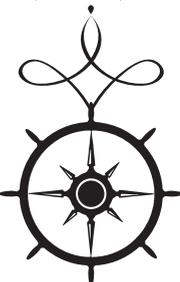


The
SAWDUST

HOUSE

DAVID WHISH-WILSON



FREMANTLE PRESS

To my parents, for the roads there and the ways back.

Better calling death to come
Than to die another dumb
Muted victim in the slum
Better than of this prison rot
If there's any choice I've got
– *Muhammad Ali, Dublin, July 1972*

My voice goes after what my eyes cannot reach ...
– *Walt Whitman, "Song of Myself"*

PROLOGUE

SAN FRANCISCO, 1856

Further from San Francisco.

The Vigilance Committee, moreover, we have the fullest assurance, had determined to *sit in perpetuity*, until not only the city of San Francisco, but the entire State, should be subjected to a thorough purification. Our informants state that they have prepared a black list, embracing the names of about one hundred and eighty of the most notorious murderers, thieves and black-legs, all of whom will be required to quit the country, at short notice, or contemplate the contingency of summary judgment before the tribunal of Judge Lynch. Among their names are said to be the following:

“Dave” Broderick, from New York.

Yankee Sullivan, from New York.

Charley Duane, (“Dutch Charley,”) from New York.

Billy Mulligan, (“great on the pistol,”) from New York.

Bill Lewis, (boarding-house keeper.)

Colonel James, (lawyer.)

Ned McGowan, (judge.)

Daniel Aldrich, (black-leg.)

Evening Star, Washington DC, Friday, 20 June, 1856.

It is only when the waning moon comes out from behind the clouds in the hours before dawn that I feel the stirring of certainties and directions that recall the follies of recent years. The jailor is asleep outside my cell, snuffing like a boar. My fellow prisoners are asleep, even Cora, whose blue terrors have not abated one bit since his capture and forced abstinence. My mind quietens, my nerves settle, I am one man again, subject to gravity and time. The clarity that I feel now is both beautiful and terrifying. I look back upon my years and feel as though I've been absent from my own life excepting the voice in my head that keeps winding toward silence. So irreconcilable do my earlier performances of myself seem that I pity him the role that he must play over and over – inhabited by a ghost of himself and by the ghosts of others, and none of his own making.

I do not interrogate this new voice nor its way of seeing, for I have no wish to return to the shaken, timid, uncertain man that since my arrest I have become.

The voice does not belong to any of my aliases or anybody I have ever known, although I sometimes hear within it the gentle melody of my friend the poet Whitman when he were most deeply transported by his words, the words of every man and woman swelling within him, and which in my solitude swell within me.

An image that I keep returning to, despite myself.

Me – preparing for battle, my body no more than a manifestation of the will that possesses my mind to the exclusion of all else. Such a fierce and sharp blade it is, too – the transubstantiation of fear, hatred, self-hatred, love and self-love. I soak my fists in vinegar blocking out the banter of my mates and my wife, the wailing of my infant daughter. I starve myself to feed my will, and the pain that consumes my bones, sinew, muscle fuels my will. The images of my opponent's face are a manifestation of my will fading to nothing before its certainty, focus and direction.

When I walk into the ring toward the scratch I am almost entirely absent. I am instead a combustible vapour made of nerve-sickness and dread that fuels the rising balloon in the shape of my body. My feet do not touch the ground. My naked skin does not feel the prick of cold air or the weight of humid air. My ears roar with silence. My eyes dance over my opponent like light over water.

It is this feature that I do not understand, because it is during my absence from myself and all of history and every consequence that I have felt most alive.

I speak of a point past the shade of death – a place before the corporeality of birth.

I watch myself pound and be pounded upon, smiling and bleeding into the gouging, tripping, bone-breaking image of myself that is both myself and my opponent who I have become, and who has become me. It is myself that my fists annihilate, and his pain that I feel, and both of our lives have led to this pure moment so ugly in appearance and so pointless that it has transcended its ritual of hastened dying and has become death itself. Witness the baying crowd, eyes flickering with pity and grievous malignancy observing the coming of death to themselves and all who will follow them, and all who have already passed over, to where my opponent and myself batter every death and all deaths – stepping one foot into life and one foot into death like dancers in a fire.

It is this story that I wish to tell the poet but I know that the voice born of a language other than my own cannot be spoken aloud, and sadly – I lack the skills to write it. I envy the poet his facility, for I suppose that the act of writing is no different to what I have described – inhabiting a voice that is unlike my own, seeing with eyes that do not belong to me, dancing across shadow and light while living death and dying in life.

Outside my cell the black sky is vaulted and bluing at its edges. Soon, those around me will awaken and then my wife will visit with my daughter. I haven't slept in the three days since my arrest. I want to hold my baby daughter and look into her eyes – my daughter who cannot speak and therefore might be the only soul who can know me.

DAY ONE

Write it down like I say it and no other way.

As I prepare my pen, loading it with ink in preparation for the interview to follow, my eyes attempt to capture the notorious James “Yankee” Sullivan in a series of discreet, apologetic glances.

He certainly doesn’t appear the ogre described by Fitch, my employer, who upon our first meeting announced himself as a veteran reporter of the political knife-fighting imported from New York.

Who claims that when other ’49ers were running to the hills to make their fortune, he instead stayed in the village. He said that he walked into the pine-board hut that served as the offices of *The San Francisco Herald* only to find it empty. Dust and mice droppings on the desk beneath the circular window stolen from some abandoned ship. He found a dustpan and broom and swept the desk and floor. He waited. That night Fitch slept under the desk. Perhaps the owner is like so many of his kind, he thought, both a drinker and gambler. Perhaps he is on a spree. Fitch passed the time by reading copies of unsold editions left in a cupboard. He claims to have been impressed. Five weekly editions covering shipping movements and rumours of famous arrivals and crimes committed against person and property.

Nobody returned to claim the office or the masthead. Fitch bought himself a door-lock from a Jewish merchant near the Australian quarter. He took down the sign above the porch and painted himself a new one, in fine gothic font. It reads *San Francisco Chronicle*.

Fitch taught himself to manipulate the molten lead typesetter and for the first printing even made his own paper. He considers himself clever and resourceful, unlike the fools who disappeared into the hills and bawdyhouses, never to return. But he is sickly and pale, with washed-out blue eyes.

He is to be congratulated for finding his level – an expression that he favours when he wants to malign or ridicule. The assignment he sent me on was worded thus: *Visit the Australian thug in the jailhouse, who will shortly be lynched. He has found his level and perhaps will speak to one so young and eager in his fascinations.*

I smiled and accepted the commission. Fitch waved me away, returning to his vomiting bucket. He claims that the fumes of molten lead are good for his sinuses, but I am not so sure.

How is that tyke, your master Fitch? Do send him my regards. I know him for a rat-eared window-lingerer, which might account for his absence, or perhaps it's because he doesn't like the smell of shit-buckets? You are undoubtedly aware of the lies he's written about me – the fighting words he places into their little military formations within the borders of his flatbed press – so that in battalion strength they roll across the streets the plains the mountains?

Do not answer that question. I saw on your face its answer the moment you entered these shadows. You expected a jug-eared low-browed buck-tooth bog-Irish knuckle-dragger?

I carry scars and burns, look I will show you.

But I am my mother's son and she were a beautiful woman. I would not call myself fine-featured but a swan cannot give birth to a hog. I won't speak for Fitch, who looks like he were sired by a prairie dog and an eel, but ...

He sits in shackles on the floorboards, his arms rounded upon bent knees. When he speaks, he doesn't look at me but rather at the wall, fluttering his left hand as though his words need shooing away. His voice is soft and wonderfully alien to me, like the song of a new species of bird. He has not been prison-barbered and yet his dark red hair is cropped to about an inch. It is thick enough to resemble the bristles on a hairbrush. His face is handsome and symmetrical and his eyes are hidden in shadow. Every now and then he glances at the door and then his eyes glitter like jewelled greenstones whose facets are wrong.

Why are you staring at my hands?

Here, take a good look.

Would you like me to make fists? If it is a portrait that you seek you would be better to search out the image of me on the long-cut tobacco tin Lorillard's Mechanics Delight. A warm halo shrouds my young head. My freckles washed away. Eyes bright with the lacquer of flattery applied by the artist, a Mr Spitz. German fellow, fresh off the boat. His accent fresh too – like newly carved pinewood. He came into my New York saloon, The Sawdust House, and bid me strip down, only to draft my head. He remarked that so naked and poised for mock battle the flow of blood to my face would be unconstricted. I asked if he had tried the same manner of deception while portraiting the Five Points whores and he blushed the colour of smoked mackerel.

I were not in chains that day.

The prisoner glances at the door regularly, his ears sharp upon every noise in the makeshift jailhouse, garrison and armoury that the vigilantes have claimed as their headquarters. They have sandbagged its entrance on Sacramento Street and manned it with merchants armed with repeating pistols in their belts, and fowling pieces slung over their shoulders. The defences are designed to thwart the expected attack from the Australian quarter, in response to the arrest of James Sullivan, the man before me, and for what the Australians see as the Committee of Vigilance's determination to remove them from these shores.

The fears are not unwarranted, either, by all accounts. The articles on the front pages of the *Daily Alta Chronicle* and the *San Francisco Chronicle* contain many statements made by Australian leaders prominent in the same political party that the prisoner worked for as a "shoulder-striker" and erstwhile ward boss. The talk is of insurrection and of freeing Sullivan from his shackles before he can be lynched.

Spurred on by the Committee, the vigilantes have warmed to the task. Two weeks ago such men were purveyors of haberdashery and leather goods, freshly barbered with soft, soap-smelling hands. Now their eyes are bitter with the icy wind and fierce with purpose; stubble grown out into ginger and grey thatching that if the purge continues will become beard. If this happens, they will of course resemble their sworn Australian enemies, who in the current climate mostly forswear the straight-edged razor – as though to be seated in a barber's chair makes them vulnerable to arrest, or attack.

The merchants return nightly to their wives, children, ox-tail stew and soft beds, but in playing the role of the soldier, their manner has become soldierly. They spit and curse into the wind. They piss against the nearest post or railing. They shit in the buckets of the condemned men and lock the doors after them. Cigars have been replaced by chewing tobacco, brandy and port by rye whiskey.

They are actors enthralled by their own performance.

Newspaperman, if I were you I'd take precautions against directing your focus solely upon me. Make sketches of my jailors. Speak to them with the reverential air of one recording momentous history. They are swollen with their own importance and like every swollen thing they're sensitive to the bladed glance lest it nick and thereby deflate that which is pumped to bursting with their own air.

I take from my notebook the sheet of paper given to me by Fitch this morning. Circulated to each of the city's newspapers by the Committee of Vigilance, it was printed by Fitch onto a durable brown paper whose fibrous texture resembles the bread baked by my neighbour Holbein, who I suspect adds sawdust to his flour, like many of his profession. I hold up the sheet of paper and read the charge: "James Sullivan aka Yankee Sullivan aka Frank Murray aka James Ambrose, you have been charged with election fraud and racketeering in the name of the Democrat Party, and of seeking to profit by deception and menace."

None of those names is mine.

Your wife stated in this morning's *Alta* that your real name, your birth name, is Frank Murray.

That is not my real name, and she is not my real wife.

Now let us see if you have the scrivening facility of Fitch, your master.

These were a few of the trades available to me, growing up in Whitechapel, East London:

Drag sneak

Buttoner

Sawney hunter

Bit faker

Smasher

Dead lurker

Snow gatherer

Queer screener

Snoozer

Kitten hunter

Bug hunter

Star glazer

Noisy racket man

Till frisker

Bluey hunter

Kidsman

Running rumbler

Fam layer

Curl frisker

Pradnapper

Rum hustler

Fogle hunter

Froe chiver

Angler

Black spice racketeer

Dobbin canter

Wicker pricker

Can you guess, from the look of me, what were my specialty as a little sneaksman?

I don't know what you're talking about. When I asked you to start from the beginning, I meant –

I were an expert fam layer. With a dab of lard or honey in the sun of my palming hand I could swipe a coin from any surface.

But it were drag sneaking that I were sent down for. Picture a busy Whitechapel street and a sprung cab drawn by a gelding with a bandaged fetlock and a white blaze on his forehead. I knew the driver of the cab his name were McCabe he were a foul man when drinking, a real terror to cart-boys and hussies alike. He used to hawk a gob on the street corner where me and my fellow banditti were clustered which were a sign to us that his passengers were distracted or drunk or weak-tempered and unlikely to give chase. McCabe were a notorious driver like I mentioned – he sped over the cobbles as a service for those gawking tourists to the east London hellholes and rookeries. Beyond our corner were a hard turn and a rise made slippery with the pungent slimes of Price's tannery.

It were stormy that day and me and my mates were sheltered in the lee of the wind. We heard McCabe coming amid the jeering of the citizens who don't like to be observed like animals in an enclosure. I leaned out first and thought I saw McCabe hawk onto the cobbles and so began to march alongside the cab looking down and not letting whoever were in the carriage see my face. I had done it a thousand times it were our regular employment in the mornings when the taverns and streets hadn't yet filled with the drunks who me and my guttersnipe friends worked over. I am talking about those of us who called ourselves Muck Street Arabs and who had our own secret society of handshakes and hideouts and rules just like the men we were emulating and later hoping to join –

Was it there that you learned to fight?

I were instructed from when I could barely walk, but it were on that very corner that I put my learning into practice. It were prized real estate, although McCabe demanded his tribute and we made sure to keep him bread'n'buttered. But there were plenty like us and many more who wanted our corner. Bigger boys too some of them. I were the tallest of my guttersnipes and with my bright red hair and mastery of gypsy curses I kept most of 'em at bay.

As I were saying, that day I thrust my hands in my pockets and put my eyes down and whistled like a loon. I could feel the tourists' eyes on my thin shirt and bare feet and torn trousers. I tried to keep smiling although they were always the type of people who if the daguerreotype were invented back then would bail me up and ask to take my picture so that they could share it with their friends in the comfort of their drawing rooms – so truly did I conform to the type known as *street-arab*.

It were a simple matter of waiting till the cab were just taking the corner of Church Street and climbing the hill and then leaping on the back foot-rail ever so quietly and then ducking my head above the parapet and grabbing whatever I could. In this case it were a gentleman's handkerchief his gloves were on his hands his wallet secured inside his buttoned jacket this were the problem with icy weather. No sooner had I grabbed his silken snot-rag and detached myself from the rear of the cab and begun running back to my corner than I realised my mistake, for there were present what we now call a peeler but were then called an officer it were Officer George Keys.

Why have you stopped writing?

I'm sorry, I was looking at your face.