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# **WYTHAM WHALES**

**Jan Van Aken**

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ISBN 978 94 646 5650 3



*'He piled upon the whale's white hump the sum of all the general rage and hate felt by his whole race from Adam down; and then, as if his chest had been a mortar, he burst his hot heart's shell upon it.'*

'Moby Dick' by H. Melville (1819-1891)

*'They swarm on her carcass with torches and axes  
Like a whale on a bloody shoreline  
Stripped of her pillars, her stays and her stanchions  
When it's only her bones on the wet poison land  
Steel ropes will drag her with winches and engines  
Till it's only a stain on the sand'*

'So far from the Clyde' by M. Knopfler



## PROLOGUE

The water does what it actually has been doing for the last couple of years. Taking land relentlessly. Inch by inch. At first, it looked innocent, but gradually it got nastier, when personal borders were being pushed uphill. It pulls people out of their deadening comfort zones and turns them into fierce competitors, like an outlived couple that struggles with a downsized bed overnight. They cling desperately to what is already mouldy and wet.

It reminds me of Brexit, which had a similar aspiration, the same poor ambition of salvation. It had redefined the land as well. Not by rising water levels, like it is doing now, but by imposing the same sort of distinct borders.

The idea of being trapped by unforgiving frontiers always evokes primal ethics and politics. We have become survivors, landwrecked survivors. Indigenous castaways, if you like.





## ACT I

'Shouldn't we inform the continent?'

David sweeps the table surface with his left hand and clears the spilled food in his other, scuffing my notebook deliberately with the rancid smelling cloth, making everything more appalling than it already is.

David can't have it. Work and food on the very same spot, at least when an indoor kitchen table is involved, which is weird, I think.

Frankly, there's something paradoxical about this place. Like a tiled flushing toilet in the middle of a jungle or an abandoned but connected overgrown red phone booth.

David's so called working space for instance lies at the southeast edge of the woods. An improvised row of ruinous open sheds in a field, each sheltering a Japanese kiln. They were built after some ancient traditional Anagama models, but exposed to the relentless elements of Nature. Since a badly stocked gas bottle took the life of their founder, that same Nature has regained positions

frighteningly easily. The symptoms of abandonment quickly showed once the hymns had died. The rewilding has already put two of the three kiln dragons down. Departments still exchange reproaches about the lack of proper storing facilities, while perhaps worst of all, previously assigned renovation funds have suddenly vanished into the thinnest of airs. The loyal foresters keep delivering chopped wood though, because of an ironic abundance. David is grateful for that, but every year more miracles and magic are needed to get the site operational again.

There are numerous examples of lost or unfinished sieges of the Hill. Starting perhaps from the silent Hill End camp site and Hazel's scattered innocent swimming pools, over the silted trenches on the other side of the woods, up to the much later decisive installation of the fieldwork headquarters in the grand Chalet, the old dismantled, transported and rebuilt Swiss hunting Lodge on the hilltop from the 1930's.

Since the Woods were bequeathed to the University, our kind sneaked up the hill like a whipped up Roman legion.

Keen academics with nervous endeavours, multiplying the human diversity in the Woods with aspirational presence. Merely foot soldiers. Some driven by ambition, some by greed, one alternatively more pushing than the other, to count, measure, map and face the degenerating wildlife under the partly industrially planted timber of Wytham Woods. And we all cherish the delicate hope of triumph in that High Street parade of the academic universe, backed by a scholar who is holding homegrown laurels above our squeezed heads, whispering enviously that our lonely partners hardly resist the ubiquitous advances in town. The rising levels now only just reconfirm the massive circles we constantly fail to square.

As said, it's a small miracle David got that last dragon loaded and burning. He is all tensed up. There is a brutal urge in his movements since he stubbornly decided to start the firing anyway. All by himself, after the rest of his team had left to roll up carpets and save kittens. I secretly hoped it would render hopeful perspectives to his fading craft, but again, it now feels more like a hot-brained battle he had already lost before he even started. That was two

days ago. He's most likely too affronted to give in, let alone to beg again for any assistance since we all refused blatantly to volunteer one single shift under these least inviting weather conditions. He surprised us with an unexpected hasty nutritional visit, before that last stretch of his 72-hour marathon of soothing the insatiable hunger of a raging dragon with nicely chopped beech, oak and birch. Nature is playing a cruel game and we don't seem to surrender.

David is a Welsh potter from Holyhead, Anglesey. Every year, he exchanges the wide sea view for an enclosed woodland scenery and claims Wytham's kiln site during the whole summer recess. He's a chunky young man who thinks like a steaming locomotive. Straightforward and once set off, hardly unstoppable. A trait that suits flame taming hobbies, I guess, but I give in like wet moulded clay whenever he approaches. Frankly, he is modesty itself. It's actually only me, who organically inclines.

David usually gets most of the attention, even though he never seeks it. The few invasive tourist permit holder families normally venture the equally modest summit, and

sneak in under the open sheds to ask him the most awkward questions with a rather lazy, feigned scientific interest, considering their poor persistence to digest the elaborated answers that follow. The children soon regret their parents' question. It feels like they've opened Pandora's box. You cannot imagine how many ideas and figures David has been chewing on, while throwing clay above his lonely Welsh spinning wheel during even lonelier Welsh winter days. His words had enough time to dry and hardened by the salty spring breezes that are stroking Mona Island. They seem ready to convert the nescient, empty-headed yuppies, the poor sort who lost touch with Nature, resources, tools and materials. The whole family give in remorsefully, having the kids join in some sort of artisanal, messy workshop. The proof lies in their content descent of the hill, loaded with the weirdest knobbly mugs or cups, cheaply wrapped in even more cheap brown paper. Different from any tableware in the shops, but loyally bought for some quid to re-earth their detached soul and to cover David's incurred costs of London clay and maintenance. The visitors look somewhat

purged after all, although still clay spotted on places where the itches persist.

According to David's rhetoric, the kiln is an ancient, archetypal way of bringing people together. There's this unique communal, non-hierarchical feel to it, triggered by the creating force of fire and the modest role man is granted in this fascinating natural process. You're never able to handle the four elements completely, I once heard David humbly confess to a group of middle-aged spinsters from Saint Hilda's, even though we're fortunate to play with them. We're just keepers, modest keepers, and there's no fame to gain whatsoever. Most female permit holders adore him. They picture him as a druid, a master of the elements, from water and clay, to fire and air. Perhaps that's why he awkwardly favours at least one cleared dinner surface here in the chalet.

I do moths, by the way. Night moths. Invisible to common people, as they mostly appear when they drink, flirt, wank, shag or sleep. And I do none of them, apart from wanking and sleeping.

'Do you mean Europe?'

Alan turns his head while rinsing a last plate under the running tap. His other arm disappears in murky dishwater. It has been his turn since the beginning of the week, but he has always weaselled out when duty called. Being a marine biologist, the rising water level evoked an urgency in his eel project, as his field of research has been expanding drastically over the weeks. It is in a way the only habitat that has sneaked in brutally on the observer's domain, rather than the other way around. One of the reasons why smart Alan once took up marine biology, I guess, the rising sea levels.

Fortunately, Wytham Hill still rises safely up from the flooded Isis Valley, but has lost the last dry link with its vital instructive urban base called Oxford about two weeks ago. In this post-Brexit era, it's pretty tricky to think in terms of islands and continents. These newly installed networks of dependencies are getting quite confusing. Anyway, the legion has been cut off and fresh supplies are running short.

'No, the University,' David replies. 'It's no use staying much longer after tomorrow.'

Read David doesn't win anything with staying. His clay collection will have reached its aimed glazing temperature by tomorrow morning, and afterwards, there's nothing exciting about a natural cooling process, which normally takes twice as long. You usually have a drink or a fag if you can't kick off from the smoke and you return to a normal life back in town if you've led any.

'You should use more soap. There are seven of us. And the plates were greasy enough to justify the spillage of amines rather than five gallons of clear water.'

Aoife is bad at estimating. Especially when agitated. She exaggerates easily in any direction thinkable. As long as it suits her. Not a very scientific mind set, I reckon, but one cannot always have the saucepan on the academic stove, she defends.

'There's plenty of water outside, love, don't panic,' reassures Alan.

Aoife loathes being addressed that way. It reminds her of her Sudanese ex-boyfriend who thought he could treat women the same way here as he did in his country.



Alan does it deliberately as well, but less exposed. I just know. As David did with the table cloth. Alpha male behaviour, to affirm the hierarchy in the hill pack. The borders of our artificial island are constantly being defied. Habitats are running out and the call of science gets overruled by friction and emotions. We sometimes look like a group of bonobos in an abandoned zoo. Luckily, time still brings solace since the evening meal is, so far, the only inevitable, tricky shared moment left. The silences at the table get embarrassing and unpleasant.

The other day, Georg suddenly stated the rainfall had turned us into sworn in MPs of the hill. We have full control now, he claimed, because nobody else can tell us what to do, or even better, not to do. Mr. Lyndon, Wytham's official Chalet custodian, left the island to bring his cats and chickens into safety. He was the last official thread of nosy authority. So...

Nobody openly replied to Georg's weird political statement, but surely everybody contemplated on the power vacuum that has been created and the retired ambitions it might have awoken. At least I did. But I only