

**Interview #16 7-19-00 Alfred Skondovitch Family in England and Dylan Thomas
Interviewed by Sharon Hollensbe in Alfred's kitchen in Fairbanks AK**

After the treatment for protein poisoning, I went to meet Scottie at the Seaman's Home, or in that vicinity. Mail from all over the world arrives there so you always go there first.

I remember that I didn't like my stepmother, and being the baby of the family I put up with the brunt, you see. And Jewish stepmothers who are really survivalists in all these situations are just... she favored her own children. I am reminded of Jewish stepmothers by looking at a nest where the little ducklings who are weak are pecked to death by the mother. That's all I want to say about my stepmother. All the other children were gone, and I was left there with a stepsister. I had three brothers, three stepbrothers, ---10 people would sit down to dinner, to eat at a huge pot of borscht or what have you. In the old days, that is, when the family was young. But with the War, the family was kind of broken up. My own mother died when I was seven and my father remarried a year later, and at that point there were lots of kids at home and we all kind of got along. There was a balance of boys and girls and you could shelter from the storm, but the war broke that up and I was sent to Banbury.

Did I ever talk about environments of painters? I vowed Dylan Thomas that I'd visit his grave and I'd piss on it. And the first time I got out of the United States—I'd been firefighting in Alaska, but I'd got my green card. He was born in Swansea, but he adopted the village of Laugharne (pron. Lawn) and he worked there. So I went there with a fellow firefighter, Pierre Benerup who had relatives in Denmark and in Paris. I said we've got to go to this village to this guy's grave. The village of Laugharne is not like any other. The people who live there are

simple folk alright, there's no gentrification, but their cottages are painted in pastel colors. It's like looking at an Italian village or a coastal village. So it was unusual in that respect. Of course I wanted to go to the grave, but we didn't do that immediately. Pierre was fascinated by this little village and we asked where did Dylan Thomas work. They pointed to a place on the cliff, and there was a road that went up the cliff like a little ridge, but it was really a little bower of leaves and branches. When you walked up this ridge, it was like no ridge in the world. You were surrounded by flowers and this bush. We went to his little house, and it was cantilevered out on the cliff, and little it was. It was something you could drag into my house, and it would fit between these cupboards. He would sleep there in a little bed. Both of us looked out to sea from this position, because when we went out on this cantilevered thing, we were free of this bower and it was just a lovely thing to look at. A bird plunged into the ocean, and Pierre said, "What the hell was that?" And I said, it's the heron diving. Which I really didn't know, but it was quite so. It was a line in one of his poems.

"How did you know that?" Pierre said.

I said, "Man in England, it's an island, so we know all the sea birds and all that tommyrot."

So we're looking down from the bower through the foliage and there was a fellow in a farmer's smock with this old hat on his head and believe it or not, a scythe like Father Time. And he leans through the hedge and says.....(can't understand tape—S.H.)

He couldn't shake hands because of the scythe. We just thanked him, jostled the little leaves and went on to the little post office, and the lady there was very proud that she was mentioned in Under Milkwood.

We looked out from the village proper and saw a horrible sight. We looked down at the beach below the cliff and there was this spanking new aluminum airstream-type mobile home. I said to the postmistress, I thought some Yanks must have pulled this tommyrot because they were buying property all over the place. She said, "No, that's the widow of Dylan Thomas and that's where she elects to live," in the godawful trailer. I don't know how she got it down there; they must have lowered it down from the cliff. But I had no desire to meet her. I was hovering around the hospital, St. Vincent's, where he was a patient just before he died, and she turned up and at one point climbed out on the fire escape and wanted to die.

(So she came to New York or was living there when he died?)

She came to New York.

.....sort out the places where artists live. That has turned me on more than being told I have talent or what have you.

I was in Paris and I thought this is an opportunity to go to Fountain au Rose which is the hometown of Bonnard. I learned that you can get the train, go there, and get out at the station and I thought, this is for me. I've always admired the work of Bonnard. You always run into young painters who say, well, I've got talent, more talent than Bonnard. Then they discover they don't have more talent than Bonnard. I've never felt that way, I've always learnt something from him. Anyway, I arrived in Fountain au Rose, and it was raining like hell. And all the colors were kind of a brown umber, green, grey sky and the rain. When you get out of the

railroad station, the town appears to be on a hill. I wanted to go over this side of the hill, and the thing that was so confusing was that there was a feeling of *deja vu*, that I'd been there before, that surely I'll find his studio. I went into a little place and ordered a sandwich and spoke to the proprietor, and inquired of Monsieur Bonnard. "Oh, oui!" and the people would talk very effusively and say *au gauche* and *au droit* and I found myself wandering around. I even ran into the postman with his bicycle and said "I'm looking for the atelier of Pierre Bonnard" and once again there was an effusive speech. How wonderful and on a day like this there are people coming, *blah blah blah*, and I still couldn't find the place.

Now I'm on the other side of the hill and I'm soaked to the skin. I heard some sounds in a modern building that they were putting up. Near there I saw a sign that said the bus to Paris, and the number of the bus was near the *arrondissement* in which I lived. I thought wow, what luck, I won't have to walk back over the hill to get on the train. So I went in the new building and asked the workmen how long before the bus comes. They said it comes in three minutes. I thought, yeah, that's bloody likely, but I hurried over to the bus stop.

I remember looking at the time schedule on an enamel plated sign, and I looked up and the sky had turned green. I looked around and I thought, "My God, I don't feel good, I'm dizzy. I've caught something like pneumonia." I looked at the houses and the mortar was sparkling, in reds and golds and greens and blues. There were concrete statuary on lawns and these were all aglimmer with color. I thought, "Jesus, what's going on here." I'm holding on to the lamppost. I remember opening a garden gate, and looking at the mortar between the bricks. And because of this phenomena of green skies, the people greet this by putting pieces of mirrors and other things in the mortar. How well Bonnard used this, the mosaics that flow through his work. Anyway, the bus came in three minutes and I climbed aboard and went back to Paris. The bus conductor

knew I was fascinated by this, and said it's the reservoir out of town that gives them this green color.

The contract that Bonnard had was one that was very common in France, but I don't know if it still exists. Namely that an art gallery representative will go to an art school and look at the graduates and decide who should join their gallery. They then sign on for the rest of their lives. Some will be successful and some will not. In the same gallery with Bonnard was Pierre Talcot and Soulage. These were substantial artists but they never had the fame of Bonnard. Bonnard learned that Roualt, a member of the same gallery, had moved into a villa in southern France. He went to the gallery and asked why he didn't have a villa like Roualt. What am I—chopped liver? You're selling my things for thousands, I can't keep up with it. So they promised him a villa in southern France.

Roualt had a limousine and a chauffeur and the gallery told Bonnard they'd get him a car and a driver. One day Roualt got up and decided all his drawings were worthless. Neighbors complained about the smoke coming from his incinerator over a period of days. His dealer discovered that he had burnt up most of his drawings. We're talking about a loss somewhere in the magnitude of 25 million dollars. The gallery hauled him into court, and they said the artist has a right to destroy his work, and dismissed the case. But thereafter he had to number every work and there was a database for everything he did. And thereafter a representative of the gallery lived with him, who was ostensibly the chauffeur, to keep an eye on him.

Meanwhile, Bonnard goes into action. He drives around this area. He never did the inspired works in southern France that he did in Fountain au Rose. He went into a provincial museum and in its place of honor was one of his paintings. And he looked at it, sent his chauffeur out to his car, and sent his chauffeur out to the car saying, "Bring me my paintbox. I

have to fix something here.” So he painted on the painting. And this time the museum took him into court and the court said, a painter can only enhance a painting and has a right to enhance it if he thinks there is something wrong, so what are you complaining about. And they dismissed the charge. Here are these two people in a different ambience and they are not doing what they did so devotedly with such inspiration, but they were pissing around doing these goddam things.

(This reminds me of your saying that in New York in the museums didn't want the painters coming in. Was that for the same reason?)

The painters don't really like museums for other reasons. Frequently a living artist would go into a museum, drunk and raise hell, get in a brawl with a curator. No, painters are not welcome, particularly when painting was done in genteel bohemian poverty caused by money flowing to the French and the British and the Germans. I think I went into this. It was a very frustrating life for painters and these museums which were championing these foreign schools, making them an official school in the United States. I remember picketing the Metropolitan Museum because they refused to show our work. And we won.

I'm reminded that at the turn of the century, a little boy named Tommy Murphy, a newspaper boy in MacDougal street, and he had a paper route, he was 12; he would deliver the New York Times and he had a client who lived in the attic in this building named Albert Pinkham Ryder. And on this occasion, there was a headline: Pinkham Ryder's work had been acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of New York, at the turn of the century. A very rare thing. So the newspaper boy Tommy Murphy actually delivered the paper to Albert, which he had never done, and Albert opened the door wondering what the day would bring. And little Tommy said, “Gee, Albert, I didn't know you were a artist!” And that has reverberated down the decades. That was a very rare thing, that a living artist would be included, though in France they

had no problem whatsoever. Of course a guy who lives in France is not going to come over here and raise hell or piss in the fireplace, which is what Jackson Pollock did to Mr. Guggenheim's fireplace.

Because I'm an artist, I appreciate what other artists have picked up from their environment and how familiar we are with these places, as far apart as Wales and Cagnes ?? of Renoir. On our honeymoon, Patti and I visited the home of Renoir. We roamed around the place and in Cagnes there is a colonnade of trees and plateaus of land and meadows that go right down to the Mediterranean, which is blue and the sky is blue. Somehow I thought, God I see nudes in this colonnade of trees. I said, no no no, it can't be. Then I tried to think of paintings where you would have had nudes. And still here were these creatures running around, posing when I looked at them. We found shards of pottery in the shed. It seems he once did the decorative brushwork on dishes and cups. But we never took any of that. **We had visited the house and then we were by these trees.**

I said, "You know, I keep seeing nudes."

Patti said, "I do too."

I thought it's time to leave this magic place. And as we passed Renoir's house, a grizzled hand came out of a basement window, and placed this breadboard in the sun to dry. I looked at Patti, she looked at me, and we looked at this breadboard and we put it in the car and drove out of there like bankrobbers.

This journey began in Paris and the rental car was to be returned to Cannes, and then we were to get the bus up the coast to Valorece. We had seven suitcases, which is a real drag, and believe it or not after all the panic and speeding away from Renoir's home as though the police

and the air force would spot the breadboard and smash us into a molecule, we finally got everything aboard a bus. I remember once we lost a suitcase in Paris and we were so happy that we were actually annoyed when they caught up with us to say “we have your suitcase”. Anyway, we got back to Vallauris* and unloaded all our stuff and we couldn’t find the breadboard. So we thought, what the hell do we do. I said let’s forget about it.

We had forgotten it at Avis in Cannes, so Patti called them up and, feeling this a risky undertaking, said, “We left our breadboard in the car. Do you have it.”

There was a sound of laughter and some guy saying in the background, “Ah crazy Americain.” Then he said, “Ze block of wood, Madam?”

She said, “Yeah, we call this a breadboard in America.”

He said, “Yes, we ‘ave the block of wood. We threw it in the garbage, but we’ll get it out and you come and pick it up.”

That was the most brilliant theft we ever conducted in our lives and bungled it, but we went back to Avis and they had ze block of wood.

*This is correct spelling wherever you find it. S.H.