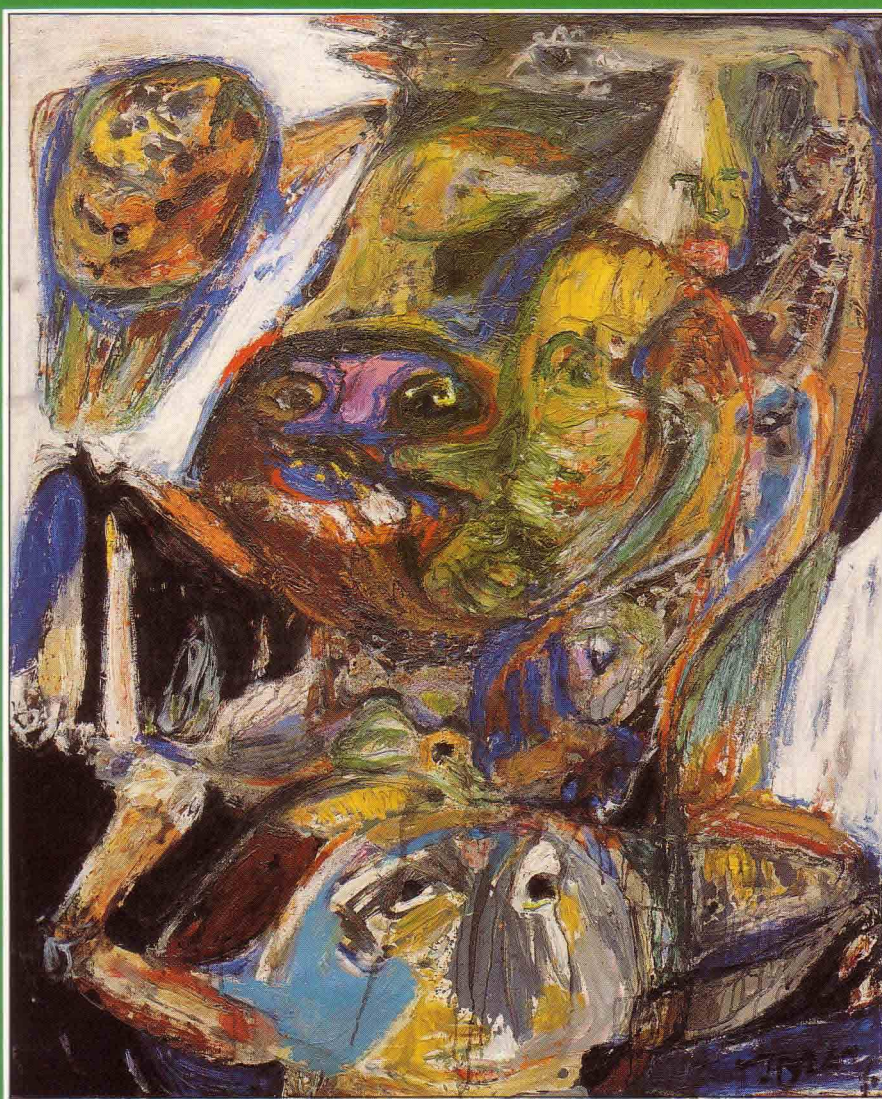


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SPECIAL ISSUE





Penn ar Bed

A short story by Ronan Huon

His wife came into the house pulling at the edge of her swimming costume to hide her fat buttocks

Alan was sitting facing the sea, and he raised his eyes from his paper. He looked at his wife: her brown skin was shiny with oil. She used cooking oil as she thought the special one sold in the shops was too dear. There was no point in telling her it wasn't really good for the skin, she took no notice.

Kristina started fussing around the house. She picked up a glass which Alan had left on the table after he'd had a whisky. When she took the oyster shell half-full of ash and cigarette ends which was by his side he shouted, annoyed.

— Leave that ash tray here, I need it!

She'd gone to the kitchen to empty it. She couldn't stand an ash tray with ash in it.

She returned with a work box, sat on a wicker chair facing the sea and began darning.

'You're not going to stay like that in this weather!' said Alan.

— It's not cold in here, she answered. It's surprising how quickly the wind's got up. A cold wind. And to think that I was in the water this morning, and then sunbathing on the beach for half the day!

Really it was still warm in the house, thanks to the big windows which, during the sunny hours, had collected enough warmth to last until night came. That side of the house, the west side, had windows right down to the floor and faced the sea. But the panes were small and dull. They'd been put in by the old owner who worked selling trees and all sorts of plants. To make the windows he'd taken two of the frames which are used to cover seedlings, and their glass stayed dull and scratched however they were cleaned. Now, though, no one bothered much with them. It wasn't worth the trouble.

— I'm glad I finished the mattress before the wind got up, she repeated, without raising her head from her work.

"Penn ar Bed" and the poems of Anjela Duval have been translated by Rhisiart Hincks.

Opposite Ronan Huon

The mattress had had its stuffing removed outside, on the dried up lawn, and she'd spent three afternoons in her swimming costume, her body covered in oil, carding the wool.

Alan went on reading an item in *Le Monde*. The headline was "The Hard-handed Students and the Idea of Mao": "Following the idea of Mao it has proven possible to use a method to smelt steel directly; following the idea of Mao they have succeeded, in the Department of Atomic Physics in Peking, in increasing the strength of the reactor from 7 megawatts to 10 megawatts, and in increasing the capacity of the neutronic flow." He'd have to follow the thoughts of Mao as well in order to overcome his personal problems!

Kristina had started going on again:

— Chann Jezekel came to bring two lettuces because you visited her child yesterday. Really, they don't call the doctor out everyday. She doesn't seem to know how much a visit costs especially on Sunday!

Alan pretended to carry on reading as he smoked. In fact he was thinking about the Jezekels, a poor peasant family living in a dilapidated farm in the middle of the hills, where the dung water still ran up to the threshold of the house. Often as he'd gone along the narrow, sunken lane by the farmhouse he'd noticed the smell of the manure. It wasn't that he disliked that smell, quite the reverse, it reminded him of his youth and his parents' house.

Somehow they had known that he was a doctor. More than likely because his nosy wife had gone to boast about her husband's work in front of the ordinary, unimportant people in the area, people who had a great deal of respect for a man they believed to be a master over their lives. Now and then Kristina went to beg a cup of fresh milk or a pound of butter or just to nose in the farms which still remained here and there.

With her stockings left on her lap, she was now fingering the piece of plastic which they used as a tablecloth on a kind of small round table, low and unsteady, which they had in that part of the house. It had been repaired with the iron frame of a large lampshade which she'd bought in some sale. On the table, beside her husband, was another shell which she hadn't seen, and which was full to the brim with ash and cigarette ends.

— I ought to put another tablecloth on instead of this one, it's starting to tear, she said.

The wind murmured on the wavy "Everite" roof above them. Alan had seen the sea changing colour, darkening, and a boat letting down its sails as quickly as it could, just keeping a small brown triangle in front, enough to reach Porzhpaol hidden in the bay, beyond Segal Island.

Kristina had started darning again, but she still talked, her head

bent over her work:

— Come to think, there's a piece of material in the attic at home which would do.

The cupboards were full of oddments of material of all colours and sizes which she'd buy in the shops at the end of the year, when the sales were on. She didn't buy them because she needed them, but because they were cheap. Quite a few of them remained unused afterwards.

Alan gazed at the sea, lost in thought. Now the furthest islands were hidden in the mist. He wouldn't go out tonight after supper, to count the lighthouses flashing alternately in the vastness of the night. A seagull passed by the window, close to the house, crying.

— Do you think, said Kristina, the interest on the money we've lent your cousin is high enough?

She had carried on with her thoughts, and sentences like that often came out with hardly any relevance to one another.

Without raising his eyes from the page Alan answered that he couldn't care less.

He was reading or looking out of the window, and on holiday. They both remained silent for a while, then he blurted:

— Shit!

He got up so suddenly that he made the small round shaky table fall over with the sound of clanking iron. He knocked over the shell, too, and as it rolled to the wall the ash in it spilled across the red-coloured cement floor.

Alan took his jacket from the back of a chair.

— You're not going out in weather like this! said Kristina.

He made no reply. It wasn't worth it.

* * *

Outside, the sea spray immediately beat against his face. The house got the full blast of the wind as it had been built on the steep cliff facing the open sea, in a place which the locals, with good reason, called ar C'hleger (The Crag). Perched on the rock, the bungalow was ugly as sin, made entirely of cement and a blot on the landscape. But it had been built many years ago, before the new laws which prohibited putting up shacks like that, so close to the sea and without leaving a right of way. It was a beautiful place even so, high up and facing Eusa.

It had started drizzling. He went to the shed to get his raincoat. The shed was a boat house which had been built after the main building but added on to it. Later, as they had no boat, it had become a bedroom where their two daughters slept when they wanted to come with them.

Their plot and a vacant one nearby, were enclosed by wooden fences, like a "ranch". The previous owner had planted fir trees. In order to give them a start and to keep them out of the wind he'd planted them in big holes, and the tops of some of them had only just begun to poke out, battered as they were by every storm.

When winter closed in and colder winds began to blow, their shiny leaves turned brown, and Alan had thought at first they were dead. But, in spring, they grew green again and shot up a few inches once more.

Behind that dense plantation there were only dunes rising and falling, without a single, solitary tree. The sea, the cliffs, the sky, a house here and there, and the abandoned lighthouse of Kergozh further inland.

Summer or winter, when he was tired of the bustle of the city, or his work or his wife's prattling, he'd telephone a colleague to look after his patients, and take the car and flee without telling anyone where he'd gone.

Three days ago he'd come on his own, in the night.

There had been no one up in the hamlet, and nothing moving in the harbour except for the masts of boats which he saw swaying when he shone the lights of the car on them. He had passed the last houses of the small port in order to take the road which zig-zagged its way through the dunes. It was raining lightly, and the windscreen-wipers moved slowly across the glass. The strong smell of seaweed had penetrated the car. It was the beginning of September and there were only a few blue and orange tents left on the mown grass. A few caravans had also been left here and there, by owners who'd come to them on Saturday evenings to rejoin their families after a week's work. The white, sandy road meandered around the dunes, and at the last sharp bend he could see his house perched on top of the cliff.

His wife had come to find him next day.

He went down behind the tiny wood to walk over the dunes.

— Shit! he said once more.

In their last argument he'd told her it would be better for them to go their separate ways. They no longer had anything in common, neither ideas nor aims in life.

Everything Kristina did got on his nerves, always buying things and moving the furniture. Meals were never on time, each eating on his own whatever was in the pantry or the fridge. When he'd have liked to come back to a quiet, cosy home after a day's hard work, she'd be gadding about, and when she arrived at night she'd be tired out as well, but still ready to tell him what she'd bought and who she'd been drinking with.

He'd have liked to have found a peaceful place to listen to the music he loved. For her that was all a waste of money:

— I don't like that din, was her usual response.

The wind whistled in the needles of those firs which had managed to grow, as he passed them at the end of his property. It was a real thicket. Now and then he'd go to the shed to get the sickle with its half-broken handle, even though he wasn't keen on physical work, and begin cutting the bracken which shot up amongst the brambles, the gorse, the heather and the brushwood. He'd clear a patch, a very little at a time, put the litter he'd accumulated in the holes around the trees and that was that. He'd be shattered and aching after working like that.

The grass no longer moved, it remained pressed to the ground as if it had been combed. He passed under a wooden fence whitened by the sun and sea spray. The wind was against him, and he started to move sideways as boats do when they battle against a storm. In places the lawn was covered with a thin layer of fine sand like pepper or snow, and the blades of grass appeared sparse like a newly seeded lawn beginning to shoot. Where tents had been all summer the grass was completely dried up, and in several places, beside the square of yellowed grass, there was a heap of blackened stones which had been used in cooking.

He heard a wail in the wind, and turned to look across the dunes. A cardboard box, left behind by campers, crashed down in front of him, and then rolled on to be lost in a sand pit. Somewhere inland a chapel bell shaken by the wild wind, rang twice.

Alan had reached Porzh ar Marc'h without realising it. He heard behind him what sounded like someone breathing. It was only a reddish brown, shaggy dog, looking for a master more than likely. He shouted to it:

— Here boy!

The animal which had gone to rummage round a gorse bush came towards him wagging its tail, and they went down to the beach, at the creek of Porzh ar Marc'h. It was sheltered there and quieter than on the dunes.

The sea was on the ebb and had left behind it a virginal, smooth beach, so soft that he sank into it up to his ankles with each step. Sandpipers circled, sometimes level with the beach, sometimes level with the sea, and soon the dog began running here and there after them.

Suddenly it shot off like a bullet to follow a bird which had come close as though mocking him, and when the bird flew towards the open sea the dog found itself in the water without knowing how, and stood still, surprised and disappointed.

The spray still flew. Alan drew his hand over his wet face and exhaled deeply.

He climbed back up the dune, the dog running in front of him, still

wagging its tail, its nose level with the ground. When it got too close to the steep, dangerous edge he called to it. A part of the cliff had come loose, and, smashed on the beach below, there was a heap of rocks mixed with yellow soil and sods with the grass still stuck to them.

Alan felt he needed to exercise until his body was tired. Staying in the house all day had made him flare up. It was doing him good to be out. Once again, when he was on the cliff top, there came to him on the wind the sound of a bell ringing in a tower somewhere.

In the distance he perceived a figure walking the ridge of the dune, going down and gradually disappearing out of sight at a turn. They were the only ones in the gale. Alan felt content in that loneliness and quietness, for to him the noise of the wind whistling in the grass, or that of the sea, weren't noises since they didn't stop him from thinking and meditating.

From time to time the figure he had seen in the distance came into view depending on the whim of the sand dunes. The dog had gone further off, and was now running in circles around the woman as she drew near. She was a young woman, with a yellow silk scarf around her hair which was waving in the wind behind her. She had black hair. "That's why," he thought, "she's chosen a yellow scarf."

He liked the look of the girl, and they laughed to each other as they passed. He saw her lips moving. She must have said something, but as in a silent film he heard nothing. The words had been blown away: "It's windy?" "Out for a walk?" In his turn he muttered some vague comment.

She was also out walking in the wind. They'd had the same idea, and finding themselves in the same wild world and with the same mad idea they were being drawn closer together.

It was unlikely to have been after an argument with her husband or lover that she'd decided to take a walk, after putting on her denim jeans and wax-cloth jacket and tying the yellow scarf around her hair.

She seemed to be quiet and carefree, dragging behind her, like a child, a long piece of seaweed she'd collected on her way, and which she held by its stem. After the rough weather piles of all kinds of seaweed had come ashore. Long black trails of it came and went continuously with the waves down below along the beach. On the dunes the wrack had been spread out to dry after being separated from the more fragile seaweed. Some patches were red where that small, fine seaweed was fresh, and some were already white. Now and then he came across long ditches with bottoms and sides made with flat blackened stones. These were the kilns to burn seaweed, but they hadn't been in use for a long time.

Alan took out a cigarette and immediately put it back in the packet realising that he wouldn't manage to light the tobacco.

He was back by the cliff edge. He went to sit for a while on a rough mossy rock, facing the sea. At the foot of the cliff, five or six metres below him the waves broke, splashed and foamed. Torn strips of weed, dislodged from the seabed, floated on the surface. He heard the raucous, high-pitched cries of the gulls in the air. But he couldn't

Illustration by Tudu.

