

Cathy Ford / from MOON IN MY BELLY

A pillowcase with a half-done embroidered border lay in her lap. The embroidery was stitched in shades of grey and black, the picture small winter birds feeding in a field of stubble. When the train pulled in, she brushed cookie crumbs off her lap, held the needle in her mouth, shook crumbs and short threads from the pillowcase, folded it, drove the needle through the linen and back out. She was the first one off the train.

It was a short walk from the city's train station to the docks. The woman held a sheaf of shipping labels in one hand, a small leather case in the other. She walked briskly, as if she knew the way, pre-determined. The woman paused just short of Pier Seven and strode up the ramp to the "Baltic Princess". A steward greeted her. He inspected her handful of papers, nodded, took some of them and snapped them, officially, onto his clipboard. He motioned to the woman to follow, into the nearest doorway. She didn't look back. He did, her cotton dress, like a smock, revealing outline. Her long black hair, waved slightly. He took her to Cabin Number Three, second class double, single this time. She was alone, he said.

The cabin was furnished utilitarian, sensible, near severe. She closed the door, laid down on the bunk farthest from the door, facing it. A chocolate brown blanket with a wide white stripe at the bottom, plain white pillowcase. She kicked off her shoes.

The following day, September 30, at precisely noon, the "Baltic Princess" left port. The majority of the passengers were forcibly relaxed, rich and bored. On vacation. They carried their social status about with them, by implication, attitude or accent, laughed a great deal and befriended no one. Through breakfast, shuffleboard, lunch, crib, dinner and charades, the passengers exchanged names, residences and points of honor.

The woman in Cabin Number Three was not seen in the dining room until the third. She appeared at breakfast, a set smile on her face, and introduced herself to everyone at her table. She was of medium height, wore a grey dress, light grey stockings, and carried a loden green sweater over her arm. Her hair hung just below her ears, in a straight square-cut style. She had a habit of reaching up to brush her hair back over her shoulder, a reach which ended in an abrupt tuck behind the ears and a nervous smile.

Steward Number Four raised his right hand, palm up, to Steward Number Five, who nodded. This was Cabin Three. This one wasn't married. She wore a ring, but on the right hand, the wrong hand. This was the woman who had deposited a paper bag full of long black hair outside her door, the first night out. She had set a used, but emptied, "For Your Convenience" basin in the corridor the second and third mornings. It's been a little rough, Steward Four had called, tapping at her locked door. No answer. His policy, do not disturb.

Second class people rarely complained, or expected to be heard if they did. Complaint was a first class prerogative. The steward liked second class. The cabins were plain, easy to clean, only once a week. No pictures on the walls. A sink. One porthole, brass inside closing cover. Vanity. Simple skeleton key and twist locks. Two doors from a toilet and bath, shared by eight cabins. Number Three was a quiet one. Obviously, her first trip. Withdrawn. Vulnerable, it showed around the eyes. A broken hearted lover. He'd seen all kinds. Potential suicide. He hoped she was tidy. He'd picked a few up. A convalescent, perhaps. The black unwanted of a rich provincial family. But not now, not this time. He smiled at Number Five. They called one another that, numbered, still. She was the only woman on board travelling quite alone, unusual.

She had made full use of the privacy of her locked door for the first few days. He hadn't knocked, but turned the handle to check. Once they settled in, a number of the passengers took to leaving their doors unlocked, with a sense of abandon and smooth sailing which made his job easier.

If she didn't eat, so what. It could mean she was dieting. He had one like that last trip, made herself sick, refused to eat. Maybe Cabin Three hid the same kind of fantastic idea of fashion, thinness, behind those brown eyes. Probably. A week of it, and someone would just call the ship's doctor. A week that shortened to two days once acquaintances were made, and polite concerns puffed up in the ship's claustrophobic atmosphere. Yes, they took care of themselves, second class, even seasick, they didn't whine, he said. He was a lazy man, he admitted it, no apologies. Still, he could have made good use of a promotion, he said.

He watched the young woman out of the corner of his eye; filled another cup with steaming coffee; winked at his friend, Number Five.

The trip took three weeks. The woman in Steward Four's charge opened up a little. She made polite conversation at mealtime, declined all games, embroidered or read, and watched the other passengers at play. She faded easily into the background of platitudes and assurances that were traded daily. It wasn't necessary for her to befriend her fellows and she did not.

Steward Number Four took solicitous concern with Cabin Number Three. He checked it daily, scrupulously, when it was unoccupied. At week's end, he changed the sheets and blankets, hung the towels on the rack. Number Four opened all the drawers in the vanity, on several different occasions. He read and fingered the titles of all the books in the room.

He made a game of trying to get into the trunk, which was always locked. Steward Number Four confided to Steward Number Five, that the young woman in his charge was indeed a very private, even secretive woman. She made his job interesting, he said.

The "Baltic Princess" steamed toward its destination. The passengers on board broke and reformed passing friendships. The young woman finished one pillowcase, and started on its mate. The steward watched the calendar, and kept his black shoes polished. The menu was out of fresh salads, and suggested canned fruit. The young woman from Cabin Number Three, second class, waited, for it to be over her severance.

It had been two weeks, the sky turned suddenly purple. By dinner, it was black, and the breakfast murmur had become a silent shout of fear, a bad night ahead. Some people from first class remained huddled together in the dining salon when the tables were cleared, read month-old magazines, and smoked. The young woman went to her cabin, locked the door, and kept a light burning through the first of the heavy swells.

Storm -
external
event
beginning

By morning, some faces were missing; some trays were sent to some cabins; some nerves snapped over the second round of coffee.

The young woman appeared unperturbed, but she ate very little. She sat through breakfast, lunch, dinner; and sat again through the second day, the surrounding faces of the dining room like an umbilical cord.

The passengers stood at the dining room windows and watched the crew beat their way fore to aft, through the pounding volcanos of sea.

On the third day of bad weather, the ship's doctor visited the shrinking breakfast crowd, and passed out sea sickness pills and sleeping pills. Steward Number Four noticed that the young woman smiled and refused the offering. While she sat in the salon, the steward visited her cabin, locking the door behind him.

The rough weather, in its fifth day, had both a narrowing and opening effect on the second class cabin doors. Those bodies first afflicted began to recover, and appeared pale and smiling at lunch. The last of the hardy stomachs disappeared behind locked doors, which moaned and spit tin-lidded basins into the corridor every few hours.

Steward Number Four went about his duties, full of conciliatory words and gestures beyond those necessitated by his position. He worked to console himself, over the loss of the woman from Cabin Three, who he now called Magda, in an offhand, knowing way. He did know her, in that self-conscious, practised manner strangers use to acquaint themselves with other strangers, that he used to get close to whoever he wanted.

The steward had the advantage in ordinary encounters, with any one of his passengers. He had a key to every second class cabin in his charge, and every second class passenger knew it.

The well-travelled patrons of the "Princess" knew the worth of a steward's key, and accordingly provided for his favor; leaving half-bottles of red wine at the steward's disposal, which had been procured at high prices from the first class lounge. The steward also collected pockets full of chocolate, costume jewellery, fine lawn handkerchiefs, and cheap paperbacks. The woman in Cabin Three, however, neither acknowledged or feared the steward. He did not exist for her. He was insulted by this distant disregard of his power. However, he continued to knock at Magda's door to inquire if she wanted anything. No.

Steward Number Four confided to his friend, Steward Five, that the woman in Cabin Number Three slept naked, her three nightgowns rested neatly folded in the vanity, second drawer on the left, he said.

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The woman lay covered by heavy blankets, in a room still foreign after nearly three weeks invasion. Her head ached, her stomach heaved; she tensed for every roll of the ship, imagined or real. She hadn't eaten for three days. She was exhausted by the turmoil inside her and the fight against it. She slept.

A warm hand touched the outside of her thigh, then nearer, then inside. She fell into it, a shadow moment, then jerked awake and tried to sit up. One strong arm around her throat contained her, a single hand clamped over her mouth. She could not and did not scream. A voice, somewhere a voice.

The steward was very gentle. He pulled off all her blankets and stroked her breasts and belly and teased her cold skin. He smiled, and spoke to her as if to a child, "Don't be afraid," he said. He slurred, drunk.

"I can't help it," she whispered. His hands begged forgiveness and when he thrust hard into her, she gagged on the vomit ready in her throat.

She kicked at him, tried to shove him off the narrow bunk. She smelled sweat and cologne and fear. The arm tightened around her throat. She lay still. A voice ghosted into her head, two breathing, a third whispered.

When the steward's friend was ready for his assault on the butterfly body pinned at the throat to the mattress, the body was prepared. She drove her feet into his hairy stomach. He fell against the vanity, and came at Magda, cursing.

He slapped Magda and he slapped his Steward Four, who had barely sustained attack by Magda's quick, angry fingernails. "All of them are whores," he said, "Or Virgins. Let her bleed." He slammed his fist into Magda's belly, just above the black shock of hair, high and raw between her thighs. He wrenched her legs apart and knelt between them. He spit at her. She flung her head from one side to the other, choked, screamed. Stop the voice. Stop the other.

"Shut her up," said the steward's friend. Steward Four's fingers dug into Magda's throat. Her eyes tore at their lids; her ears strained for hope in the silence. She tensed. The stone of the red ring turned and dug into the new dirt on her palm.

The steward watched his friend's face. The friend kept his eye on Magda's heaving chest; her breaths and half-breaths fought through the rise of her narrow ribcage. The friend laughed low in his throat, heaved his thick legs wide apart again. The cramps in the woman's naked body jerked from her toes to her spine, to her heart. Write, the voice said.

He bent forward slowly over the woman, and took her right nipple between his teeth. He bit hard, twisted his head away, laughing, and shot semen over her growing bruises.

*

The woman in Cabin Number Three came to shivering in the cold room. The walls sweated hate and relief. She heard the final click as her cabin door shut. She lay on her side. Her legs convulsed high to her swollen chest. She felt stickiness set on her skin, and the throb of blood.

She fell out of the bunk onto the floor and crawled to the sink. She vomited dry into the tin pan, again and again. She scraped the touch of their hands from her body with a rough towel. She poured a bottle of toilet water into the sink and bathed every stinking inch of her skin with it. She dragged her trunk up against the locked door and collapsed against it, as the strain forced a rush of blood down her legs. She tore the sheets off the bunk and lay between two blankets. The blankets scratched her like an old horsehair mattress. She had put on

two nightgowns, one over the other. She held towels against her open wound, bleeding and shaking, full of fear and disgust. The voice dwelt in her, hissed cold white like a new moon rising.

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In port, the captain stood on deck, and supervised the unloading of his travel-weary responsibilities. The passengers filed off, some gay, walking into the open arms of strangers who met them at the dock. Some showed remorse, for what had been left behind; departures, passages, and now, arrival.

One young woman handed the captain a note written in a careful hand, which she had folded around a silver skeleton key. The key was to a steward's cabin, or so the attached tag read, inscribed by the same hand. A double-bunk cabin, strewn with bloody sheets and towels, onto which had been dumped several items of costume jewellery, good quality, two bottles of the captain's brandy, one of red wine, a handful of satin underwear, lacy, and a bad photograph she had also found in their dresser drawers. Steward Four, blonde hair, laughing into Five's caricature, like a dare, rouge daubed onto his cheeks, his mouth painted gaudy, hands bejewelled. A cheap photograph, cheap to include, but included. In the head, a voice, moonshot.

"It is true," the note read, "Murder was committed. Like theft.
Ask."

She staggered down the gangplank, hair tossed by a new wind, north, blowing cinder, and fire sparking against the sky, the wind on fire, like she was. She was one of the last ones off the boat. She didn't lose, but gained her balance on the wide wooden dock. She collected her trunk, giving instructions for forwarding to the dockmaster, immediately. She glanced once at a worn letter that she had safety-pinned into the pocket of her coat, and walked away. She did not look back. She looked as if she knew where she was going.

* * *

She felt thin, as thin as bones, as if she carried her skin and flesh like clothing, or a covering of light summer blankets. She was weak, weightless, her hands couldn't hold a pen, a pot handle or a cup of tea. She picked everything up with both hands, cradled even a single dinner plate as if it were a heavy object. She leaned on the furniture, traversing the kitchen from chair to table to cupboard, walking slowly and bent over as if she had a severe stomach ache or a sore back, as if she was an old woman. She heard axes screaming, one long scream. It grew, like a foetus contained and containing. He said she should eat, she repeated she wasn't hungry, she just wasn't hungry.

*

Nine o'clock, He was already up. She kicked off the quilt and dressed quickly. Cold. She had done these things. She ran, five miles the first day, wearing a heavy sweater, then carrying it, pounding along the back lane toward town. She scared up one grouse and two rabbits, gave herself a headache, and coughed up sickening white phlegm three times on the walk back. When she got home she threw herself into a tub of ice cold water she had carried, two pails at a time, from the creek. She shook, her teeth banged together. She choked and gasped for air, and vomited into the slop bucket until she was dizzy. Her body a cave, inside velvet, weighted velvet. She went to bed and cried herself to sleep.

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She had assumed she wanted a child. She knew so little about children, not how to take care of them, not how to talk to them. She had no concept of how big a child was, how much room a child would take in her, her arms, her lap, her mind, her house. Farine's was the only baby she had ever held, or fed, or sang to. He seemed pleased with her, he didn't cry much when she looked after him, but it would have been different with a girl, Farine said. Boys are easier. She had stumbled through it all until now, until she was sure, and now, it was all wrong.

She carried her warm, tight woven, heart close. Barely there, that small life, female female. A flicker. A splash of light. Felt before she knew, this is female, child, girl, woman, conceived, creator. Felt that she was with she, then pregnant with she, then to become mother to she. A small, impatient delight in her that collapsed when she knew, mother, that she must tell him. Her belly more pregnant than womb time, smooth opalescent, moon smooth and pale rising. Over dark earth, black at shore at night. And couldn't tell him. He didn't want a child.

She considered he had nothing to do with it. She thought it might be Erik's child. Nothing had been done to prevent it. To have a decision made for her, by accident. If she had gotten, would they have gotten, what had been gotten, had she. But of course it wasn't Erik's child, always bled for, like ritual. And many months past. Months, years, centuries. Erik, god-like, but like him, only in appearance like he was. Tom, the acts of god, disdained, powered, arched his hand over her, woman, as if to pacify, purify, or annihilate. What he could not enter into he preferred to ignore. But her small rebellion clung to woman, herself, created woman, made a child. Yet only enough hers that he would suspect her, even accuse. The gifts of a worshipper as parasitical as the worshipping. If she could have claimed miracle, to conceive and bear, woman of woman, divinity, virgin of virgin, but no, he would claim precedence, authority, kingship. He would make it his. What have you done to me, he would say.

On the second day, she contemplated an oversize crochet hook Farine lent her to finish the trim on a rag rug. She would fish that inner sea occupied treacherous by one tiny bottom fish. But the hook was too cold, clinical. She mixed a gallon of lye, changed her mind, and dumped it down the outhouse. Next, a strong vinegar douche. But there wasn't enough vinegar and besides, she thought it was too ordinary. She needed fire, parching. Her body fuel for the fire, she'd starve it out. She decided that if she decided it didn't exist, it wouldn't. Couldn't.

*

She lay curled, fetal, under the blankets, and fingered herself, the song from a finely tuned instrument. Used and valued this new found, inalienable trust and delight as she might a knowledge of herbal medicine that comforted, relieved, harmonized. She might have played the piano, her own keys. As if this knowing was the clinic into which she carried herself, ambulatory, just in time for such music, revitalization, to be treated to a renewed joy in life. But she wasn't on her death bed. She wasn't tired or sick. She was alone.

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The descent had the clarity and stillness of amber. It was very quiet. The worst thing to do was move. This stifled womb was a wilderness, she had planned to leave crumbs along the trail, but everything echoed like the inside of her head was a barrel, and she couldn't find the right path. Brushing her hair gave her a severe ear-ache. She already had a headache. She closed the curtains. She slept all day. He tried to wake her up, but her head was stuck against the wall of her dreams. He pushed his words at her are you getting up with me well are you getting up or what. Her head rattled like an ornamental gourd, dried empty, the seeds rattling. Dry head, dry womb. She had seen seed pods split open, the seed like squashed pearls. But this pearl hung in her window. Her mind the window to her womb. It was all wrong, Magda. Your head is not your womb. Your life is not your body. Kick it all in and start over. That's it. Of all mistakes, let yourself make this one, single, absolute, leave it. It's not true. A belly is not just to be filled, a child is not a feast, a woman is more than her moon swollen stomach, rising, rising. Not a negative, shade, or crescent moon that he fills. Like the certainty that moons rise without sun. Before and after or without sun, a moon rises. Take rain, take cloud. Take that freedom. Finally, alone. Act it out. Can't. Not coming. Don't feel well. You're pregnant. No. Not Farine. Babies and men. Men and babies. Made a pot of tea and let it go cold. Went to bed. Pulled the covers up over the head. That song, persistence, throbbed through the house, inside the walls, scream, thought that, too late. A long buried scream. Laid on the back and the throbbing a murmur, a voice, determined to be at peace. A willing, necessary

participant, one who passes through the gates, through the doorway of an empty room. Once perhaps. A hundred times. Always knowing the passage. The murmur rose and fell again, a reply, it started to rain down, the washing, running silences cushioned one another, the fear as natural as the sky opening, comfort. Held night, waited, calm for it to be night, call it a dream. Or morning. Wait. A thread in life, a fabric like moonlight on a plowed field, frozen in winter.

"Tell me what's wrong."

Nothing.

"You're all right? You're not sick?" He folded his wings.

What do you mean?

"I'm going over to Peter's. I'll be late." He tucked his head under a wing.

She closed her eyes.

The days enclosed, full, as if they quarreled. Made his own supper. Crawled into bed, salt of sweat glazed his fear. Turned her back to him. Dealt cards to the voices. Played hearts. Hung on to one hand all night, confident the game would soon be over, wait it out, sooner if held inside, hearts a game never won. Points accumulated like memories, helpless. Sat in the kitchen heat and waited for conversation. He dressed in the morning, naked inside wool underwear, inside overalls, faded white in streaks.

"Are you getting up today?"

Won't.

Every night he bathed his feet in the big oval tub that hung beside the back door.

House emptied itself of him, cool or light rain, snow, then rain, it rained, the cards went on relentless, numbers a tone of voice, large, loud, ugly. Small, sharp, pointed, accused. You. You. The blood dance.

Help. Have to get out of here. Doors. Body as if swathed in bandages, shocked. Numb. A broken leg. Can't move. Can't speak. Can't hear anything. Those extraordinary, uncontrolled moments, numbers, that are the most ordinary, the best controlled, cards endeavoring to escape mathematics. Itself, answers to no number, no reason, logic, but its own. The calculation sustains. More limited, more precise. More than he has time for. A private card game. Solitaire. Catch the queen. Told him number five sat on his shoulder this morning and purred and rubbed its wet nose on his cheek and breathed so alive, he tried not to be surprised, laughed, petted it. Don't touch. What imagination. Can't give him a card, even one, he'd want to play, change the rules, describe the point system into oblivion, don't care if he doesn't understand.

He'd want to play — no, not just play, but deal. Magda want to be the dealer, no one else. And Magda only like solitaire. Cards are objects of art, artifice, not tools to stab one another, cause defeat or loss. Magda play by her self, with, not against, by self. Magda know he would even shuffle — not content to pick up the deck and hold what cards may turn up, he would shuffle, coordinate, even dictate the game of chance, the percentage could be calculated, how many times the queen of spades would turn up. Magda my own queen, Magda play solitaire, Magda never shuffle. Magda never tire of the delicacy of a heart, a three of diamonds. So Magda never learned card games, Magda say I hate them. And Magda do. Those fair and lovely sevens giving into a jack of clubs, Magda hate it. And the ace over all, haughtily, proud, female, a bitch unless in the hand. Not Magda's. Magda play solitaire, lay it seven on seven on seven, black on red, red black, reading the white cooled spaces luxurious as clouds. Magda play alone. And sometimes Magda win. And sometimes she wins.

Magda never shuffle. Magda just push them all together, the cards choose where they go, like memories do, choose where to surface. Sometimes they come up the same way again, sometimes it's the same over and over. A hot prairie day he said fall I will always love you. The way he shuffles cards. Slap. The words come down flat on the

table, his face down. That was the closest he ever came to the submission demanded of Magda, he couldn't look at Magda, knowing Magda wasn't hanging on his words then, or his love. When Magda tired of dragging that one thin sentence out of him, when Magda had given up, then he dealt that, another heart, more hearts. But collecting hearts was his specialty. If he dealt Magda one he'd consider it a poor deal, a bad hand, a misdeal. Of course he never said hearts were his cards, but it was quite apparent. He played restless, tiredly, with the blacks, and diamonds he said once, always struck him as cruel, look how sharp, pointed, they are he said. She laughed. Nine of diamonds, Mary the queen, curse of.

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She carried the cards everywhere, played them constantly. The immaculate winter moon bathed in the river at night, and suspended light, by day, in her belly. She couldn't remember the conception, how or when, how it felt, so close to the beginning. Somehow, they weren't related to one another, that initial void and this enormous bulk. She didn't look pregnant. It was hard to remember. She couldn't be. A three, an eight, a king. Tom grilled her, put her on trial, but she wouldn't give. So don't speak. So don't sleep in the same bed. She bled one day, bleed for you, she thought, you win. The weight of it lifted, but the bleeding stopped. A nine. A nine. And the voices returned. One. No, three. Of their own volition. Each of their own. "Nothing is wrong."

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Christmas. She knew the day exactly, expected it to be significant. Since she'd decided not to have a baby, she'd lose it today. Birth and death. The two most important events in life. In one day. For her benefit. She lay in bed all day, expecting. Nothing happened. The bomb ticked on, inside. Eleven. She went into the kitchen, the fire was burning low. She put in another log and set the cold coffee pot back on. In the shed, no doubt. Or the front room. She wouldn't look. She laid down two fives, an ace, a jack. No money for Christmas, not even enough for a piece of cotton, for a shirt. She walked into MacIntosh's General Store, Christmas eve, bought a half pound of nuts, assorted, with the egg money. Shouldn't have used it for that. Wrapped the nuts in a cigar box Mac found under the front counter. Set the box under the tree, hung with two gingerbread men Farine had given them, "To hang on your first tree," along with three balls made out of silver foil she'd collected. And a rhinestone heart pendant. And a locket that wouldn't open any more.

Tom went out right after dinner, returned in an hour with a package under his arm. She was puzzled. It was too big for a deck of cards. Surely he knew she needed some new cards. She'd shown him all the ones she carried, he hadn't been impressed. The backs were all different, and weren't very interesting. Besides, they were getting worn out, the Eiffel Tower, the collie in a green field, the parasol and all. He had put the package beside the tree and gone to bed. His bed, her bed. Whoever went first.

She unwrapped it. It was a catalogue. She laughed, delighted. This was better than cards. She could send for the ones she wanted. He came in from outside, a cold draft accompanying his set smile. "You're welcome," he said. "Took me all of ten minutes to find it. They're free at Gunderson's Hardware. Nice of you to get out of bed."

So he ~~jailed her. He laughed. Torturer. His child in her.~~ She had to see Farine, she could ask Farine. Had he laughed. Could he laugh. Why would he laugh. "Is this what it's like?" Farine would have made a nice family holiday dinner, Farine had no fear of the Christmas Christ child coming. She had a baby. She had a boy. She was too far away. She had made bread pudding. And shortbread. Not much, because they couldn't afford to use the butter. "Peter says it's not Christmas, without shortbread."

"Would you two like some?"

"No. Thanks."

Two. Two. One. A one is an ace.

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She sat up late. Queen of spades. She couldn't sleep in his bed. She was guilty. Of treason. Behead her. Off with her head. Queen of hearts. Turned at night, to his back. She was bent, in the middle, like an old playing card, for the pain, but didn't say it.

"Can I have one of your cigarettes," she asked him. He was eating breakfast. She'd been up all night. Again.

He frowned, but passed one over. Lit.

Nerves. "I'm going to have a baby," she said.

"No."

"Yes."

"I'll phone Doc Hawkins. He'll know what to do." Three shorts and a long. Tom Dennison had known Doctor Paul Hawkins all his life.

She grabbed her coat, and ran, as much as she could, to Farine's. Farine had gone to town, left a note on the door, like always.

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They talked about anything else. They sent for the seed catalogue, ten dozen canning lids. Tom drew plans for an addition to Peter Lavalley's barn.

She watched Tom's hands around the morning cup of coffee, fingers nicotine-stained. He smoked too much. She smoked.

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He dipped his thick slice of bread into his coffee, murky with cream. She drank hers black.

He left early for Peter's. "When his work's done," Tom said, "We'll start a new fence of our own. Get a couple cows next fall, after harvest."

She folded his sandwiches into wax paper. "Goodbye," she said at the door. "I'll feed the chickens."

"I love you," he said, and she saw her fear reflect in his eyes. It's too late it's too late it's too late. Her eyes met his, collided in the empty space between their bodies. A space untouched so long. "And I," she began, hopeful, reaching, surprised. It will be all right. Stay.

"I'll be late to dinner," he said.

She washed the clothes in lye soap, boiling the water on the stove. The shirts and socks hung by the stove-pipe, the sheets froze on the line. She lifted the tub and carried it to the door to dump it. The step was iced over, her shoes were wet. She slipped, and lye water steamed down her legs.

The towel ripped some skin off, the rest blistered. She couldn't wear stockings. Her legs scarred pink, hairless. She stayed in the house. She showed him her burns, and he made dinner. And told her to stay in bed.

In the evening, she thought she heard the river, though she knew it was miles away.

Farine walked over some nights, through the snow, with Jonathan. He was a happy child. Talked. Tough kid, denim jeans.

"It's so bright out with the moon," Farine said. "We're not a bit afraid."

She waited. The moon kept rising, like clockwork. A blood opal moon. Like if she spread the cards often enough, she won.

* * *

Morning. The moon going, gone. Sky empty. An empty room, a vast empty room. Woke again just as the first fingers of light parted the grass beside my mouth. It was cold. The sky faceless, no sun yet, just that light, without direction, everywhere. Nothing blanketing the vision. Wrapped her dress tight around my legs, feet curled under the full skirt. Satin half-slip the swaddling clothes, blood red, sticky. Waited. Heart hung over destiny like empty sky, without warmth or movement. If only the bleeding would stop. If only the pain would stop. Perhaps never wanted anything so much, this so completely felt, understood. Other wants expected or inflicted or came so easily, now all memories, like this would never be, not like this. This, a stopped moment in time. Just in time. This inanimate sense of possession. This, holding on because something is certain, because it goes on despite everything, anything anyone might do.

Then it slipped from her, coolly, yet burning, the need for the child become a need for herself. Choosing, thinking she chose a child, as unborn, as much an attempt to attach to a life she could not reach alone. A foetus is an escape artist, aborted or birthed, tough, sinewed. Alone, she was crippled. Womb dry. Now must begin to use her other senses, eyes, hands, voice. It isn't enough to bleed. Whoever said it was. A woman is. A woman bleeds. A woman does. The beginning ends. The ends begin. A movement, a life cycle other than lunar. A dream, another dream. A moon risen in the sky. Blood colored. Blood covered. A woman tide that washes over the moon, the mere magical moon.

One large clot. Slide. Not as round and whole as she had thought. Ragged. Glistened red and shiny. You are no child, aloud, when I saw it, caught in the satin. Saw no eyes, no child's head, no heart beating, my stomach sore, cramped. It was over.

The shock of it was this was the first time her body had surprised her, taken and done of its own accord what it wanted or needed or demanded to do. When a separation was made, by force. She knelt in supplication. Up to now, she had dragged her body along behind her. I had. Now side by side.

She wanted a warm bed. I wanted to go home.

Pick up the clothes and return to an empty house, the emptied womb rooms will all look red. For a while. A beginning, sure as knowing, an ending seen. As love. As to love. As one to love. As two might. But sometimes can not. Too. Two try.

Fear left and grown cold just as this soft red jelly did. Gathered in hand, walked, painful, to the edge of the slow moving river. No sense now of the time or the temperature, just a flattened marriage bed led to, left in the grass. At the river, dropped the plump red mass into the water, fastened by its undulation, to her the wholly appropriate flow of water by and slowly through what I had thought. Watched, when it floated slow from the bank and into the current — thought she understood even that, and waded into the water after it, my slip trailing in one hand. The water streamed through the blood flowering, life, lifting and spreading, away.

She was caught in her dreams. Compulsive. She knew she could break out of them, but chose not to. Just that knowledge, challenge, in the very depths of nightmare led her on, against her own dreams, an attempt to finish them herself, to control them. She dared with dream as she did not with the world. And then she found she couldn't wake up. Control out of control. She couldn't wake up. We couldn't wake up. I couldn't.

Stopped, the rocks too slippery, the water too swift, to her waist. River cold as a winter virgin, current swept. A suicide could happen like that, by accident. Did not bear death with me, did not see it float out of sight. It strangled out of the throat, like a cry at the moon, like wolves had torn the flesh all my life, felt them, saw them, for the first time cried out against them, shouted, they, she, me. And screamed, you were no child of mine, no daughter. If you had been you would have fought back. First what is closest to you, then you fight back, your way back, all the way back. Did you? You, me. Cruelty exists. Heal thyself. You, I. And if he wanted anything, he wanted a son. Neither of us had you. Right there, at the very start, when we thought we could choose, we lost. Stumbled through my life like a sleepwalker waiting to trip over a tear in the linoleum. Waking in the morning, cold, dried blood on my toes. Determined, undetermined, womb hum.

The cry turned laughter, mocking. Sat by the river and waited for the right moment to leave. It wasn't time. The slip wasn't dry, hung in the branches of a willow. Skirt spread around my hips in the grass, wrung dry. Still, it wasn't time. Still bled a little. You will always bleed a little, I thought. She, I. No moon. A bird flew across the river, river of the soul. A red bird, a bird with a red breast, a red breasted bird. Sent a smile up at it, even into the sun.

He stood in the doorway. Haggard. Grey. "Magda," he said.

"Your face is grey," I said, answering.

He took my hand. Thinly ready, for morning.

"I want," I said. And thought perhaps I had not said the word before. I want a cup of tea. I would like a cup of tea. Hot tea. And then I want to be held. Close. Warmed. Voices low, to be kept low. A mutual agreement. Didn't look at him. Picked up the small grey suitcase, packed the night before, what night, what moonlit night, a distance like an act of conjuration, like a chant, remembered I had trouble filling it. On the table a pile of his cigarettes, shredded, the package torn.

"You should stop smoking."

So he'd been up all night. I want to be held. By you. And hoped he wouldn't mistake this now, you wouldn't, this beginning. Still, prepared otherwise. And I. Said. The wall between invention and experience fell down. It just all fell down.

"There's blood running down your legs."

"I know."

Ritual can get rid of the past.

"Don't you feel sick, nauseous? Can't I get you something? I'm glad you're home. At least you're home."

Still the same, solicitous. I'd never tried the difference between his politeness and his caring. Just bowed eternal to the social convention of questions that needed no answers. "Tea?" Poured into her cup, his cup. My cup. Do you say "No" when the cup is full? Or expect change when you're not there? I wasn't. After March comes April.

"You must be in pain, let me —"

"It's nothing."

He smiled.

Compared to what I have to tell you, nothing. Nothing at all.

"What time is it?"

"About six."

"I could sleep till noon."

"Tom."

"What?"

"About the wallpaper in the bedroom."

"You hate daisies."

"Tom."

"Yes."

"I'm going to change it."

* * *



INTERVIEW

The interview took place as a conversation between Cathy Ford, Penelope Connell and Bill Schermbrucker, on the evening of the 29th May, 1978, at Penelope's home in North Vancouver. The transcript has been edited down from a much longer original, and Cathy later inserted some expansions of thought and clarifications (which are indicated by parentheses). Bill made the final cuts.

— BS

27 December, 1978

BS You're interesting in terms of an interview right now because you're a relatively young writer. You seem to be getting tight enough and good enough and strong enough — at least I believe and Penny believes — that you're going to go on doing it for a long time and successfully, whereas a lot of other people are going to fall aside, so I thought it would be interesting to hear some of your experiences of your commitment to writing and how you feel that is working out for you. Perhaps we might start on how writing is changing for you, if it is. How long have you been writing?

CF I would say ten years in fact, forever in my head. Something that's important to me right at the moment is that you two, or I guess the magazine, seems to be interested in the fiction that I am most excited about myself. I don't know where it's going and at this point I don't really care, except that it keeps on happening and that's the important thing. A lot of what I'm doing in fiction is fairly undirected. That's why *Moon in My Belly* became so important to me; it was like a project that just kept on going till it reached its own end.

BS Is that a stage of maturing, from undirected writing to a project? Are those important terms?

CF Right now they are, probably because I think I'm embarking on a new project; I think there's new things shaping and I feel I'm just getting my energy back after finishing that novel and then a set of poems followed so closely behind, plus moving and all that, you know, everything starting over for me . . .

BS Well, how does moving relate to writing? Moving to Mayne? Where's the connection?

CF There's a lot more light. I just feel like I'm opening up. It happened very fast; it was always a dream. We really had almost forgotten what the country is like.

PC How long have you been on Mayne Island?

CF I've only been there since I finished the novel, which was November [1977].

BS But did you move in order to write or did you move in order to go out of the city, knowing that you would write?

CF I've known that I would continue to write for quite a while, but I knew that it would be a better place to write for me. I lived in Vancouver for long enough and got involved in a certain part of what is going on in writing in Vancouver. People would say, would you like to read and I'd say Yes, I'd like to read, I love to read. So I'd go to read and there'd be three people there. That kind of discouragement was starting to wear on me. So it was time to change; I had to reassess a lot of things, I guess, like my commitment to being public. Prior to moving I'd just come off a year of saying, Okay I'm not sending out any work, I'm not reading, I'm not . . . I withdrew (except for commitments already made) ; I set it up very consciously, I said, a year from now I'll send out some new work — if I have any new work. I was pretty sad about things. It has turned out it's been a sabbatical of almost two years. If people came to me and said, could we have some poetry or something, I thought, *now* that piece goes there. If I was really sure, then I sent it, but nothing like before.

BS It seems to me that was a wise decision that you made.

CF Well, I had to make it because what happened was that in order for me to come out at all and show my stuff to people, I'd become a tactician I guess — I don't know — I've seen different tactics and I know what mine is. In fact, left to myself I may not ever come out. So there's a point at which — I call it my arrogance — I get arrogant enough to come forward and my attitude is, if you don't like my writing, well . . .

BS fuck you.

CF Yeah. It's all — it's self-protection. But it was getting so that I'd send ten poems to a magazine, five that I thought, okay, such-and-so — this magazine is interested in this. Then I'd send five to spite them. It got to be a game. But people were picking up on the things I sent in to spite them. What does this mean? I backed up a long way. It hasn't hurt me as far as my writing goes; maybe it's hurt me, I don't know, publicly or something.

PC If you were writing that novel so privately for the last three years, there's been maybe a withdrawing in your work for quite a little while even before this. Is that something in your writing?

CF It *was* in the novel. I started out like I said, I workshopped the first draft. It was a story I had forever, ever since I can remember, a narrative that had to be told or retold, or something. And the first section of the first draft — I practically got thrown out of the room — I mean I almost got canned: "You can't write a sentence, you . . ." My first fictional effort. What did I do or say, what could I do or say? I had to back right up and decide where to go. *Now*, I could face that same situation; having *finished* it, it's nice to look back. I could say, "Well, I did this because that's the way it had to be." But at the time I didn't have that confidence. People were saying, "No," when I was saying "But, but, but . . ."

BS Do you think — going back to those terms of undirected writing and projects — those workshops advance one or the other of those kinds of things?

CF It depends on your relationship to them and it depends a lot on the other people, whether you consider you're working with them, or for them, or against them, there's a whole emotional relationship that you enter into because the people are there, there's bodies there week by week, and someone's not there because they have a cold or something, and it all affects things. You show them pieces of tight-wire work, you know, if that's what you're interested in. (For me, it was a process of bringing work forward that I considered to be working/unfinished. I rarely showed a piece of writing that I considered complete. Unless I had motivations like self-interest in the sense that I wanted to discuss the "subject.")

BS Would you go back to another workshop now?

CF I've had my fill for a while. I still like the process but I want to be by myself.

PC So something's pushed you from poetry into prose.

CF I sort of fell; I kept trying to tell stories in my poems and they got longer and longer. The day I woke up with a fifteen-page poem I thought All right . . . [laughter] if you're gonna tell it, tell it. I've always thought fiction interesting and somehow, although in the old school of it I'm not a traditional poet, there is a line in my poetry that is quite traditional and I've always felt fiction to be more like a lark for me, I feel much freer and well, daring — I don't know what the word is, I just feel more open. I read very different fiction than poetry. I'm pretty middle-of-the-road as far as poetry, and fiction I read as odd as I can.

BS You were talking about going public earlier, and a commitment; were you talking about a commitment to go public?

CF Yeah, there's that. There's a commitment to my writing that's very solid and then I came to publishing and performing. (Whether to do it or not.) At one point, writing and "being a writer" were the same thing to me. When I first started reading and performing and meeting people at readings, there was no difference. I didn't understand it when people said they wrote poems to be read aloud. To me, there was no difference. And then, I guess it was a wearing-away process. I guess I felt like an innocent that got burned at some point.

PC Rejecting your audience?

CF Yeah. I still love to read, I *love* to read and I still always would be very excited by the whole thing. I never said no until it got to the point where I had to. I'd go to a reading and I felt, boy I spent five hours getting ready for this and nobody even said anything.

BS Well, is that an important thing then, to get that reaction, whether it's "I hate you" or "You're wonderful"?

CF [laugh] Yeah! (As a performer.)

BS Does a young writer get enough of that?

CF I sure have gotten enough . . .

BS Where have you gotten it from?

CF You know, those experiences, where I reveal myself sort of accidentally — those times were the nicest ones, just kind of meeting people. (That bridge between performing and coming back to being a writer and then writing.)

BS In publishing in print, have you had reactions from people that have been helpful to you?

CF In a different way; because there's a group of people that I correspond with very regularly, who I know are watching for my things and I'm watching for theirs. I get immediate feed-back from them; they're very direct about it. Not very often do strangers come upon me and say anything. I have a hard time believing that strangers are reading my work.

BS Are you interested in telling us what kind of a group that is? Is it just accidental acquaintances?

CF Some of them are accidental, some of them began when I was working at a press and got manuscripts from people through there that I was very high about, and I or they initiated in that process.

BS So friendships developed.

CF Yeah. And Vancouver writers that moved away I'm interested in. And now I've moved away from writers, some of whom I feel I've *worked* with for several years. We write. They keep me alive. And writers that aren't "writers."

PC Do you feel you write *for* them or do you write for *you*?

CF Me. It's just that . . . it's a kind of security, I suppose.

PC Well, lately, when I've been reading your stuff, specially these excerpts from *Moon in My Belly*, I get a feeling that somehow you centre yourself when you're writing; you withdraw completely. I get a really mystical sense from what you're doing.

CF I think that's part of what I feel about having a project. The novel was important in that way to me because it was so separate from my other writing; the poetry I was writing at the time and through that whole time is totally different. One was balancing the other all the way through. The poetry that I wrote through that time is just gathering itself now. It's like it was waiting on the wayside for the novel to be done, because the novel was strong and took over.

BS I thought you'd written a novel on Mayne — but you wrote it here in North Van?

CF I wasn't allowed to move to Mayne until I finished it. No, I didn't allow myself . . . I went through this whole process, where I moved out of our house in North Van, and he was over there, hammering, and I went on the weekends. I moved to the basement of the house of some friends, to type.

BS Was that a regimen, a daily thing?

CF It had to be because I don't like typing, I think of it as work. It was work that *became* enjoyable but also it needed discipline. (Especially when the "final" typed draft discovered revision.)

BS You were doing the first draft on the typewriter?

CF Oh, no.

BS No. You hand-write?

CF That's right. What you see of the novel is about five drafts. Parts of it are one but not many. The majority of it is four or five.

BS Are each of those drafts typed up or is only the final draft typed?

CF It was handwritten and then typed — that first type was a revision of the hand, quite extensive. Then the typing was revised; then that whole thing was rewritten.

BS By hand.

CF Yeah. Then it was all typed. The last time . . . and parts of what was typed the last time were revised again, just pieces of it. The first draft essentially was about two-thirds of the book. I thought it was the end but it was not. So, the second draft was all the way through. Then I had to go back and do it again, at least twice more, parts of it three more times — sections, you know. But especially at the end I felt very pressed and I didn't answer the phone.

PC So the thrust of this rewriting is to expansion?

CF Fiction I write shorthand, I skip, I associate, and a lot of that had to be tidied up. I did very little cutting. It was driven into me that people were misunderstanding things because the leaps were too far, so. The story was no different, but there were scenes missing. I have them in here (my head, heart, consciousness, etc.), and a lot of it was just plain waiting for those scenes to come clear enough that they could appear.

BS Why do you think you were holding back from those?

CF I didn't realize that I was holding back, I thought they were evident. At a point there was a realization that not everybody knew this story. It's a very simple story but there are parts of it that are unknown, so I had to tell them.

PC So what we're seeing as your incredible economy is really happening the other way round. That's great; I like that.

BS I find your writing getting more accessible and at the same time richer. I think the novel pieces we've seen are a real advance over the rose pieces. The rose pieces are extremely tight — I don't know if "elliptical" is the word — there are those jumps; there's a kind of artificiality because one realizes that the reader's been called on to make leaps, and you question sometimes the necessity of it. Not, say in "Cut Flowers" [*The Capilano Review* #10] where you jump from one scene to another, but in that same story where the narrator shifts from roses and says "some of them are red," and you realize, no, it's eyes. A certain element of trickery in that particular line. But I feel about the novel much less of that, and much more reliance on just the depth of the story itself, the images, the nexuses of events. Are you just being more naked in the novel?



CF That's part of it. Say in my poetry, it's not that I cut things out; that's how I really do write. That's how things really do "sound" to me. I really do "think" (write, sound, hear, see, touch) like that. People say, "You go through and cut out all the 'is's' and 'and's' and connectors." But no, I don't do that. In fiction, it's very similar. In the novel, there was a conscious decision on my part; okay, people are misunderstanding this. When I workshopped it — the first draft was ninety pages — we're forty-five pages into it, and someone said to me, "Ah, this is an historical novel, isn't it?" And I thought, oh my god, why didn't you know that in the first two lines, as I hoped you would or as I intended. That came clear in the novel and my commitment to it as a piece of the whole. The rose things — I'm still waiting for them; they're coming together, it's like they're filtering down. So, already there's things going on in those pieces, and parts of them have been . . . they're changing. I don't know how to say it except that they're changing all by themselves. There's that realization that, okay, here's a language trick that is unnecessary now, or, it is limited by the fact that it is a trick. So it changes, or it gets larger, or it disappears. And the fact that after "Cut Flowers" more pieces appeared was a surprise to me — I didn't expect them.

PC So, there are still more rose pieces coming, then; that's good.

CF The strangest part of it is that it's a bouquet, chrysanthemums and lilies are appearing. It's exciting but very bizarre to me. I don't have a hold of it, I'm still waiting; I don't know what's going on. But I'm excited. It's taking my vocabulary or what language I think is mine. It's really opening it up.

PC As far as I'm concerned, those pieces *are* your writing.

CF I'm starting to think so right now because that's what I'm paying attention to. (Fictionally.)

BS Some of your writing has a kind of sadness in it and some has anger, and I think I like the angry stuff best. In your book of poems, in *Blood Uttering* — the one poem that I like is "Anger." Yeah, that one just pisses right up in my eye.

CF At a point the anger comes through more, I think, in the sound, in the voice. When I read a while ago it was said of me that if I talked like that all the time “they’d” lock me up, which is probably true. I never knew it until I started putting myself in front of a room full of strangers. I thought it all went together, I thought the people who would be the least interested in my work would be the people that knew me best. Apparently it’s not true. I read once at the smallest building, the tailor shop in Chinatown, it used to be a gallery for a while, and this woman that I’d known for a long time, but it was the first time she heard me read, held her hands over her ears and ran out of the room. She said, later, I can’t believe it; you stand there in your little flowered dress and you read those horrible poems, and I didn’t know these contradicted, so for a couple of years I was pinning myself together, I thought, am I schizophrenic or am I what? So that still goes on. In some of the poems the real anger comes through. Usually those are first draft pieces that just set themselves, and I think that’s my “strongest” writing. The sadness is more social consciousness, it’s not the way I live my life; I’m (working as a writer in social conscience, perhaps, in some things, by exposure, by saying what cannot or has not been said) the last word in optimism, as a person, I think. (Every statement is a political statement. And every poem is a political poem. But politics are of the moment/as poems/except in sequence/which is also timed/but poems are not timed that way.)

PC Speaking of anger would you like to talk about Joan of Arc?

CF Sure. I couldn’t, I tell you, for a while.

PC How did you happen on Joan of Arc?

CF Some of the poems I was writing, all through writing the novel, very angry, very feminist, very screaming rape in the streets until (I was) people were, at least, sure they had heard it. I got very excited about what I would say are my heroes, Elizabeth, Mary Queen of Scots — they started showing up and they each had their own little poem, their own several poems. Another point: I realized that I could not deal with Joan of Arc, I couldn't; it was impossible for me. So I thought, alright . . . It's the first thing I'd ever done that I went out and researched, and I lived with the thing for a long time. I set it for myself as a thesis. It was a challenge, I guess, to myself.

PC Is there something particular that fascinates you, is it the blood? Or what about her? Her spirits?

CF What mostly fascinated me about her in the beginning was the misconception, or what I saw as the present "historical" misconception: that I had "found out" early on that when she died she was, to all intents and purposes, obliterated; (burned, the ashes thrown in the river) and was, in what would have been her own lifetime, revived, as a saint, as a martyr — well, she wasn't canonized until much later. But the first trial she went through was early on, even before she was allowed to see the Dauphin. That first trial was very extensive and all the records were destroyed before the second trial, which was the one that ended in her death. (She kept referring back to the first trial records, saying she had already answered those questions, presumably no one bothered to tell her the records were gone.) Also it seemed that she was so plainly logical, so plainly not mad, so plainly not dancing with death as if it were some kind of rich wine. It was so clear to me that I felt committed to do something about it; there's something in me of moral righteousness, a fire somewhere, I don't know where it comes from. But I felt committed to her. (And to trying to understand how she felt when those who first applauded her political and strategic abilities turned against her. And knowing she understood the power of voice, of the word. She had been spoken to, she sent letters to the English that caused

havoc in their ranks. She was aware how significant her position was — she spoke freely about being a virgin, wearing men's clothes, she said what she felt she had to with the full expectation that people would listen.)

PC A form of social consciousness.

CF I think so. And somewhere along the line I was extremely upset at reading books that still talked about women and penis envy, the book being written in 1972 or something. I was outraged. "Joan of Arc is the standard female 'impersonation', the sickness . . .", there are "mental hospitals full of women who think they're Joan of Arc" and I thought, this is wrong, this is not true, not real (she wasn't a martyr, she was labelled one when it became politically expedient. She was burned as a political power; yes, she did extraordinary things for a woman of her time, but it was not fear of a "woman", a "maid", that got her burned. Joan was humiliated and tortured as a woman, Joan of Arc was given a trial, by a church and state who were threatened by her direct relationship to God and the implication that the zealous were capable of taking up arms.), so maybe it all came from there. And the farther I got into it, the more interesting it became. It's really a book about war, I think. (And self-defining, self-determination.) It's a war book and she was no screamer, very calm and collected, knew exactly what was going on, but remained optimistic. She thought right to the very end that someone was going to save her, that she was politically important, politically powerful enough to be saved. And it just so happened that she was mistaken. (She was too powerful to be allowed to live, according to "them".)

PC Yes.

BS Obviously at some point in the future some graduate student is going to do a thesis on you and say, "These are the dominant symbolic terms in Cathy Ford's fiction," and obviously there's blood, and moon, and water, and several others — those are the three that have struck me. When you use, say, water in a fairly insistent kind of way, or when you use moon in an obviously rather deliberate way, I don't feel any contrivance there, I don't feel, as with a lot of inexperienced writers, that you are playing out some symbolic term for whatever changes can be rung on it. There must be stories here, some experience of moon, some experience of water. In a sense, I suppose, you should say, well read my fiction.

CF (That's all I can say. I have nothing else to say about it, about "how" I'm being read.) I am an uneducated writer in the sense that I have to wrack my brain to think what a metaphor is or a simile; I know next to nothing about "symbolism". It goes farther, farther than "literature", for example, I think Freud is garbage, so much of the work and the openings became so tight, such rules. I can't even spell certain words, I have such blocks, I cannot spell "psychiatrist," "psychoanalyst". So that for, say, *Blood Uttering*, it's clear in the sense that blood is colour, that blood is paint, that blood is feathers and blood, blood is a sense of, I think, maybe images in the book rather than symbols in a universal way. The specific, not the general. So that the image *becomes* the symbol but only for that book. Someone heard, for example, that I had read a piece of the novel and in that relationship was excited about it and wrote to me and said, would you send this specific piece to me. I sent that piece and the person wrote back to me and said things like, she was worried that — how do you say this? — it was not taking into consideration the victim theory and Canadian literature as it has progressed through Canadian women's eyes and . . . I wrote back and said, "I put it to Magda and she said, that's the way it has to be." (I said some other things too, that the novel was historical, predated the theory, and that I appreciated the careful attention. Which I

did. But disagreed with.) It's not that I don't know them, those "rules", it's that I don't want to, or that I think they must be broken. According to the fiction. And if I see them creeping in, then I work them over. (Like a burglar in the house. This is what I mean by uneducated. I try to start or stop things even if it's not done or advised or current or whatever by anyone else. I'm curious. And I think that (other) Canadian (or world, international) literature is like the page. It's only applicable if it is made use of or if it limits. Size texture type shade. That is, my interest in writing the unwritten. Page as neutral. Unless otherwise. *The* choice. Small on the allusion side.)

BS I'm not in any indirect way trying to accuse you of that. What I'm interested in is your experience of those things. The reason I didn't ask you about blood is that it's quite obvious to me what at least part of your experience of blood is. I suppose I could say the same about the moon, except that the moon is a bit more of an abstraction. But water, for example; I'm so puzzled by that experience of water, how it's become almost an obsession in the novel, the water.

CF It's an obsession of mine. I'm newly 26, I've almost drowned twice in my life. I mean, there's reasons but it's like — it's not really possible to find them except in my own self or in my own images. (Or, in the way the images are mine.) (Particularized.) (That all words, images, symbols are innocent. Contextualized by the book itself/that is/by the writer's choice. Writing/the use of words/is not innocent. This making of books involves directly the element of trust. That the writer trusts her own power to delineate, or rather, define, redefine, the words. And that the

reader trusts the writer/the book to have done so.) So that if it's not directly related to my experience I don't write about it, I feel unable to. (But then I'm a listener, I empathize, I'm a sympathetic, so there's lots to say, to report.) I would rather not rely on technique. I rely on it last to get myself out of my closet or into the world. (I study it, I use it, like having a vocabulary. It *is* the method, and at best so implicit in what is said or written that the how is the rhythm of/the patterning.) Right now I'm working on what I could only call derivative prose and that is relating to a person or an event, but not a *symbol*, although I am aware that there are symbols lurking, you know.

BS You're talking about source here.

CF But I think it's the same thing. Symbolism is what some writers, or some critics, or some readers rely on and it's like demanding (for something external to the work itself) to be centre stage. I guess the people that I care to have read my work, I want to trust me, I want them to read it, that's all. And I want them to "not have read anything else."

BS Do you think that this balance between poems and novel that you were talking about before is something you feel comfortable with still, and that it will go on for awhile?

CF I don't foresee an end to it. One is definitely supporting the other at the moment. The poetry is rhythmically contributive and the tightness of the writing is focussing on things in my fiction; and too, I still feel I'm in grade one in my fiction, I still feel that I'm a poet, but I'm gaining the ability to look back. A lot of my poetry is opened up in the sense of prosiness — that's an expression that's been fired at me. "Thank god you finally started putting in the connectors. Oh you're not writing sound poetry now."

PC So there's not going to be a fusion of the two forms, then?

CF I think if there's going to be a fusion anywhere at all, it's in the pieces that began with "Cut Flowers." It's starting to happen. I'm most excited about just even the hope that it could be. I'm very excited about that. It's hard to talk solely for me in terms of writing, for you to see the house where I used to live and the house where I live now would explain a lot. (Some people write about places, I write in them, or from them. The sense of the room as camera.)

BS You were talking earlier about travelling.

CF I never wanted to travel till the past couple of years. I never wanted to go to "Europe," I never wanted to go to "Mexico." But now I feel there are things that I can come back to, and the most likely way that I'd go travelling would be sailing. He wants to be a sailor, he's got salt water in his veins.

BS That's in spite of your fear of the water?

CF In spite of it, yeah, partly because of it too.

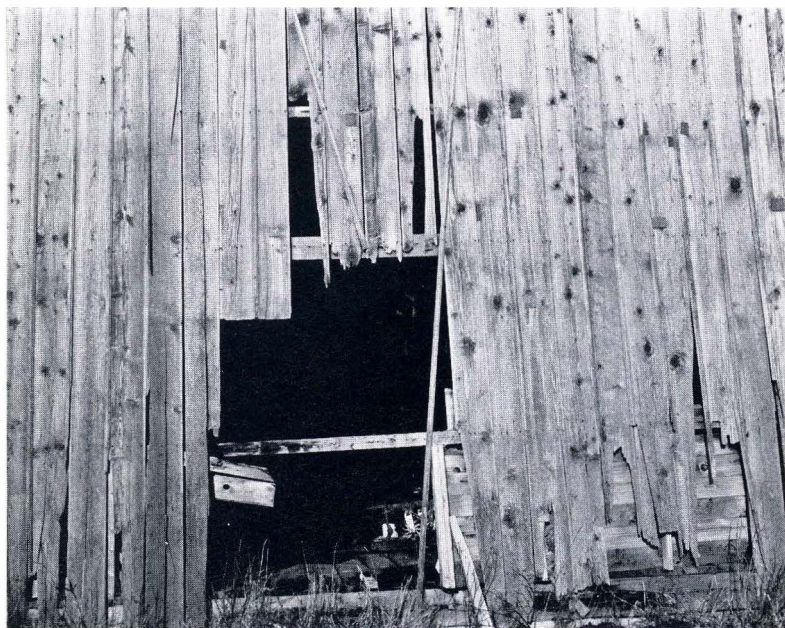
BS Live on the edge. . . .

CF I think I always have, I think I've looked over a couple of times. You know, there's a sense of a *very* fine balance there. I never knew I was on the edge of anything, I never knew there was any difference. Until I looked over a couple of times and thought, oh, this is the edge.

PC And you were right about that, do you think?

CF I think *Moon in My Belly*, yeah, quite a bit. Things happened in there that I had no idea about, obsessions that I always kind of knew I had but I never really allowed before or — I put them away in the cupboard and they came out. Chickens. I hate chickens.

BS Well, there's that incredible scene in the novel, the axe going at the chicken. . . . And washing clothes. I mean, there's obviously that whole scene in that novel about washing clothes but it seems to come back again and again. It's almost a nineteenth-century thing, the tub. . . .



CF I think a lot of, I don't know, in quotes, "children," say, that grew up in the Fifties, lower middle class, the Sunday night bath . . . it is nineteenth-century, really strongly. Plus having a grandmother, other-language, mysterious, storyteller. Somehow, I was the odd grandchild. I mean, as a child I hardly spoke, I was the "ideal" child, right? quiet, occupied myself very independently, read in the corner, and so on, so my grandparents liked me at an age where they appreciated that kind of child. I got to read my grandfather's books and, I was the one to whom my grandmother told her life story and her mother's story, that she had not even told to her daughters. And that whole sense, an important sense that I have a sort of history. It *is* an historical novel, but there was that shock for me, I thought, my god, page . . . what is it? forty-five, and you're saying that to me now.

BS Is there some duty to rescue history?

CF There is for me. (Rescue as in prevent from being lost, not from death. Some deaths are natural.) Because at a point in my poetry I realized an obsession of mine was telling or retelling narrative things. In poetry the stories, the "real" stories in my poetry were obsessively historical, either my childhood, or stories that I had been told. There's a long poem in *Stray Zale* about a woman dying of cancer, it was almost a direct lift from a story that someone had told me. And a friend said to me, I didn't know your mother died of cancer, and I said, my mother didn't die of cancer, my mother is alive and well. So I feel that. I have a fidelity to it. I'm really interested in the shift from telling, retelling, and then to the page. And lies, the whole sense of people lying, amplifying things, concentrating on certain things. (It's an attentiveness shift, changing by concentration, like adding salt.)

BS Recently we've noticed that most of the fiction writers that we publish are women and most of the poets that we publish are men.

CF My sense of it is that the performing writers, especially in Vancouver, are predominantly women, and I think there's a lot of performing going on in fiction that is not happening in poetry on the page.

PC Can you talk about that some more?

BS What do you mean by performing?

CF The majority of writers in Vancouver that are really interested in performing as readers are young, energetic, excellent women poets. They aren't publishing much poetry. And the men that are publishing poetry don't seem to be too inclined to being public in a sense of *touch*. But there's women going across Canada, paying the fare out of their pocket, or going to the U.S., in order to read and perform. (I think women are craving personal communication. They are fed up with waiting to be published, waiting to be accepted in magazines, waiting to be asked to read through the established channels. Women are out of the waiting room now. They're talking, they're making noises, they're risking exposure.) It's a different sense of being public, and a different sense of performing.

BS But you're talking about women *poets* there, right?

CF Yes. And the immediate past. And the change in emphasis for women writers from poetry to prose in many cases. This is also what I'm feeling as a personal shift, so of course I'm paying attention to it. It is not true for everyone. But there was a great bloom of women poets, performing, *being* everywhere, arabesques on every page, women dancing, and shouting, and laughing, and screaming, it was like a long overdue explosion . . . (Didn't "we" know it was coming? Didn't "we" keep working for it?) all of a sudden magazines discovered women poets, right? And that's kind of died down a bit now. But now a lot of *those women* — it's not necessarily the same women — have either moved into fiction as well or are starting to publish their fiction, a lot of times based on their work or strength as a poet (that is, fiction is starting to bloom like poetry, it's being felt), the ones that have made the shift. I've talked to a lot of women that have the sense, say, in Canada, that there isn't a male poet under the age of thirty-five that they're interested in, they don't "exist", they're not in the streets, they might be in the magazines but they're not real yet; I haven't "seen" them, I haven't "heard" them, I haven't "touched" them.

BS Do you feel, as a fiction writer and as a woman, that you're in a large company of other women fiction writers?

CF No.

BS Do you feel that you're in the company of men fiction writers?

CF No. I don't feel in any company, I feel I'm by myself. But I've always felt that, too, as a poet. It was a lovely surprise to me but it was a profound surprise when women's groups, galleries, and coffeehouses asked me to read. And that was the point in time where I was really thinking hard too, like, why am I reading? am I reading? will I read? I don't think I fit. (Yes, feminist. That is to say, self-defined. And keeping it private from those to whom *that* is definition. Demanding the room. The space. To change. Which is — the only point in telling anyone is to tell it to those to whom it makes no "difference", that is, those equal, equally. Unless seeking to knock some other heads around a bit, grab at the first level "their" perception. Which, on occasion, I try myself. And as a larger audience is sought or stumbled upon, the frequency of the occasion increases, necessarily. Fumbling, noncompetitive elitism. I feel compelled to say what I mean. I seek to. This is of course/the fight for women writing/no more "sewing curtains" excuses/for writing by women/for good writing/for fine writing by anyone/to appear anywhere/that fight first for the poem/the fiction/then for the poem the fiction by a woman/because I am/One/In the fight.) And I've considered sabotage on several occasions . . . there's no plainer name than Cathy Ford, right? So I'll keep it but — I don't know — sending under another person's name or saying you're a man, pretending it, or something, to see if there is a difference. It's all a game. I've never done it but it still interests me and I know people that have done it and that have been accepted or had their books reviewed on that basis. (Sexuality. Writing can be sexual. Writing can be sexist. But it *can't* be *evaluated* sexually. If it is, the evaluator is totally wrong. This is not to say that there is no "women's" writing, because there is. But I think it must be *writing*, misogyny practised by men or women or magazines is absurd, like all prejudice.)

BS But if you look at the themes that young fiction writers are writing about and those pieces that are interesting enough to make it into good magazines — there are very few men writing their things there; there are some, but very few. And the themes that women are writing about seem to still be holding a certain amount of interest.

CF (That biography is not irrelevant so much as implicit, or explicit. That feminism is closer mouthed and harder working. Than previous. But the problem is. Writers are being ignored. Books are not being reviewed. Writers are being burned by bad contracts. A game played called writers, not writing, that hurts. In my experience the majority of these writers being belittled, the “new”, “young”, “unknown”, are women. Something must change. For *the* writers, for *the* readers. All of them. Women are writing about all of these injustices, in various ways, writing about them or working against them professionally. Besides all of this there is the great unhearing of woman’s point of view. There’s a desire to hear. To find out. Explore. The seeking of other women’s writing. Writers. Painters. Photographers. Printers. Publishers. That searching. Which comes back to. Circular. Knowing “who” wrote it might be of interest, it might even give a clue as to intent, method, style, but when the piece confronts the reader, the writer has gone on/ridden over the next hill. Finally. Hopelessly. Women are still working to get to the point where their work is *work*. Publically.) Well, I think it’s rebirth — that rebirth is always more exciting than athletic prowess. Women’s fiction is opening and women fiction writers are aware of it and so now they’re coming out a bit.

BS But are those categories, then, associated with the sexes really?

CF Well, for some writers, some critics, some magazines. (I talk about what I desire, there, not what I see or have seen.) It seems to me that some writers are centered. That they are neither male or female in the sense of being pushed out there, that at some point or other there was that moment and perhaps it was only a split second, where their writing was accepted or published on the writing, the fiction alone, nothing else. There was nothing political happening. And there are those writers, and to be a writer in my sense, that centering part has to be reached where it doesn’t matter who wrote it, it’s irrelevant who wrote it. It

might be of biographical interest or something but at a point it's absolutely irrelevant who wrote that damn good writing. But right now I think women's fiction is kind of at that point where it's being flogged, it's hot. In the States right now there are three different magazines that I know of doing women's fiction issues this year. Perhaps coincidentally it is *The Year of the Child*. (Perhaps it logically follows that "serious" women fiction writers shouldn't be publishing right now. But writing does not receive acceptance by staying at home. Nothing changes in an unopened room.)

BS I think that the whole women's movement and the slow partial acceptance of some of the consciousness that the women's movement has brought to society has given a kind of temporary boost to people just because they're women writing on women's themes. But aside from that, I'm just puzzled by the absence of interesting fiction from men. I mean, who do we have? A lot of men sending in little bits but they're mostly little bits, they're often very unfinished manuscripts.

CF And at a point that's important. Unfinished. Unpublished. Unknown. I mean it's important to be anonymous, isn't it? No one can pull you anywhere at all — they don't know who you are. I met someone at a party whose work was appearing in a magazine that I thought wouldn't publish work of *that* quality by a woman. I was wrong. I'm glad I was. But I had been so convinced that I said, I thought you were a pseudonym! Are you real? I was serious, in a way, I'd been fooled by a system that I was/am trying to break down . . . yeah, I thought it was a pseudonym.

BS She thought Cathy Ford, was, probably.

CF It is! I mean the last three years at UBC there was a Kathy Ford that wrote for the *Ubyyssey* (now for *The Sun*) and people'd come up to me and say, oh, I saw that piece in *The Ubyyssey*. It wasn't me, or it was me, depending on my mood or the time of day, but I hope she got some of the same, or it wouldn't be fair.

PC I think women are writing about things that have never been written about and that's what's good, and they're writing about them as well as anyone could.

CF (Please, let's say as well as they can be written about. It's the same. Gently.) There's that whole sense going on *between* women writers, too, that somehow brings out even such a simple thing as a woman sending a piece of fiction, she may have written it in 1965, but *now* she's gonna send it, *now* she's feeling that the atmosphere is there for it. There are women — it's not just women — there are people who are writing in closets; a new magazine happens and they think, well, that's the magazine I'm going to send my stuff to. It happened to me. I mean I sent poems to this magazine to the point where, I don't know, where — three years ago I got a rude letter back saying something or other, I don't remember what it said but I thought, alright! and I didn't send any more work in. Then I had a piece of fiction so I thought, if anywhere, *that's* where I want to see that piece of fiction and I sent it. My god, I got a letter saying, can you send more. I skipped all the way to the post office! It's the timing, too.

BS What can magazines do to help writers?

CF I think they can open up. I think they should establish an arbitrary policy to publish only writers they've never heard of [laugh]; I don't know what they can do. (Perhaps recognize that some writers are victimized by the unfortunate paradox some subscribe to: that to be an important writer you must be an important person.)

BS Is there anything else we should cover here?

CF One thing I'm tough on, and I'm sure of, is trust. (Trust between the writer and the work and the reader. The writer — the fiction. The fiction — the reader. Not between them but what connects them. The only thing that connects like a common vocabulary once agreed upon by both parties, the hinge, each controls one side of the door. The opening is what is trusted. The act. The result. The process. A personal position. And relevance. Eroticism/language/linguistics. In the mouth. On the page. In shape as well as the dictionary meaning or specification. Neither plot or scene. Perhaps narration. As hinge.) Some writers have a sense of the writer writing and they present that sense on the page. I want to get away from that. I know I'm writing. If there's a reader, the reader knows "I" have written. We both know I'm not writing when the reader's reading. I don't want to frame time past, but passing. I don't want to lead anybody down the garden path, I don't want to be "the director of the film", I want to be the camera, the eyes, the lens. I don't want the sense of . . .

BS pre-forming the experience?

CF Yeah.

PC Does that relate to what you were saying about people reading *you* and seeing through you?

CF Yes. Or seeing through the eyes of the piece. The writer's always there ("evidently", but not "actually", the writer and the reader — to me — are *we*), and we know, so let's get on with it. That's my attitude . . . Let's go on. I mean, there's writing about writing, that consciousness was new in the recent past, and some people do it so that I'm interested. Some people do it in a sense that I quit going to church because I could read the Bible by myself, or whatever. I have a feeling right now that it is extremely fashionable to write about writing a book. The new hero and the new heroine is the writer on the page, saying, here I am writing a book or I'm not here at all but I'm writing the book and don't we both know it. (This is a kind of conscious intrusion that I'm not interested in, although I am sometimes interested in watching such a movement in work by *other* writers.)

PC One of my students today talked about a good first line being, "Here I am looking for a first line."

CF I'm always looking for those things that are just a little bit ahead, going ahead, moving ahead, and there's imitations of imitations, and sometimes they're better than the real thing, of course, they're all real things, but at a point it's gotta go *on*, anyhow. Not necessarily ahead or up but it's got to *go*.

BS I call it courage or risk or something. That's what I feel about so many of the people who send in stuff to *The Review*, is that they are taking no risk at all. They don't let you know any of the real pain at all. It's all posture.

CF But I think, say a year ago, posture was all. Posture got you a book and some people are better at it than others and it doesn't make them any less, it just times them, they're timed.