.*

i

Who will be the last emperor ?  
 Who will volunteer ?  
 Who will wear, for us,  
 the crown of our disaster,  
 saying, this is worth my life  
 and the lives  
 of all who remain here with me,  
 my neighbours. This.  
 This flapping rag our banner.  
 This rubble we call battlements  
 which all night guards us  
 and all night we guard.  
 These dead hollow squares  
 whose shattered paving stones  
 now make room for thistles  
 and the yellow grass  
 lanes for shy lizards  
 and hushed games  
 for doomed children. This slow  
 striding of ragged towers  
 which do, despite all, constitute the lines  
 of a great city, frontage and establishment  
 of one way of being reasonably civilised.  
 If to be human has been valid here,  
 the long and terrible trail of our history  
 may yet be vindicated. But now ?  
 Have we anything here  
 actual and worthy to defend ?  
 Who will be the last emperor ?  
 Who will volunteer ?

*The last emperor  
is still praying at Mistras -  
there on the hill  
where the nuns sing.*

Where the emperor is  
our value is centred ;  
there in him  
all our hope lies.  
Our history, where we belong,  
he is. So let his place  
be here. He and the City  
are one identity  
here to die.

*The last emperor  
still prays at Mistras -  
there on the hill  
where the nuns sing.*

Some luminous precision  
in theology, some saving  
refinement of angle or perspective  
some new reconciling  
of line to line  
system to system, man  
to Maker - and all  
picked out and filled with grace  
by the harsh glory of our sun !

*The last emperor  
still prays at Mistras -  
there on the hill  
where the nuns sing.*

Is it permissible  
to seek salvation ?  
Can the emperor even now  
find the essential key  
the adequate deed of reparation  
so that hope may thrive again  
and futures be conceived ?  
Can he yet secure for us  
the right and the power  
to form a line and say

here you shall not pass  
at this point we stand  
this we stand for  
and it belongs ?

*The last emperor  
is still praying at Mistras -  
there on the hill  
where the nuns sing.*

iii

Monemvássia – sole entry, solitary road,  
where the hawk still rides the lion’s great head  
and the wild shepherd gentles his flock  
down the brown hill-side to the bay.

And here the emperor threads his way  
out of the silence of the hills -  
that eternal sweet scent of oréganon  
those empty tortoise shells -

down to where the sea flickers  
and booms in its golden bowl,  
the last emperor  
finds his way.



*World Press Contest Prize Winner. Akintunde Akinleye Nigeria, Reuters.  
A man rinses his face after a gas pipeline explosion Dec 26th 2006*

## 2

# The emperor's icy touch

*(written August 1998)*

*The emperor's body was never found. When the Turks took the walls of Constantinople, he shed all his imperial regalia, including his purple slippers, and flung himself into the fighting. Only the slippers were later identified and it is assumed he fell, anonymous among the soldiers. But no one knows for sure and we are free to wonder. Perhaps he didn't die in that place, at that time. Perhaps he simply wandered away- this side to Thrace or that side to Anatolia.....*

i

The last emperor is homeless  
his situation a blood-spattered fog  
his way in the world a sleepless wavering  
between lines that hold no word for him.

What fires remain to the homeless  
that we may keep them burning ?  
What walls remain substantial enough  
to guard the crux of our existence ?  
This is where the emperor belongs  
supporting those who keep station  
at the borders of our dark grounding  
where all begins and all may meet.

Ulysses  
 that wily sea-captain  
 heads for Penelope like a crab.

He knows that sidling cross-wise  
 from one violet island to another  
 is the only way he'll get home.

So the last emperor  
 wandering clear of his ruined city  
 learns in his agony

that no direction is essential.  
 He has feet (now slipperless)  
 he has ground (now a square foot or two)

and he can stand.  
 All he has to do now  
 is make it to the next moment.

This strategy of floating,  
 of riding an isolate wave-crest,  
 of drifting like an exiled cavalier

from island to island  
 from flot to jet -  
 seems a sound construction

for our dismembered world.  
 Or is it just dread  
 of taking part ?

The last emperor no longer shines in company.  
 There's blood all over him, long dried.  
 He brings a staff with him, tipped with goat's horn,  
 and employs it to probe  
 cautiously all round him  
 in case his feet do further harm  
 through inharmonious stumbling.



v

The emperor has lost his slippers.  
He has lost his walls.  
He has lost his only place  
and meaning in the world.  
His station has deserted him.  
He wanders like a windy skeleton  
through the enemy's holding  
of Thrace and Anatolia.

So let him learn immediately  
the art of cobbling,  
how to build walls  
no horde can encircle,  
how to secure a place in the world  
no force will indispose,  
how to magic hope and meaning  
from an empty prairie -  
these plain sweet breezes  
of Thrace and Anatolia !

vi

It is the loss of ties  
that sends the emperor  
into free-fall -  
the old bindings dismantled,  
the substance and place  
that once he could assume.  
His meaning has fled from him.



Without ties without place  
there is only the falling free.  
The emperor shrieks as he falls away  
but even shrieks have an ending.

The shrieks end  
and now there's nothing of him  
except his falling.

The emperor still breathes.  
He tries  
a movement of his hand  
and makes it.

He can survive.  
Meaningless and falling  
the emperor lives on.

Beware of him.  
His touch is icy.

vii

Might it be a matter, then,  
of bringing the last emperor  
in from the cold ?  
If so, there's a problem.  
We have nowhere  
to bring him in *to*.  
Nothing sure  
nothing habitual  
no firm place of human assembly  
now survive in the world.  
The world the world  
the world is happening so quickly  
none of us  
can belong to it any more.  
The emperor is falling -  
but so are we all.

Let icy hand, then,  
for hope and comfort's sake,  
reach (with care)  
for icy hand.



*Early morning in Rajasthan, India. March 2007. Photograph: Erin Michelle Smith/Guardian*

3

## The Emperor at Kerbside

(written June 2007)

*The Emperor finds himself in a modern city and roams the shadows of many lives. His existence is similar to that of the fox, a familiar sight on London streets, especially at night.*

i

Highness !  
I saw you tonight  
creeping like a sickly fox  
across our street.

The camera's bound  
to have caught you  
in that glare  
of white light

at the corner -  
would it miss ?  
I didn't know  
you were still going,

Highness,  
with your City a charnel yard  
of stone and bone  
and shard

of fine crockery.  
There you presided.  
Can death  
be worse than this ?

ii

Between our blurred and broken lines  
the fox is worth picking out.  
He guards the word on the tip of all tongues  
the telling we are frantic to avoid.  
He slips between the cars at kerbside  
his home his own slinking  
his homelessness our street.

iii

He has moved in.  
I heard him last night  
scuffling by the open window  
emasculating my arrangements there.  
This morning  
as I put the garden  
back together again,  
I knew he was watching me  
from my window.

iv

All my life since setting out  
I have carried fragments and relics  
mementoes of a time intact.  
The city is fallen,  
  
undone and irretrievable.  
Bowed archaeologists scraping about  
shall not ease my desolation.  
The City is fallen.  
I am the ruins.

v

He makes grin  
his mask  
and he spins in the air  
his stink  
and lightly  
sleeps  
and lightly  
he shits.  
He has no shame  
in his matter.  
His game  
is defiance of death.



Picture by Alexander Chadwick

vi

There are real advantages  
to being nowhere nowhen  
no profile  
on the radar screen.  
I am the broken emperor  
so when I materialise  
surface breaks  
queues scatter  
and mouths gape in wild surmise.

vii

Fox feathery and starved tonight  
emerges from a bank of ivy.  
His back arches, he walks on tip-toe  
and his tail is like the skeleton of a wing.  
The cats take no notice of him.  
They know that *they'll* be alive tomorrow.

viii

The stillness of the Voice on Sinai  
foxed Moses. He'd made that arduous ascent  
in full expectation of Grandeur and Majesty.  
Still, small and crucified day upon day  
(until at last  
one day of sorrow  
He'll simply give up the ghost),  
this was not the God which Moses thought  
had promised to show him the Way.

Cities in the desert  
picked over by camera and crow -  
history grows dim  
the present points to sorrow.



*"Blind Light" Antony Gormley Haywood Gallery. Photograph: David Levene/Guardian*

4

## The Emperor Unclothed

*(written August 2007)*

*The image shifts its focus. The emperor whose walls gave way is joined by and merges with another, made famous by the writer Hans Christian Anderson. This emperor once paraded his city naked, deceived into believing he was wearing new clothes...A small boy was unwise enough to call out the truth.*

i

Who *was* that boy  
who said the emperor  
was merely naked ?  
The boy died of course  
almost at once  
his flesh in gobbets  
scattered across the hills.  
Perhaps he was blind.  
For the emperor wore that day  
the sheen of his apartness  
and a shadow so long  
it girded the earth.

Have at you, Highness -  
 clear of the multitudes  
 free of the robes.

You're just quarry now  
 shoulders bare and shining ahead -  
 fair game.

We'll paddle in you,  
 your excellency,  
 you'll do us good.

A young fox  
 most of his fur missing  
 pads the ridge of the garden wall.

He knows he doesn't belong here  
 and to survive the night  
 he must glide to perfection

*between* each holding  
 he must slide with precision  
*around* each lit space.

That wide-eyed small boy  
 who proclaimed the obvious to his neighbours  
 didn't live long enough to see the truth -

that truth is unendurable  
 but learning you've bowed for years to a lie  
 can drive you to murder.

And the fox said to the boy emperor  
 "follow me.

Let me guide you  
 through my web of shadow

to where the truth lies hidden  
 precarious as an embryo.

Let us sidle  
 together."



*Miner drills for gold in a Peru. Photograph: Enrique Castro-Mendivil/Reuters*

5

## The Emperor in Chaotic Times

*(written October 2008)*

*This last section was written in Mallorca, during the major financial upset of 2008, when Gordon Brown was Prime Minister of the UK. Brown played a positive role in the crisis but later proved useful to the country's inhabitants and to his political opponents there, not as a saviour but as a scapegoat.*

i

The last emperor stirs.  
Chaos inspires him.  
It brings back memories  
of earlier convulsions  
when he was the apex  
uppermost in disaster.  
Now citadels collapse again  
and strange new progeny stagger  
sleek and bewildered  
across our blasted fields.  
The last emperor hunches  
into a ball, wheezy and crackling  
and hurries to join them.  
He is sure this time  
he will be our chosen one.

But what is there left to say ?  
It has all been used up.  
All the great redemptive words  
fizzed and burned out  
almost the instant they entered time



and for millennia  
they've hung in countless rooms  
like lumps of raw clay  
twisted and re-modelled  
to ennoble and justify  
the frets and furies that have always been.

But the last emperor  
has no need of hope.  
He lost it ages back  
amongst the paraphernalia  
of cities and face  
and full diaries.  
This is child's play.  
Yes indeed, oh yes indeed  
there's nothing left to say.  
He sings to himself happily.  
Against the odds another chance.  
Against all the odds another chance.  
Let's try.

ii

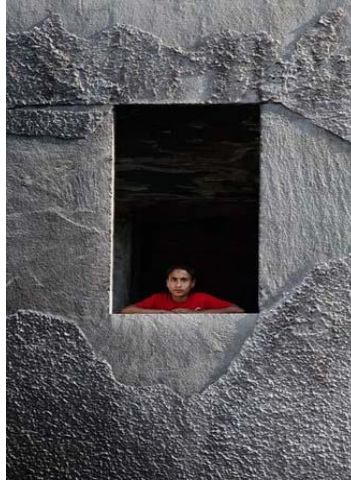
The last emperor confided  
resting his feet, reaching for the water jug -  
"I had a cheering thought today.

I realised the past is just  
another set of possibilities  
as rich in guidance and new ideas

as anything present or still to come.  
The dead may still belong in the dance."  
The last emperor was almost weeping now.

"And straightaway, the walls of my City  
renewed themselves in my mind  
and the dead rose from their mass graves

took back their faces, their noble eyes,  
and became again my counsellors,  
comforting me with their wit and high learning."



iii

When the great City fell all those years ago  
the emperor had to give up communicating  
with crowds. Now he secretes words in code

under stones and between buses, whisperings  
deep in caves by the shore, scribblings  
borne in small balloons loosed to ride hurricanes.

It's more intimate that way, he says,  
more telling  
more effective in getting his message across.

iv

He tends to avoid caves for his resting.  
They are too obvious and accessible.  
He goes for between-space  
and between-time  
on the edges of snug living.  
Fly-tips do well, for instance,  
or gaps between fences  
in the more established parts of suburbia  
where arguments over boundaries  
can open things up a bit.

Allotment huts have proved satisfactory  
shared with the odd fox or down-and-out,

or patches of spare paving beneath bridges  
beyond where the cyclists pass.  
And like the kestrel and the red kite  
he is drawn to the motorway  
and will often bed down within feet  
of the juggernauts  
blasting through  
their sharp beams  
searching infinity all night.

v

Since the last emperor lost his name  
he's been invisible.

He asks himself,  
does it matter

where I place myself  
if no one can find me there ?

He wanders from city to quiet fastness  
and there's no difference

except in the impact on *him*.  
No one knows he has gone

and no one takes note of his arrival.  
Yet on the mountain trail

he adds a small stone  
to each cairn he passes.

There is no name on it  
and no one will know

he placed it there.  
But the stones will continue

to serve and guide  
once the emperor is dead.

I've learned to be  
an invisible servant

says the last emperor  
to himself.