

INTERVIEW / AUDREY THOMAS

The interview took place at Audrey Thomas' house in Vancouver, on February 1, 1975. Those present (indicated by initials in the text) were Pierre Coupey, Gladys Hindmarch, Wendy Pickell and Bill Schermbrucker. The interview was pre-structured by the Fiction Editors on four topics: Africa; the writing process; Audrey's particular works; the politics of writing and of being a woman writer. The selection here contains about one third of the tape transcript, and reflects all the main points which were discussed. It is mostly verbatim, especially Audrey's statements, but we did some editing and reordering, for clarity and continuity. The original transcript is preserved along with the tapes in The Capilano Review archives.

- BS Obviously language fascinates you — names, words. And you have your etymological dictionary.
- AT I have almost total . . . oral recall? It's like having a photographic memory. I've had it ever since I was a child. It would allow me to lie in bed all night, going through everything I had seen all day, and heard all day, and watching for puns — I was very interested in puns, like my grandfather (the Harry of *Songs*), who I'm sure had a great influence on me in that respect. He encouraged me to find out the meanings of the words; he wouldn't name anything for me, which used to irritate me when I would ask him the names of trees and things like that. He would demand that I find an appropriate name for them.
- BS Okay. I want to get to Africa. You went there, and you had a really bad experience which led to *Mrs. Blood*, and then you went back five years later, why?
- AT Because I wanted to write about it and see what it looked like from a healthy person's point of view, physically healthy. I don't think *Mrs. Blood* is particularly healthy, it is a very confined book, with Africa only as a peripheral. There is much more of Africa in my novel (*Blown Figures*).
- BS What is it that attracts you about Africa?
- AT The rhythm, and the fascination with words, which is something the Africans have too. The violence of the colours, the violence of the landscape.
- BS Do you find Africa a less threatening environment than Canada though?
- AT Oh yeah, sure.
- BS Your Heart of Darkness is Canada?
- AT I think so. Yes.
- BS In Africa you encounter forces and can write about the encounter in a way that is not demolishing to you?

AT Yes I think so. Jung went to Africa and he wasn't sure why. He went back, he went twice, and he says some really interesting things in *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*. One of the things he says about India, which is equally true about Africa is:

India affected me like a dream, for I was and remained in search of myself, of the truth peculiar to myself.

But about Africa he says:

What is going to happen to Jung the psychologist in the wilds of Africa? This was a question I had constantly sought to evade, in spite of my intellectual intention to study the European's reaction to primitive conditions. It became clear to me that this study had been not so much an objective scientific project as an intensely personal one, and that any attempt to go deeper into it touched every possible sore spot in my own psychology. I had to admit to myself that it was scarcely the Wembley Exhibition which had begotten my desire to travel, but rather the fact that the atmosphere had become too highly charged for me in Europe.

I hadn't read Jung before I wrote *Blown Figures*, and then all of a sudden last summer I pick up all this stuff! He talked at one point of how Africa smelled like blood.

BS Do you think in a way Africa is a more human context than North America?

AT That's partly true, because we've done away with all the signs and rituals. If anything overwhelming happens in North America, we ignore it or hide it, or put it in some institution. We're not supposed to grieve, we're not supposed to raise our voices, and we are not supposed to do anything excessive. They have very little prostitution in Ghana, because women screw right up until they're eighty, they really love it. This kind of thing would be considered really disgusting here. When you mourn in Ghana, you have the forty days, and then another fifty days, until you go through a whole year of cleansing and rituals and dancing and drummings and parties. We don't mourn for anything — we are not supposed to.

GH That's our equivalent of going to the shrink — therapy or something like that.

AT One of the closest equivalents that North Americans have found is drugs. And we're taught to ingest things, to put things into our mouths, this is part of our culture.

WP What about this whole trend in the last while of Jesus Freaks, and occultism?

GH There have been a lot of religions in B.C. — I don't know, twelve or two hundred — but in terms of moving towards ecstasy or ceremony, in terms of anger or mourning or grief, that is not a large part of it.

AT They are not archetypes. This is the thing: that the Africans do fit in with the archetypes, so you know you have something to lean on when something overwhelming happens to you. I've written about it in *Blown Figures*, in the whole last section where she is trying to exorcise what she has done. She actually goes to the fetish priest to have it done. Only she's left it too late, and she's a European. Probably it's because she's a European that they can't do anything for her.

BS I notice in "Two in the Bush" that she is never afraid. There is very much an Alice-in-Wonderland sense there, about Africa. Here's this woman in the hotel, and a guy makes an approach to her. In North America it would be very clear what was going on, it would be a sexual thing. But this guy has a beetle, a cochineal beetle in a box, and he wants to show it to her. She is not afraid.

AT No, I'm never afraid in Africa. I was never afraid until I got sick, and I gradually got some perspective on that. Can I read you the rest of this from Jung?

In travelling to Africa to find a psychic observation post outside of the European, I unconsciously wanted to find that part of my personality which had become invisible under the influence and the pressure of being European. This part stands in unconscious opposition to myself, and indeed I attempt to suppress it. In keeping with its nature, it wishes to make me unconscious (force me under water) so as to kill me; but my aim is, through insight, to make it more conscious, so that we can find a common *modus vivendi*.

I think that's beautiful! And then he says:

The predominantly rationalistic European finds much that is human alien to him, and he prides himself on this without realizing that his rationality is won at the expense of his vitality, and that the primitive part of his personality is consequently condemned to a more or less underground existence.

I think the thing about going to Africa is that you can let it out. Peggy Appiah said that for the Ashantis — the Akans, which is where I lived — that for them dreams are the only reality. I really like that. They are very much in touch with their dreams. No matter how educated they may have been in Europe, and come back, they are very much in touch with superstition, with ancestors, the whole necklace of time.

BS “Dreams are the only reality.” What about nightmares?

AT For sure, there is that too. David Godfrey said to someone else that Audrey doesn’t write African novels, and I sent him back a message that those are the only kind there are. What I meant there was the sense of the other, the dark side of ourselves, the nightmare side of ourselves, where everything is too big, or too bright, or too beautiful, or too overwhelming. When lizards are *this big*, and when snakes sit in the trees and spit at you, you are in a whole other world. The only thing Ian was ever afraid of was snakes, the only thing in the world. So they warned him there were snakes on the road down to this sacred lake, Lake Bosomtwe, and you go down this steep cliff, narrow narrow path. When he came back up they said, “Did you see any snakes?” “No,” he said, “I stamped my feet the whole time.” And they said, “Oh, but you stupid man! They are in the trees!” *Snakes* don’t sit in *trees*, Cheshire cats do. That’s why the Alice thing is very real, that’s why in all my African books there are allusions to *Alice in Wonderland*. That’s very much the way I felt when I was there. Rhinoceros beetles that can peel a banana with their nose — an incredible thing to see one just clicking along the road.

BS Are there two private Africas for you then, the fearsome one and the child's world of discovery and surprise?

AT Yeah, and they are the same of course. When I went back and wasn't threatened in any way, I could see the other one. Is that a time change or . . . ?

GH I think it's like a dream — the quote about dreams being the only reality and all that. It's not a time change, it's that what your psychic physical reality it at one time is incredibly different from what it is at another. And it's essential that you return there and be in that place with a different — the same but different — body, and a different psychic reality.

AT When I went back I went *alone*, too, and that seemed to be a very good thing. I think I do better alone, which is a very sad statement about me, than I do when I travel with other people. Sometimes I really have to force myself to go down the rabbit hole when I'm alone. When there is someone there who speaks your language, you really don't have to make much of an effort to go outside yourself, you know.

BS Has it been relevant for us to begin by talking about Africa?

AT I suppose so. It was in Africa that I sold my first story. Africa gave me the time also, to write. I read African writers, I correspond with friends from Africa.

BS What is this thing about Africa for Canadian writers?

AT George Woodcock's idea was that you step back, that's what he said in his article in *Maclean's*, in order to view your own country. I'm not sure it's as simple as that. I think that maybe it's that we get so riled up and in such turmoil, by going there, that it sets free all kinds of things.

PC Why are the prose writers going to Africa, why aren't any poets going? This does not surface in poetry.

BS Dorothy Livesay has been to Africa and written about it.

AT A lot of British poets. Earle Birney went to India and also to Africa.

PC But that's more travel colour than the kind of searching for what is essential. I don't know the answer but it suddenly occurred to me that poets aren't doing that.

GH Prose writers need more space.

AT Yeah.

PC One of the things I pick up on is that you feel terrified about Canada, that in spite of its space it is a very constricting culture.

AT *Very* constricting. It's like being in a large room with no windows.

GH Indwelling, as opposed to a psychic, social expansiveness.

PC Indwelling, yeah. I think of Olson's *Call Me Ishmael* whenever this notion of space comes up. The continent being a vast ocean that has to be explored, in that sense Africa becomes a metaphor for the exploration of Canada.

AT Or for the exploration of the unconscious. I think that Africa is a metaphor, and I certainly agree with you that it is for me, in my writing.

BS Well, we've talked about Africa and writing about Africa, and that leads me to ask if you feel, as a writer, that you belong with any particular group.

AT No, unless I belong with other women. Women are writing for other women at the moment, I don't know what men are doing.

BS Men are writing for other women too.

AT If I belong anywhere I suppose it's in connection with other women.

BS Has that always been true?

AT Yeah, I think that probably has.

BS I don't believe it.

AT You don't believe it. Well, editors are mostly men, so I don't know. The first story I ever got published was a story about my miscarriage, and I certainly didn't write it for any man. I probably just wrote it for myself. But if anyone could understand it, it would be another woman. I was very surprised when it was a man that finally accepted it. A lot of women have read it since, in *Ten Green Bottles*. So many women have had miscarriages, and this is another thing that people haven't talked about.

PC Audrey, do you think that's a positive thing in writing right now, this writing for women?

AT As long as it doesn't become a cult it is a *very* positive thing. As long as you don't feel that you *have* to do it. I think women are excited to finally be talking to women.

BS As a writer, what has your drive been towards or for?

AT To try and put down on paper the changes I was going through, for me, but also for Ideal Reader or Constant Reader, who is another woman I would think. When I was a child I really wanted to be A Writer, I wanted to be *known* and all those things. Then when I started to write again, it was because I had to. I had to somehow put down what was happening to me, and words were the only thing I knew. I didn't know how to play any instrument, I didn't know how to knit or crochet or anything. Words were all I had, the only weapons if you like, that I had. So I started writing.

BS The language you just used suggests competitive or aggressive writing.

WP No, it doesn't sound aggressive, it sounds defensive.

AT Thank you Wendy. A defense against being a Scorpio housewife, I mean the second time I began to write. The first drive was to be a "writer." My stories were always read out in class. I was twenty when the second drive began.

GH I'm interested in the first drive. What was the image at that time?

AT Well, I was small and shy and unconfident. Somehow I thought that if I wrote something I would be large, non-shy and confident. The second time I started, in any big way, I was really trying to make some kind of order out of the chaos that my life was. I came to Canada, and I was twenty-three and had one child, and I went to graduate school. I was very lost at graduate school. People were using words that I had never heard before, and then another child, and I began to teach, and got really turned on to words again of course, and met a lot of interesting people, and started putting down words on paper again. One part of me is really happy to stay at home and have kids, and really be the traditional housewife, but this other side of me says no, that isn't enough. I think that's what I was trying to deal with in my writing, the two different sides of me.

GH It's to create some kind of order that goes out into the world, that this is me.

AT Yeah, that this is me, I'm not really lost. This is me, and this is how I'm dealing with this thing or that thing. I remember the first time I fell in love with a man other than my husband, and having to deal with that somehow. And then he died. And having to deal with that. All these strange things that kept happening to me, and I would write them down and try to work them out that way. And then realizing after I'd written them down that they weren't so earth-shattering after all; or they were, but you'd organized the horror and could go on from there. I suppose it's a defensive mechanism. Mind you I was very secret about it. I had the office right next to *Tish*, I would keep it very secret, because I felt if those guys found out, those *poets* Pierre, I would be ruined. I wouldn't have a chance if those poets found out what I was trying to do.

BS Let's take the times when you just decide it's time to write. What is it you're trying to do when you write a story?

AT Well, I'm writing a Mexican story at the minute right? "A Monday Dream at Alameda Park." What I'm trying to do in that story is bring together about four or five men that I know who have a strange but understandable desire to remain forever young. And I'm setting it in Mexico because I kept meeting people down there like that, with their second or third wives or whatever, you know, who would sit in the bars and tell me how they'd lost their children. I like to set things in alien cultures because they're that much starker. I don't presume to write about people who are not North Americans — I think it's difficult enough to do that. I would never write about an African woman, anyone like that, I don't think I have that kind of total empathy where I could ever do that with any degree of success. So this is a story that I just feel I want to write because I kept bumping into all these men who were having a new life — Malamud's book — but they weren't doing it too well.

GH I think there's something about the process that starts something off. I want to ask about that process. Okay, she's in that circumstance, she went to Mexico — you're afraid of planes too aren't you?

AT Yes. I took the bus and the trains.

GH You took the bus and the trains, to Mexico. At this point Ian's with the children. So you're not trudging down with four others, you're trudging down alone again, single, but the couples you're meeting, the male of the couple —

AT — is usually an older man with a younger woman, and I was really fascinated by this. Of course I always start from an actual incident. I have very little imagination in me, in the sense of making things up totally in my head. So it was an actual incident where I spent some time with one of these husbands due to a fluke and the fact that we didn't know that everything is closed in Mexico City on Monday. That's what really started the whole thing off. It was his suggestion to write the story about it.

BS Well then, as a writer, are you simply trying to record what happened to you?

AT No, not at all, because he is not the man in the story, but he gave me the idea for it.

GH Okay, let's hear about that day with that person first, then get the process.

AT Alright. He was on his second wife. He was the same age I was. He was very attractive, very learned, and really going to Mexico with a lot of positive things, like he was reading Octavio Paz, he was reading Oscar Lewis, he hadn't just gone down there to soak in the sun, although that was another reason he'd gone down there. He'd also gone down there because his marriage was very shakey with his second wife, who was about twenty-four, and he was thirty-eight. And we spent the day together. He prided himself on not spending the day with her. They were totally liberated, right, so they'd never spend their days together, they would go off in different directions. And I went to the Museum of Fine Arts, and he went to the Anthropological Museum, and we were going to meet for lunch. Only I had the only knife, and my museum was closed, so I didn't know him very well, and I thought now what do you do, what do you do? You've got the knife, he's bought all this stuff, do you try and find him, or do you just think oh fuck it and go off and find something else to do? And while I was trying to figure that out I went to the children's park, in the big park, and was watching two monkeys feed a bird, which I'd never seen before. And that was so delightful, to see these two monkeys with crusts of bread feeding this bird, and I was sitting there laughing when this man started yelling at me. I thought he was Mexican so I didn't turn around, and it was Craig, and he yelled my name. We then set off together, cause his museum was closed of course, and we went all over Mexico City together looking for something that was open, and that was the basis of the story, to try and find something that was open. But in the story the man is about fifty-one, and the girl is about twenty-three or twenty-four, and

he cannot keep up with her. You're also a mile up, right, so there's an oxygen problem — you know, if you run around Mexico City you're bound to get tired. So the story is not really about Craig, although he was the man I spent the day with, it's about somebody else who is trying to keep up with a young wife, tripping from place to place trying to find *some* place that's open, where they can find culture, right?

WP Rather than talk to each other.

AT Well, yes and no. The woman comes off best in this story, because she just accepts the fact that the museums are closed, but he can't, because he's a professor. He's a professor of Metaphysical poetry, and he can't accept anything at all.

PC Is that a congenital defect of men?

WP/GH/BS/AT Just professors!

AT He's been going home and having sleeps, then pretending that he just got in when the girl comes back. She's with him this day, so he doesn't get his little nap in the afternoon that she knows nothing about.

GH What a bound-in freedom, eh?

AT But can you imagine a man so afraid of his virility that he goes and takes a nap and doesn't tell his wife about it?

GH Yes I certainly can! I can imagine how dirty it was.

BS Why didn't you just live that and pass on, what's the point of writing a story about that?

AT To show how we all delude one another.

BS What, you want to *teach* people?

AT Well maybe I just want to demonstrate the terrible gap between men and women.

PC Do you have any particular kind of programme or intent that is conscious, that you want to see as a result of what you do write?

AT I didn't go down to write any stories. I went down for a holiday. But it's very hard to stay away from situations, you know. I've written two stories about Mexico, and the other one is about mummies. In this cemetery where they exhibit mummies they had the littlest mummy in the world, *la más pequeña momia del mundo*. Terrible. Sad little face. About twelve inches high, in a little dress. So I've written a story about that too, that I doubt I will *ever* publish, cause it's such a painful story that brought back horrible memories about this kid of mine that died. You know, where do you get *la más pequeña momia*? It had to be a stillborn child.

GH Mm-hmm.

AT And that just totally wiped me out when I went into this mummy museum and saw this, this . . . thing.

PC Do you cry when you write?

AT Sure. And I get upset and I leave it, and I come back and I tear things up.

PC Did you cry when you wrote that particular story?

AT

BS Well is writing a sexual surrogate, is it a sexual activity?

AT It's sensual. I don't see it as sexual, except that when you know it's really good (of course that means that the next day when you read it it's shit, right?), at the time when you're writing it, when you feel it's really good, it is kind of sexual, there's that orgasmic feeling that something is really happening, something really good is happening. I'm a skater, the skater I never was, just zooming along. Once it's done, I find it hard to go back and revise it in any way. It's a block, you know? When it's finished, it's finished. That doesn't mean I don't change every day. If I'm writing a *novel*, I throw away every day what I don't

like. Throw it away! Burn it! I don't even keep it. But once it's done, that's it, you know? There may be horrible mistakes in it, but I don't change it. And I've been very lucky to have editors who never changed one word. Bob Amussen, David Robinson. Not one word, only corrected my spelling

GH I'm interested in this process where in each stage of writing, the next day you can just throw away, burn, destroy, you're sort of rid of that without the ritualistic . . . it just *goes*. In any way does that connect with how you're living your life?

AT I wish it did! Patrick White said writing was like shitting, and I think there's a great deal of truth in that.

PC Lawrence Durrell said it was like going out and chopping wood for forty-eight hours a day.

AT Lawrence Durrell wouldn't even know what he was talking about. I've been reading him, I really dig him, but I can't imagine him chopping wood. I can't imagine him doing anything more than saying "Waiter!"

PC But he was talking about hard work, and I remember you talking about the literal process of writing that you go through, a great many hours, every day, regularly, a discipline.

AT I'm a very disciplined person. I consider it a job, it really is, and I go to it as a job. I get very irritated, *very* irritated, if people call me up during my writing time.

GH You let all your friends and acquaintances know what those times are?

AT Absolutely clear to everyone. The only time I sort of allow it is if I've got a book coming out with Talon and I know that David is going to get in touch with me. But here's the old mother again: I daren't take the phone off the hook, because my kids might fall on their heads and cut their heads open at school.

BS I want to ask you about your books, Audrey. As I looked at the titles today, it occurred to me that between number one and number five, which is *Ten Green Bottles* and *Blown Figures*, that the first exhibits a fear of the bottle breaking whereas *Blown Figures* is a delight in the melting of the bottle.

AT Oh that's *very* nice Bill. I see *Songs* and *Mrs. Blood* and *Blown Figures* as a continuity. I'm not sure I see *Munchmeyer & Prospero* in a continuity. And *Ten Green Bottles* was just five-finger exercises, though a lot of those things are going to become novels — already two, maybe three, have become novels. "If One Green Bottle" became *Mrs. Blood*, but so did "A Winter's Tale." And then "Salon Des Refusés" became the second part of *Songs*.

BS Are *Munchmeyer & Prospero* important to you?

AT They're tentative efforts, particularly *Munchmeyer*, to write as a man, to try and be a man. I don't know how successful that was, but I wanted to try and write from the point of view of another sex. I don't think *Prospero* was all that hard of a thing.

BS I've always pressured you to get beyond therapeutic writing, to constructs. How do you feel about that whole thing now?

AT That would be terrific, but I doubt if I can do it.

BS Well go back to *Ten Green Bottles*, Herman in "The Albatross," there you've really created a person without expressing yourself as the dominant focus.

AT Yeah, but I'm not sure I could do it for a novel. Again, that's an ethnic thing too, like it's all very well to do that as a story, and I knew that man, I knew him very well, but I don't think I could do it as a novel. Because I wasn't in the war, I wasn't in Austria, I wasn't put in prison camp — how on earth could I write a novel from his point of view? Impossible! I don't have that kind of imagination. I can only write about myself in the end. Unless I meet someone as fascinating as he is, in which case he becomes a short story, but not a novel.

BS Everything of Gladys' that I've read is also right out of herself.

AT Well what's wrong with that? I mean what do you object to about that?

BS I don't know. I'm exploring.

AT I wrote to Patrick White the other day and said "no man has a right to know as much about women as you do." But after I wrote it, I thought he only knows about women of that certain age, he never writes about young women really.

GH In a little essay in *Ms.* magazine, Erica Jong talks about the problem of women writers taking on a male identity and then not finishing the work because it's just impossible, though I think it is possible in some sense. The other thing that occurred to me recently, in class I said well, damn it, you get a writer, say Lawrence, Faulkner, James, they may create anywhere from fifty to a hundred characters, but basically have got seven or eight characters going, and it's a matter of how close they get each time.

AT Uh-huh.

GH In some sense we're always doing that, you create your own drama in the world as you like to see it, at that instant in time, which of course has got to relate to very earlier and other dramas in some very important way for you, whether you recognize it or not. Of course there's going to be times when you think it *doesn't* work, it *doesn't* come, and then times when it totally does. I don't know *how* I can connect these two points! I'll make some attempt. Because it seems to me one of the delights of being a fiction writer is that you *can* enter the identity and the physical body of someone else. I think it's more important the physical body, and the things you got into tonight. One of the aspirations is to enter another so totally that you know *exactly* what it's like.

AT Right.

GH Someone once said to me, "If you had three wishes and you were going to die right after, what would you do?" And I thought, yes, I would like to be a man, now what moment would I like to be a man? Would I like to be a man at the point of coming, is that the most important, the critical? I know the men present said they'd like to give birth, but then the other one said, "No, no, no, no! I don't want to go through that process!" So one of the delights is that you can enter the body of, and perceive through those people, characters, configurations, male or female, in a way that you can't in your life. The thing Erica Jong was proposing may indeed be wrong, it may be right in terms of not completing things, but wrong in terms of not expressing the range of delight say of writing *Munchmeyer*. There must have been some delight in you, in terms of hoping you were close?

AT Oh yeah.

GH And that would be the real range of writing.

AT That was one of the few books that I thoroughly enjoyed writing. Men have told me where I've made mistakes, where I've said things that men probably wouldn't say. But to try and see things from a man's point of view was really interesting and really instructive. You know? When you realize that they too have their troubles.

BS You used to tell me I could *not* write dialogue. Then I realized you were trying to improve your own writing of dialogue, especially men.

AT I think my writing of dialogue now is pretty good.

BS So do I.

GH It's fine.

AT This is again this thing of having this strange ear which can remember syntactical patterns of the way people speak, so that once I have those I can invent enormous pieces, like that

German guy Herman in "The Albatross." I just invented that from listening to him talk. Once you got his syntactical pattern you couldn't go wrong. Once you realized what he was doing with English, you could say anything and it would come out alright. Same with "Two in the Bush." Once you found out that Arnie was from Fresno or wherever, that Joe was Portuguese American, that Joao Kakumba was from Angola, and you listened, you heard all these differences in the way that they talked. I don't think I have trouble with dialogue any more, but I did have at one time, before I stopped listening to my own voice and started listening to other people's.

BS In *Munchmeyer & Prospero* you attempted very powerfully to come to terms with individual people who were living their lives, not yours; and that links up with some things in *Ten Green Bottles*. Do you intend to go on in that direction?

AT I don't know where I intend to go. Now that *Blown Figures* is finished I don't think I'll write anything for a long time. I can't imagine where I can go from there.

BS Is the difference for you between a story and a novel this matter of endurance in the perspective of the character?

AT I think maybe. One of the things Ian said about my play *Submarine Cable* is that it's totally from my point of view, and why don't I try it from his point of view, which I don't think I can do. He'll have to write that.

WP That's exactly why I didn't like the play. It was like leaning against something that kept giving way, you had nothing from the other point of view to support you at all.

GH That would really be a problem for you to do, to try to enter *his* point of view.

AT I thought his point of view is expressed quite well, but he doesn't think so, and neither does anybody else.

BS I'm interested in knowing how you perceive the changes that came about in the revision of *Songs* in 1971 or whenever.

AT Well the publisher liked it and said he would publish it if I would "make it a little stronger here and there." Now what does *that* mean? I put it in a drawer and said the hell with it. Then when I came back to it, when I came back from Ghana the second time, it was so mild compared to what I wanted to say, that it really got condensed into the first six chapters and I added the whole asylum stuff, which wasn't in the original. The violence, the madness, the sense that she really is alone, things I had kind of glossed over.

BS Is it more honest, naked, open?

AT Who knows what those words mean? I distrust those words. I just didn't *care* any more what anybody thought. That's all I can say.

BS More courageous?

AT I just didn't care. I just *did not* care. And so when I rewrote it I was more *free*, alright. It hadn't anything to do with courage. I was *more free*. I felt less hampered by my past, less committed to being the nice girl, the nice person. You know my mother always wanted me to write animal stories, children's stories. And I didn't care any more.

BS Okay. Well now is *Blown Figures* a rewrite of *Mrs. Blood*?

AT No. It's a sequel, the end of a sequence. There may be a part three in the sense that I think there's going to be a book about Richard, who's the guy in *Mrs. Blood*. Richard would be first, *Mrs. Blood* second, *Blown Figures* third. *Blown Figures* is a very difficult book. I think it's going to get panned, laughed at, spat upon. I don't really care, again. I'm in a very fortunate position because I need very little money to live. Those people, reviewers or whatever, can't hurt me.

PC They can only hurt your ego.

AT I really don't care. It's going to get a lot of criticism because it's got all these blank pages. It's a good adventure story, it's a really good adventure story!

- BS* Okay. In "Two in the Bush" the guy says everything is a political act. Is writing a political act?
- AT* My publishing is a political act. Why would I publish with Talonbooks if it weren't? I lose \$500 every time I publish with a Canadian publisher, but it was something I wanted to do. I certainly am going to become a Canadian citizen.
- BS* Is your writing an escape or an engagement with the political realities?
- AT* Well you know what our friend Patrick White said: "If man is a political animal, then I do not exist." I'm inclined to feel that way about myself. It isn't something you can add like vanilla, you either are political or you're not. I greatly admire people like Barbara Coward and Steve, and what's happening at New Star Press. I think that's very good, but I'm not part of that.
- BS* How do you, as a writer, engage with the political realities of Vancouver, of B.C., of Canada, of the world, of women?
- AT* I don't.
- BS* Women? You don't engage?
- AT* Well I would be in the tuna fishing plants interviewing them, right?
- BS* No, you're a novelist.
- WP* No, that's not the same thing.
- AT* How can one engage politically with women unless you want to change their lot for the better?
- WP* One of the biggest things that women are having a problem with is their awareness of themselves as women, and a sense of communication.
- AT* Well that's probably the only thing I can offer. It's amazing the women who've read my books, of all kinds of ages and literacies, who say yeah, you're talking about me, and I lost this kid, and nobody cared, and said it was like just garbage, and so on. In that way I can help.

WP That may be the only political statement to be made, as far as women are concerned in that kind of situation.

AT Well I think that women have to know that they can fight, that they don't have to stay on welfare.

WP But they have to be together before they can really fight. We've known that we can fight, literally as human beings, for years. But as a minority group we haven't known that we can fight, because we've never been together before, and we have to get together now. Your writing is really giving us that kind of sense, as many other women writers are giving it.

AT I can only give women a sense of their bodies. As far as their minds are concerned, I guess they'll have to do that for themselves.

PC I think we make mistakes when we use these words as categories. We get buffaloeed by what we think these words mean. "Politics."

GH The questions Audrey answered very quickly tonight had to do with politics. I would like to find out from her what she thinks "politics" means.

AT A political act is an act of defiance, an act that says who you are at the time, in the place where you are, and that's why I said my publishing was a political act, because I lose money by publishing in Canada.

PC I would normally agree with Audrey that politics implies an act of defiance, against convention, against establishment, against the kinds of rules that we have been accustomed to, or that we are led to believe that we have to become accustomed to, but I disagree with the definition of politics as exclusively an act of defiance. I would say that, in Blaser's terms, it is a *real* articulation of your experience of the real, and that's where it comes into your experience as a woman, and that's why it reaches the experience of other women.

AT I hope.

PC You don't have to hope, that's a fact.

AT You don't ever know.

PC But I think it also comes to the experience of men in themselves as women.

AT Oh, and that's very important!

PC I think so. I think that's where it's not just politics as an act of defiance, but politics (or whatever it is) as an illumination of our experience.

AT Until men accept themselves as women it's very hard to —

GH No no! I think until men accept themselves as men, not as they've been defined until now, and until women accept themselves as women, and men as men . . . like at this point we're in a state where women are attempting more readily than men to accept themselves as women and question things. My sense of politics is a sense of the whole. When you responded to Bill's questions it was a way that I've heard myself previously, just the word itself turned me off, I just wanted to deny *it all*, and say I'm an individual outside of all that. And it's not true at all. It's to do with how you see yourself in relation to the whole, that is society. Everything a writer writes says something about him or herself and the society at that time.

AT Sure, but I don't *add* it. I can't be conscious of it while I'm doing it.

PC The thing that links politics with the whole formal concern of a novelist or poet, the whole technical concern, is that both of them imply a will to transform. To get into another character, another persona, outside yourself.

AT Yes.

PC We all want paradise through writing.

AT Or whatever.

GH That's not paradise, that's just connection with the whole.

PC It's another word for connection with the whole. When you say that you get a very sensual feeling from being in another person's skin, that gives you a sense of the whole. Which brings us back to Blake, to our misunderstanding of Blake, who is one of the few people who have achieved a unity of desire and experience.

AT I only feel I have failed, if I feel no ear will understand or listen to what I'm saying. But you know when you've done that. I can't really worry about questions of what's political and what isn't.

BS For the past two years you have been all over the country to writer's conferences. Why do you do that?

AT I love it, I have a marvellous time! There are all these other people that call themselves writers. We're all struggling along together, and we're all lost together, it's like a whole pen of sheep. And I vote for the things I believe in. I am trying to change the status of writers in Canada.

WP Just getting back to the matter of women: you've said you write for women, but I can't really accept that, because you turned it around and said you write for yourself.

AT Well, I write for myself, and I happen to be a woman, and I have a vague idea in my head that the people who most understand my writing are women. A lot of men admire what I'm doing, but more women than men.

WP I don't think it's women we should be writing to, but men, at this point.

AT We should be writing for ourselves.

