

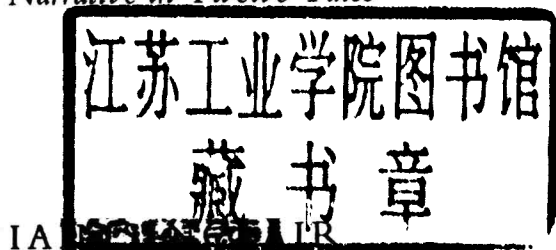
DOWNRIVER

IAIN SINCLAIR

DOWNRIVER

(Or, The Vessels of Wrath)

A Narrative in Twelve Tales



PALADIN GRAFTON BOOKS
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Offered to those contrary spirits,
Mike Goldmark and Patrick Wright

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I

He Walked Amongst
the Trial Men

He Walked Amongst the Trial Men

'He walked amongst the Trial Men
In a suit of shabby grey;
A cricket cap was on his head,
And his step seemed light and gay ...'

Oscar Wilde,
The Ballad of Reading Gaol

'And what,' Sabella insisted, 'is the *opposite* of a dog?'

Her husband, Henry Milditch, continued to ignore her. This was not easy. Sabella had been painting all afternoon, and was now flagrantly drunk. She poked a pint-sized coffee mug into his midriff. The red wine splashed on to his shirt. He wheezed cigar smoke like a leaking radiator.

'You two are as boring as those old farts on "Test Match Special". Everything's finished, burnt out. Nothing is what it used to be. Every book you mention is "a dog", "a howling dog", "an absolute dog". I want to know what *else* there is in the world.'

Milditch, up to now, had kept his life in separate compartments. But, with the move out of Hackney, everything was coming to pieces. His wife was roaming free in his book room in an old rugby shirt that she filled very adequately, even though she had put it on back to front. And her daughter was doing her best to climb into my lap and interest me in an odd volume of nautical memoirs.

'You're a pair of rheum-eyed mongrels.' Sabella spun on me. 'You whine about dragging yourselves to Groucho's. Why don't you take us along? I don't mind male bimbos. Some of them are quite tasty. And all of them have more to say than you do. Who the hell wants to spend their life stuck out in a Suffolk fish dock, ploughing through reprints of Wilkie Collins, and watching fat opera queens pull themselves out of taxis?'

Milditch compulsively reshelved his yellowbacks. He muttered some-

thing incoherently decent-minded about inner-city schools and the rising tide of litter and urban violence.

'Bollocks to urban violence,' Sabella screamed. 'You'll dump me out in the sticks with your rotten kids, while you slide down the motorway. You'll only crawl back when you need a few quiet days to sleep off the excitement.'

Milditch picked her up, carried her out, and locked the door. She kicked against it steadily for ten minutes or so, until she damaged her naked foot. Then she sat in the corridor, and sobbed. Quite musically.

I turned my back on the small pile of books I was about, unenthusiastically, to carry away; I looked out of the bay window at the lovely green lung of Victoria Park. A tame prairie that kept me sane through a difficult winter. This was the house of some old sea captain. It was oddly proportioned, with each room decorated in a distinct style – as if warring tribes had camped there. When the park was finally butchered and buried under tarmac by the threatened road schemes, it would all be over. There would be nothing left. The Widow and her gang had decided that Hackney was bad news and the best option was simply to get rid of it, chop it into fragments, and choke it in the most offensive heap of civil engineering since the Berlin Wall.

Then Milditch dropped the hint. Which was, I suppose, why I let it lie fallow for so many months. He gave things away only when they were fatally tainted, or drained of all their vital fluids. He wouldn't pass on an infection, unless he could swop it for a superior one. He must have been unnerved by the weeping of his children, the curses and the threats of his wife. He looked, pacing his den, obsessively delousing his ginger beard, like a veteran foot-soldier from the Katowice midfield, a slightly sandblasted Tommy Smith.

'Tilbury,' he mumbled. A confession that he instantly suppressed. 'Tell Dryfeld and I'll kill you. I don't want this surfacing in the guidebook. It's still too hot.'

Who was Milditch anyway? His birth name had dissolved, long since, into the borders of the River Lea, the industrial sumplands; out there among the thickets of intemperately abandoned motors, the odd shoes, the cat sacks, the dusty banks of albino nettles. *Milditch* fitted better at the foot of the credits. It went unnoticed. It sounded so damp and wormy and English. The obscure fogs of his Baltic destiny had been exchanged for a manic restlessness, which partly masked his lifelong quest for revenge. He made deals. He shuffled telephones. He haunted the dead zones of the city looking for connections that only he could activate.

He had another angle: he acted. And cornered the market in dispos-

able villains, donkey jackets, and third policemen. He underacted to the point of being, clinically speaking, brain-dead. He once made base camp for a three-part Mini Series push-on-the-Pole; which was routed, for the convenience of the Money Men, through Angmagssalik, Greenland. He pocketed quite a provocative compensation cheque when a wind-machine, hurling polypropylene chips in a simulated blizzard, cut his face to ribbons. No matter. Convalescent, swathed in ice-crusting bandages, he turned up a stash of pornographic novels – dumped by a crew of drill-bit technicians, en route to the Gulf – and shuffled them, at a modest profit, into the deep parka pockets of the Second Unit.

Milditch's survival depended upon his anonymity. If he became a 'face', he was redundant. He let his hair grow and went about unshaven, glowering; then reversed it, scalped himself, grinned like a monkey, and razored his jowls into the consistency of expectorated bubblegum.

I knew him as a book dealer. An acquaintance of mine met him selling cold fish on a beach. Others swore that he dabbled in property. Certainly, he was known to all the casting directors. He was always shooting down the M4 to Bristol; taping his two sentences from some repeatable radio classic; gathering the scripts from his fellow thespians for immediate resale; scouting the Clifton bookshops: only to return to his gloomy captain's cabin, to make the inevitable phonecalls, while he watched the shadows lengthen across the troubled ocean of the park.

'Tilbury,' said Milditch, reluctantly activating a light switch, 'looks well worth a visit. The floor was covered in books. That's good. Nothing in cupboards or on shelves. So they don't do the fairs. The place probably opens once a year, for an hour, while the owner airs his alsatians. I'd cane it myself – but I'm marooned in Uppingham in a duff production of Calderon's *The Surgeon of Honour*, sponsored by some local nutter who's trying to revive rural England by importing Soviet chess champions. Just send me a nice sweetener, mate, if he drops his trousers.'

I knew then that my days as a dealer were almost over. I didn't want to touch whatever lay on the floor of the Tilbury shop. But I had the queasy sensation there ought to be a story in it.

A swollen pink finger, like the thumb from an inflated rubber glove, rose above the London plane trees, and twisted in the evening air. I could still make out the slogan, 'Celebrate JESUS!' The tent-show season was on us already. It was time to be out on the road.

II

The train out of Fenchurch Street has been salvaged from some condemned fairground. It shakes the boardwalk at Limehouse so fiercely that the station threatens to collapse into a heap of rotten timber. The guards, pouting with boredom, hands lost in pockets, twitchy, surfeited on nipple-sheets, have been thoroughly schooled in circumlocution. They have no ambition beyond stranding any person misguided enough to commit themselves to their protection on the poisoned sands of Canvey Island: a gulag of sinking caravans, overlooked by decommissioned storage tanks.

'And this also has been one of the dark places of the earth,' I quoted, straining the portentous ripeness of another Pole over the drowned fanns of Essex.

Thin winter light suppurated between towerblocks and shabby graveyards, picking out the glinting scabs of rusty water. A network of ditches offered to flood the low fields, to hide the disgraced enclosures of fast-breeding motors, that were herded, unlicensed, for conversion to paddocks of weed-choked scrap.

If there was an open *mesa* left, it was soon bunkered into a firing range. Red flags kicked in the breeze. The occasional lop-sided barn, a heritage token, had been preserved for the well-fancied combat of imported pit-bulls.

And always, beyond the pain – the river: black, costive, drawing me on; flaunting the posthumous brilliance of its history.

III

Tilbury Town is a single street, and it is shut. European rain brings down the dirt that floats so enticingly out from the massed pipes of the power station. The innocent sightseer abandons his guidebook to relish a haberdasher's grease-streaked window, which features underwear so outdated it has all the nostalgic allure of a fetishist's catalogue. There is a 'Financial Consultant' with a twenty-four-hour sideline in radio-controlled mini cabs. And yet more mini cabs. The chief industry of the place is providing the means to escape from it.

Cranes from the docks seal the set, and diminish it; preposterous as the Bureau de Change that is gratefully dying into its varnish.

After a couple of hundred yards the buildings simply give up. I am lost among the terminal hobs. Locked yards with sheeted secrets,

contracts that lack a signature, consignments that were never collected: a killing ground for lorries, misdirected, with an inadequate cargo.

On the inshore edge, between the point where the speculators ran out of ideas and the storm's horizon, is a pisshouse, half-demolished; a municipal *jeu d'esprit*, with green tile pagoda roof. The exterior walls are still favoured by local sentimentalists, staggering home with a skinful – and a singular method of celebrating the resonance of location. And here, on the very precipice of oblivion, propped by a flying buttress of ex-Laundrette washing machines, is a lit shopfront: a mirage that could almost pass for Milditch's legendary Antique Haven.

There is a man inside, smoking, warming his hands over a two-bar electric fire. The CLOSED sign is nailed into place. The man looks at me, at my rain-plastered scalp, my dripping coat, my hungry red eyes. Turns back to the fire. Which has a more profitable animation: it throws out sparks. With luck it will burn the place down. He cleans his ear with a matchstick, and rolls the result between his fingers. I rap the window sharply with a coin. He lights another cigarette; rummages under the table, finds a second fire, a fan-blower, and plugs that in.

The existential pathos of this mute Conversation Piece could have endured for a generation. The rain reconstituting my shirt as tie-dyed woodpulp. The junkman's thoughts set morbidly on poll-tax forms and the price of electricity. A sheet of dirty glass dividing us into Subject and Object, observer and observed. My eyes feverishly annotating the bedlam for a book that would justify this manic quest. Jugs, biscuit tins, trays of bent forks, cracked picture frames. None of it held any interest for him. He might have been hired to sit there. He probably couldn't escape. The washing machines, like an unrecorded ice age, blocked his exit. He had not chosen any of these things. He hated them. People died; he stored whatever they did not take on their journey. The dead dominated him. I was also a threat: I might want to force even more stock on to the premises.

The tremulous balance of the situation was ravished by a gunshot from the corner of the street. I rapped, with a little more force. The key holder surfaced, gasping, from his control experiment in suspended animation. More shots, skidding tyres, crashed gears ... and a Morris Traveller, lacking its side-windows, mounted the kerb. And drew up, a yard shy of my kneecaps.

In the world of junk shops and resurrectionist scavenging, there are no surprises. The unexpected is what we are most comfortable with. My old market colleague, Iddo Okoli – for whom Field Marshal Amin was the cadet version – stepped from his smoking wreck, and removed his

bowler, to execute a formal bow. Lion-hearted; he gripped me to his chest, growling dangerously, like a flesh-eating king.

The excavated proprietor shuffled to the door. I followed Iddo inside.

IV

They lay under the pear tree: smeared with themselves, torn, sore, and thirsty. They lay apart, panting. Their tongues lolled in the dirt. They dribbled, slippery with melting 'KY' jelly. Then the fatter one, Bobby, crawled off, sick to his heart, unbalanced, and looking for air that he could breathe. His creamy lace-trimmed basque pinched false breasts from his abundant flesh. His varnished skin was marbled with a perplexity of contusions. His black silk stockings were split; revealing spidery tufts of man-hair. He was dragging his insides after him across the gravel: a dead dog. They were still trapped in the thatch of a barren orchard.

What could be more depressing than the interval between orgies? Bobby wondered if he would *ever* summon up the enthusiasm to begin it all again. How could he avoid catching sight of last night's partners? How could he avoid paying them? Always problems for the creative mind.

As he crossed the path, he begged the single stones to pierce him. He relished the sluggish ripples of discomfort. It could have been an hour, or a day, before he reached the concrete steps of the redoubt, and hauled himself on to the river wall, the East Gun Line.

'Speer's Theatre', his friend the painter had called it; wistfully invoking the classical pretensions of the Third Reich. The steps were all that was left. A meaningless piece of something. The outer rim of a Temple of Atrocities. He wanted to lick bloodstains from the cold stone. He wanted to touch the water. The morning light on the river was his salvation.

Wooden stumps in the mud. The ruin of a jetty. The tide was turning: a slime-caked causeway, plastered in filth and sediment, pointed at Gravesend. He often boasted, without much justification, that Magwitch faltered here, escaping from the hulks; and was brought to shore. The last pub in the world, the World's End.

From beyond the curve of the power station, Bobby saw them coming up on the tide: from the Hope into the Reach. The familiar nightmare. The early light followed, like an attendant; grey, crumbling, flaky. It broke them apart, into a flood of false lumber. They floated in never-connecting circles; going under, dipping from sight. They were

all dead. They swam to fetch him. Wavelets, drowned angels; pale-green billows. There were women in hats, holding their children above the waterline. Infants slipping from their arms, slipping from sight. The river's net was churned; and the ropes were cut.

'Not again,' Bobby whimpered, 'I swear on my life. I'll never do it again.' Hot tears bruised the kohl, blackened his eyes, inflicted damage.

More ropes than faces. He knew it would be the same. It could not change. The living location imprisons incomplete instants of time. Sex acts release demons. But the morning light would resolve it, sweep away the visible traces. Except the Indian woman. She was always there. Walking across the water towards him, daintily stepping from wave crest to wave crest: down from the church, court habit, throat hidden in a ruff of sea-bone, most severe.

'You called him father, being in his land a stranger. And by the same reason so must I you. Fear you here I should call you father? I tell you then I will, and you shall call me child, and so I will remain for ever and ever your countryman.'

The mantic shine of fever. Sewage breath. Her voice in his mouth.

Then the howl; the compressed madhouse shriek of the power station. Steam alarms. Whistle. Dread. The unrinsable taste of sperm in the throat.

V

The curtains were drawn. The doors of the pub closed against the vulgar world. The inner circle of the Connoisseurs of Crime paddled yet again through the shallows of forensic legend; traded atrocities. They dominated, complacently, a log fire powered by gas jets. Errlund, his desert boots on Hywood's chair, was hogging the conversation.

"'Sir" graciously took me along to the Beefsteak,' he droned. 'Too many flapping ears at the Athenaeum. The old pansy didn't want his posh pals to catch him hobnobbing with a scribbler. Yes, he'd try the fish - a palsied scrape of cod. Difficulties with his choppers. Nearly spat them on to the plate every time he opened his mouth. *Une belle horreur!*'

'Spare us the complete rollcall of domestic details this time, old boy,' Hywood yawned. He'd heard it all before. And it wasn't improving. Some fool had mentioned Errlund in the same breath as Marcel Proust, and it had gone, quite disastrously, to his head. The reviewer had, of course, been discussing types of morbid pathology, and not literary style.

'I followed him,' Errlund continued, impervious to cynicism, or any other form of moral censorship, short of an iron muzzle. 'I followed him

into the dining room. Have you noticed how he walks these days? Waddles, I should say. He lurched between the tables, like a circus elephant with the squitters. Nodded seigneurial acknowledgement to complete strangers. They thought I was doing the decent thing – bringing him out for the afternoon from the nuthatch.'

'For God's sake, Errlund. Drop the Chips Channon routine, and get on to the serial killings. Are you going to publish the surgeon's papers in full, or are you going to "summarize" them, and bend whatever you find there to fit with your own theories?' Hywood tugged at his earlobe in annoyance. He'd given the advantage to Errlund. He'd betrayed *interest*. Now the bastard would pad it out until all the chaps forgot it was his turn to get in a round.

'When we finally eased him into his seat, he had the greatest difficulty remembering where he was,' Errlund sailed on, serenely. 'He stared up at me over his half-moons in a perfect rictus of terror. He must have concluded I was his valet, or bumboy, and he simply couldn't imagine why I was sitting down with him at table. He was far too *gentil* to mention it, of course. All that shit flogged into him at Eton and Balliol. His fine grey eyes were watering slightly, and there was just a hint of rouge on his cortisone-puffy cheeks.'

Errlund paused. His timing was perfect. Hywood's eyes were shut. But he was faking. 'Get on with it, man,' he growled. 'Or do you want me to finish it for you? "If you do this thing..." Is that right?'

'Quite right,' Errlund conceded. 'He gazed at me for a few moments, in silence, to convince me of his seriousness. "If you do this thing," he croaked, "you'll be blackballed. No decent club will touch you. You'll never see your name in the Honours List. Your K will remain a pipedream." Then he excused himself; his "secret sorrow", problems with the waterworks. One of the waiters carried him back, trouser-cuffs steaming. He counted his cold sprouts and gave me a very significant look.'

A snort from Hywood, followed by a jaw-cracking yawn, indicated that he was crossing the borderland of sleep. Errlund's narrative was underwriting his nightmare. Hywood had joined them at the table.

'His concentration was fading fast,' said Errlund mercilessly, 'but he managed to signal for the custard. "Make me a promise," he trembled. "You will never again associate that noble name with those tedious crimes. They can never pay you enough blood-money. Leave it to the Penny Dreadfuls, old chap. What can it possibly matter to the civilized portion of society if a few whores are slit from nape to navel? I've never myself cared for sports, but these hulking and vigorous young black-

guards must sow their wild oats. Let them keep it to the streets, and pray they do not frighten the horses.”

Hywood sat up with a start. ‘Did he actually confirm that your man was the guilty party?’

‘Oh no,’ said Errlund, ‘he was much too far gone. He’d wandered off among the yolky richness of Kentish brickwork, honey-coloured Cotswold stone, Winston, Guy, Jim Lees-Milne. “Must say,” he drawled, *à propos de rien*, “quite surprised, glancing out of the jarvey on the way over – the vast numbers of coloured people passing unmolested down the Haymarket.” Then, without warning, he shoved a bundle of letters towards me, under cover of the cheeseboard; coughing into his sleeve, and fluttering his eyelashes like a Venetian concubine. “You see, Errlund?” he broke out again. “You take my point? You have a contribution to make. Your name is often spoken aloud on the wireless. I can arrange for you to view all the private papers. I’ll give you another man altogether, a sick soul. A much better yarn. What can the ‘truth’ matter now – when you set it against an advance from an honourable publisher? Your fame is assured. Take your time, go down to the country. It will be marked in the right places, I promise you. Drop in, any Thursday, at the Albany. My day, you know.” I had to lift his hand from my knee. When I walked out, he was still talking to the empty chair. The waiter was taking a brandy glass to his lips, then patting him dry with the folded edge of an Irish-linen napkin.’

Bobby, the publican and sinner, the gold-maned ‘television personality’, posed for a moment in the doorway, then tottered to the bar and shot a very large gin into a dirty glass. ‘Cunts,’ he whispered, superstitiously. And pressed his glass against the tiny shoulders of the dispenser.

A Romanesque docker, head slicked with sump oil, sleeves rolled threateningly above the elbow, kept his back to the fireside cabal of Crime Connoisseurs, while he indulged in some serious drinking. He was being talked to, whined at, flattered, flirted with, and altogether patronized by Conlin, the notorious Lowlife photographer. An evil-smelling dwarf who had lost his christian name, thirty years before, in a strict discipline Naval Training Establishment for delinquent boys. His Leica was on the stool beside him. The great Conlin! The man who had shot, and later destroyed, the definitive portrait of John Minton. Beads of salt-sweat rolled down the contours of his coarse-grained skin. Smirking, then sniffing, he began to excavate the docker’s ear with his tongue. Without hurrying, or spilling a drop, the docker finished his drink. He stood up, rolled his shoulders, and clamped his vast hands around the back of Conlin’s neck. He looked for a long moment into the

photographer's eyes: then he nudded him. And watched him drop, screaming, on to the floor.

Gamely, Bobby rushed forward to hook Conlin's elbows back on to the bar. Blood was dripping from the photographer's broken nose into his vodka. Bobby teased a cigarette between Conlin's trembling lips, and lit it with his own.

The board behind the line of inverted spirit bottles was decorated with exotic postcards from Bobby's collection: jungles, ivory poachers, whips, balconies. Bobby tried to take his mind off things by constructing a fiction that would animate these static images.

Recklessly inspired, he groped for Conlin's camera. He propped the wilting photographer between the docker and his mate; then fidgeted the group, until the sign, BUOYS, could be clearly read on the left of the composition. He carefully framed out the corresponding door, marked GULLS.

The dockers were rigid, severe; breathless. One of them mimed danger, by fingering a kiss curl; while the other excited a detumescent bicep.

Bobby, the artist, was not quite satisfied. After prolonged meditation, and a final check through the viewfinder of his fingers, he darted forward to unzip Conlin, fumble him, shake him out. The éarwig! Now satisfied, he snapped the shutter on another fragment of his one-day-to-be-published tribute to a lost generation: the Tilbury Group. He might give his agent a tinkle.

VI

Iddo Okoli, savage in Middle Temple mufti – pin-striped, wing-collared, with soup-stained tie – progressed benevolently through the collapsed markets, smiling on chaos. His wife, broad, dignified, sheet-wrapped, followed in his slipstream. His children, in a file, struggled with suitcases of outdated textbooks. How his optimism survived, nobody knew. He bellowed at back-counters. He shook the plaster from damp ceilings. He beat on tables. There had been good days when he almost covered his bus fare.

His prospects changed with a small piece of theatre that became apocryphal in the trade. A literary graveyard, lurking between the Royal Academy and the Museum of Mankind, was 'rationalizing' its stock, and adjusting to market forces (prior to becoming an airline office), by reshelving directly into a builder's skip. Iddo watched, hands on hips, as the nocturnal assistants blinked into the brilliance of the