



RAAKVLAKKEN / COMMON GROUND / FRAGILE FRAGMENTEN

On my first visit to Watou, July 2022, I found myself in an environment that had been completely foreign to me until then. It became a journey of discovery through the Watou biotope, like an anthropologist on a first exploration. Night and dawn showed the village honestly and vulnerable. Two seemingly random places caught my attention.

First, a patch of woods to the north of Watou, strange and almost unnatural in the landscape. How had that grove been created? In my mind, several scenarios were possible: from a family looking for a playground for the children to an extreme introvert who loved birds and trees, or was it just a happy coincidence? A fertile piece of land is not easily given up in Watou for 'just some hedges and trees'. In the end, it turned out to be a rather profane story, but also a stroke of luck, a true fragile fragment.



May 1940, bombing Watou, we are in the house on the right. (Image: weeshelwonder.be)



May 1940, provisional graves on site. (Image: through and back)

Another place that really appealed to me was Jerome Derycke's shop. He declutters houses and sells anything still usable from his garage. Inside the shop, a quirky eclectic universe has formed. Peppered with vivid stories from Jerome's life in and around Watou, you will find everything from the tiniest screw to a dérailleur or a 1950s scrapbook on aquatic life. Again, a fragile fragment that is twofold: the sensitivity of the objects and the shop itself. Will it continue to exist after Jerome?

A PIECE OF HISTORY / COMMON GROUND

On a subsequent visit to Watou, I met Guido Doolaege, one of the owners of the patch of woods. An intense day unfolded. He told the story of the plot he and his brother still own.

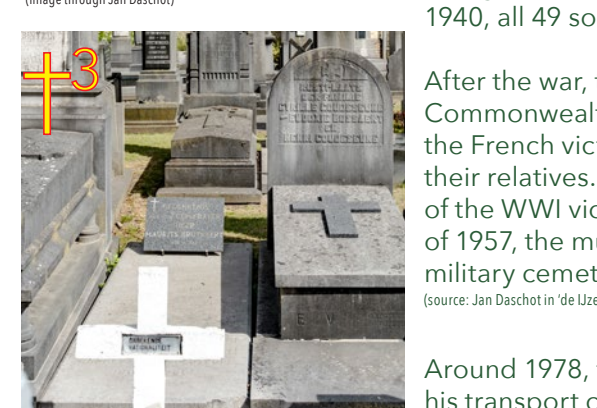
The aerial photo shows what happened as a result of a bombing (1) of Watou by the Germans, 27 and 28 May 1940. Besides ten civilian casualties, forty-nine soldiers died: thirty-five British, thirteen French and one of unknown identity (?). After the bombing, they were provisionally buried on site (11). Soon the occupying forces ordered the establishment of a cemetery for the fallen. Watou had to look for a place. A solution was provided by the church administration, which owned a plot of land along Houkerkestraat that could serve as a military cemetery. That plot could be exchanged with another, almost equal-sized plot that the church administration leased from the municipality of Watou. Even before the deed was signed, Omer Leupe, Jerome Alleweireldt and Pascal Valley accepted the arduous task of exhuming the corpses and making an inventory of personal items. Their working equipment consisted of 'two buckets of pure water, a litre of creoline, 50 gr of cotton wool, 100 gr of iodine ink, 2 bandages, a broom, a bottle of strong drink and about 20 cigarettes (Belga or similar)'. During October and November 1940, all 49 soldiers were reburied (12).



1940, Moensstraat na het bombardement (Image: weeshelwonder.be)



October 1940, reburial to military cemetery. (Image: through and back)



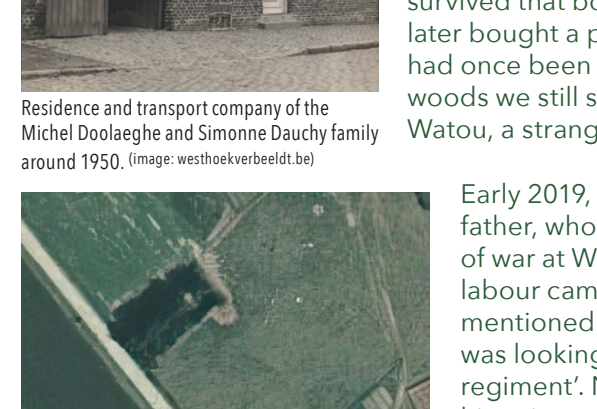
Circa 1940, the unknown soldier was reburied one last time in the local cemetery, alongside the father of the First World War.



Father Doolaege and Rem D'Ha at milk collection, Whitson Day 1952. (Image: weeshelwonder.be)



Residence and transport company of the Michel Doolaege and Simone Dauchy family around 1950. (Image: weeshelwonder.be)



the grove, circa 1980 (with pond) (Image: weeshelwonder.be)



the grove, February 2023



Jerome's shop, a fragile fragment of a fragile fragment, October 2022

FRAGILE FRAGMENT / SOME WOODS, A MIRROR, A SHOP, A VILLAGE

What do a patch of woods and a shop where things and memories are recycled have in common?



More than we think. Suddenly I was no longer a stranger in Watou. Curiosity about the forest, about Watou. Having a glass of wine with Jerome and Guido on a late October afternoon. Both the woods and Jerome's shop are fragile fragments.

The woods by just existing. It is as if this place does not want to be forgotten, a fragile space within Watou, a scar. 'Sacred Woods' as John West put it. The shop is of course a 'business', but also a place where cherished memories find a new owner and can be cherished again. An ever-changing place where you enter in curiosity and rarely leave empty-handed. You might not buy anything at all, but it will be hard not to think of the past lives that belong to the carefully displayed objects. It is like a miniature of Watou and its surroundings. Both places can be gone in an instant. Watou is no exception in this world, which is rapidly changing and where market value often rules the roost. With this project, besides a story about a bombardment, a mirror and a forest, I especially want to make the subtle and the vulnerable visible and show common ground. That which connects us all, artists, visitors, residents of Watou and those who died here.

Meaning is not in objects or places - the fragile fragments - themselves. Meaning is given by us through language and experience. A thing is a thing, an object is an object, as so beautifully described in Wisława Szymborska's poem 'View With Grain of Sand'.

Like a silent witness, the monumental mirror in the living room bears the traces of the bombing. For years it was in oblivion, as was the cemetery. Now it has regained its familiar place and, through her reflections, allows different fragile fragments to meet again. The forest, a house, war, life, time and space intertwine.

Iwrt Bernakiewicz, Watou, 2023.

VIEW WITH A GRAIN OF SAND

We call it a grain of sand, but it calls itself neither grain nor sand. It does just fine, without a name, whether general, particular, permanent, passing, incorrect, or apt.

Our glance, our touch means nothing to it. It doesn't feel itself seen and touched. And that it fell on the window sill is only our experience, not its. For it, it is not different from falling on anything else with no assurance that it has finished falling or that it is falling still.

The window has a wonderful view of a lake, but the view doesn't view itself. It exists in this world, colorless, shapeless, soundless, odorless, and painless.

The lake's floor exists floorlessly, and its shore exists shorelessly. The water feels itself neither wet nor dry and its waves to themselves are neither singular nor plural. They splash dead to their own noise on pebbles neither large nor small.

And all this beneath a sky by nature skylless in which the sun sets without setting at all and hides without hiding behind an unmining cloud. The wind ruffles it; its only reason being that it blows.

A second passes. A second second. A third. But they're three seconds only for us.

Time has passed like courier with urgent news. But that's just our simile. The character is inverted, his haste is make-believe, his news - inhuman.

UNKNOWN SOLDIER



FIELD / BURIAL GROUND / FUTURE PLANS / GROVE / ?

BOMBING

HOUSE DOOLAEGE

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LAST RESTING PLACE OF UNKNOWN SOLDIER

Is Jerome's shop like an Aby Warburg atlas? Seemingly unconnected things from a small and ever-changing universe before regaining personal meaning.