Carol Ann Duffy: The World’s Wife

**A conversation recorded in Manchester 2005**

**by Barry Wood**

**Barry Wood:** I thought we might start with a general question about **The World’s Wife**, about the overall structure of the poem. Two parallels occur to me: Ted Hughes’s Crow and also Eliot’s The Waste Land. Both poems have a mythological narrative structure together with a strong personal, even autobiographical investment. How did you set about organising your poem, as a sequence, and did either of these poems influence you in any way?

**Carol Ann Duffy:** Crow was not an influence at all. The Waste Land might have been in that it’s a poem I’ve known and loved since I was 16, so it’s become part of the poetic DNA really--an influence buried in the poem but you’re not really aware of it. What I wanted to do in the book was to look at all the stories—fairy tales, myths, stories from history, film and pop music or whatever, stories of heroeswhich had informed me as a writer, part of my cultural ancestry. So I wanted to celebrate them, in a way, but also find a truth which hadn’t been amplified previously. And the way I wanted to do that was to find a female perspective on the character, and I did that by finding a personal connection with the fairy tale, myth, piece of cinema, etc., so that although I’m wearing the mask of Queen Herod or Mrs Beast I’m not lost in my own place, my own life. It might be that it is autobiographical in that it might be true to my imaginative life or my emotional life but not necessarily true to the actual details of my life. Once I’d done that I typed out the poems in a sort of chronological movement. So we start with “Little Red Cap” which is about a young girl becoming a poet and end with “Demeter” which is about a woman becoming a mother. So that it follows the arc of my own life in some ways.

**BW:** The poems are unashamedly set in a contemporary idiom, re-casting the old stories in terms of modern life, even if not your individual life, and re-doing the stories and subverting them.

**CAD:** I think poets and writers have done that forever! What you can do as a poet is take on a story and make it new. Dramatists do this as well. One of the stories in the book is Pygmalion, which has been used by writers from George Bernard Shaw to Willie Russell in Educating Rita, old stories which are made fresh.

**BW:** Right. Shall we go on to “Little Red Cap”? As well as being based on fairy tale, it also seems to be one of the poems with a strong autobiographical investment, focusing on the idea of yourself as a young poet, asserting your independence.

**CAD:** Yes. “Little Red Cap” is the original title in Grimm’s tales of the story we often know as Little Red Riding Hood. In the poem, Little Red Cap is a version of me. The first verse describes the landscape of Stafford—houses, playing fields, factories, the allotment near the railway. These are all literal details of the geography of my home town. And then I have Little Red Cap fall in love with and have a relationship with the Wolf, the wolf in my poem being an older male poet that Little Red Cap, a teenage female poet, learns from. And it becomes the opposite of the original fairy tale, where she fears she will be consumed by the Wolf; whereas in my poem she more or less consumes him. So it’s based on my own first love, first relationship. But it also looks at the idea of women in poetry being dominated by the male tradition.

**BW:** The details of the poem suggest there is a violence involved in asserting independent identity, a violence that echoes the fairy tale?

**CAD:** Yes. I doubt if I would have used the violent imagery of the poem at the end had it not been in the original fairy tale, where the woodcutter comes and opens the wolf up and finds the grandmother inside. The wolf’s belly, the grandmother inside, are all there waiting to be used. In a sense, in the poem, the grandmother’s bones are the silent women who aren’t present in English Literature. Feminism looked back to see why women hadn’t been recognised as a presence in poetry. That’s quite a combination of feminist history and fairy tale. But using Grimm I was pleased to find these layers of meaning.

**BW:** Yes. Part-way through the poem you refer to”words … alive on the tongue … Music and blood.” An enigmatic combination, isn’t it?

**CAD:**I don’t know. Isn’t that what art is? “music” is beautiful, but the “blood” is what the art comes from—the feeling, the experience, the pain, the joy. You get a bit of Ted Hughes coming in there.

**BW:** At the end of the poem the imagery changes: “Out of the forest I come with my flowers … “-- which is deliberately echoed presumably in the image at the end of the sequence when Demeter’s daughter arrives: “bringing all spring’s flowers”?

**CAD:** Yes. The book begins and ends with the image of a young girl carrying flowers. At the beginning, the flowers are the flowers of poetry, and the flowers at the end are the flowers of motherhood.

**BW:** And they’re bound together, poetry and motherhood… To go on to “Thetis”, the second poem: this seems less directly autobiographical. The individual experience is more embedded in the story?

**CAD:** In “Thetis” I was interested in the idea of change, which is what a lot of the stories in Ovid are about of course. I just wanted to look at how Thetis changed and how we as people change. But as I wrote the poem I became involved in the form of it, the kind of rhyme. I had a lot of fun constructing the poem, playing with rhymes: “paw, raw, gore, jaw, saw, twelve-bore” in the fourth verse. I love all the sounds.

**BW:**Thetis says: “I shopped for a suitable shape”—looking for the right tune, the right shape…

**CAD:** Yes. And she’s trying to find the right shape … for love, really. So, she’s “a bird in the hand of a man”, then feels “the squeeze of his fist”. That doesn’t work, so she turns in to the albatross, which is quite a faithful loving thing to do really. The ancient mariner bit. Then she changes again into a snake, coiled in the man’s lap. But feels he is about to strangle her. Changes again into the tiger. It’s about failed love, this poem. She changes into a mermaid, only to be caught again by the man with “his hook and his line”, etc. She becomes “racoon, skunk, stoat”, etc and is “stuffed”; and then is wind and gas only to be destroyed by “a fighter plane”. So, she’s constantly being changed for and by love.

**BW:** All these are images of the masculine world, and how it asserts its power over the female.

**CAD:**Yes. And then she truly changes when she has a child, and there it ends: that’s the true change. And that’s true of me. That’s the thing that changed me most.

**BW:** Actually the image of the child, the experience of childhood, is a recurrent preoccupation, isn’t it, not just here but elsewhere in your work?

**CAD:** Yes. I’ve always thought with Andre Breton--I think it is, the surrealist poet and thinker--that childhood is the only reality. I think I believe that.

**BW:** So, to “Queen Herod”, which in some ways completes the opening triptych, doesn’t it, because you’ve got a fairy tale, a reinterpreted Greek tale and now a voice from the Bible? Was that a pattern you conceived of from the start or something you sorted later?

**CAD:** Well, I suppose the original concept was to take stories I’d been formed by, from childhood. So in my particular case I had a Catholic upbringing, I went to a Catholic primary school and then a Convent school, so stories from the Bible, particularly The New Testament, were part of my background on a daily basis, there was church more than once a week, confession and communion and that sort of thing, and my brothers were altar boys. So these stories are very close to me, and so I didn’t just think—one from the Bible, one from Shakespeare-- these stories were just there in the way in which family stories and family mythology are just there in a way. So I did 30 poems but there could have been a lot more.

**BW:** That was another question--about whether there were other poems which you didn’t include because they didn’t fit into your conception of the collection as a whole. But just to go back to “Queen Herod”. In some live readings of these poems you’ve referred to them as “feminist entertainments” which I suppose is true of some of the later poems but if this is an entertainment, it’s entertainment of a very vivid, dramatic and grotesque kind, isn’t it?

**CAD:** “Queen Herod”? Yes, well, you know the story of King Herod: he heard that John the Baptist was proclaiming the arrival of a new king, and he took this literally, and thought a human king was coming to take his throne and his land and his palace. But of course John the Baptist meant a spiritual king in Jesus Christ. So Herod locked up John the Baptist in the dungeons of his palace and ordered the murder of every boy under the age of two and thought that that would prevent this future king from growing up. And he gave Salome--who had performed a dance for him--and her mother, the head of John the Baptist on a plate. So I grew up with this story from the age of about eight and thought when I was thinking about writing The World’s Wife how violent and dreadful the world of Herod is, including genocide and so on, --it’s so appalling but somehow excused because it’s in the Bible. So I began to think what would make a woman act in that way. And of course I don’t take the poem literally but I was examining the idea of protecting your child from harm; and of course any mother who knew that her daughter was going to grow up and suffer pain and heartbreak would want to protect her daughter from meeting anyone who would do that to her.

**BW:** It’s a dangerous world, Queen Herod’s world, but it is also a world of the solidarity of women, because the Three Queens become the Three Wise Men, representing Grace, Strength and Happiness. Those are the central values ..

**CAD:** Yes, but I was also thinking of the Fairies in the story of Sleeping Beauty, isn’t it, who come bearing gifts –not of gold, frankincense and myrrh, but grace, strength and happiness. And I imagined this as a sort of filmic poem, with the camels, etc.

**BW:** Yes, in some ways this has a very detailed physical landscape.

**CAD:** Yes, obviously I’m taking things from the original story but in my poem I wouldn’t want it to be thought that this was a way to go on. (Laughter)

I’ve always thought the last nine lines are a bit Plathy…

**BW:** Plathy?

**CAD:** Yes, “daggers for eyes” and so on. I’m not influenced by her work but she may also be part of the poetic DNA.

**BW:** As was Hughes … ?

**CAD:** Possibly.

**BW:** “Mrs Midas”--one of the first of the poems I heard you read aloud. What got you started on this?

**CAD:** I was asked to contribute to Michael Hoffman’s collection of translations of Ovid and was asked to do the story of Io. But my favourite was the story of Midas. I used to love that as a child, I used to imagine what it would be like if everything you touched turned to gold, not only your food but people you loved, so I really did want to do Midas. And this is a poem about the failed love, autobiographical--if you like, another take on the man in Little Red Cap, but done more lovingly. It’s a poem about leaving someone.

**BW:** Yes, but isn’t it also contemptuous about male vanity? It’s one of the first of the voices, the women’s voices in the collection, which expresses exasperation at men, which isn’t so much about male power over women but about masculine egotism and stupidity?

**CAD:** Yes, the rhythm of the poem comes very much from my own family, my mother and my grandmother, which were actually Irish, so it is in an Irish voice, “What in the name of God is going in?” and “Look, we all have wishes; granted; /But who has wishes granted?” etc. I wanted to bring into the poem some of the rhythms of the exasperation of women. Jesus!

**BW:** Yes, there’s also a nice conjunction of things, in term of idiom, like in the third verse, you’ve got “the Cloth of Gold and .. Miss Macready”. Sounds like a teacher.

**CAD:** Yes, Miss Macready is Mrs Midas’s History Teacher! And the Field of the Cloth of Gold was, as far as I remember, when Henry VIII met the French king and they tried to outdo each other by showing how much wealth they had. And because Midas is turning everything into gold, … a sort of school note comes into the poem. And that’s what happens to me. The school I went to we had a huge amount of facts drummed into us, the names of capitals, the defenestration of Prague, the Diet of Worms, the Field of the cloth of Gold, all this factual knowledge, and I like to use it up in my poems, because I can’t think of what else to do with it! So in my poems you’ll find lots of general knowledge, put in because it’s a way of getting rid of all this useless information! It’s the same in my later poem “The Laughter of Stafford Girls’ High”, a long poem in which I put everything I could remember from school, just to use it up.

**BW:** An inventory of your school days! Going back to Mrs Midas, as well as exasperation, there is horror at what’s going on.

…

**CAD:** Yes, based in affection really—“At least,/You’ll be able to give up smoking for good” … So although she’s annoyed and exasperated with him, she’s also in love with him—“we were passionate then .. unwrapping each other like presents .. “. And his selfishness has ended their love. So this is what this poem is about: selfishness destroying their marriage.

**BW:** One of the things that has always struck me about this poem is the way the comic and the exasperated tone and the horror at what happening comes through at the end in, on the one hand, the condemnation of “pure selfishness” and, on the other, with the immense sense of loss. The lyricism at the end expresses the tragedy of the situation.

**CAD:** Yes, “his warm hands on my skin, his touch”.

**BW:** When I’ve heard you read this line, you’ve always give a long pause, or a pause at any rate, before you say “his touch”, as if you want to leave open that sense of regret and loss.

**CAD:** And the poem is of course about the “Midas touch” ..

**BW:** So there’s a pun there! His “touch” is both loving and destructive of love.

And the next poem: “from Mrs Tiresias”?

**CAD:** Yes. And then, after reading Ovid for the purpose of contributing to the Michael Hoffman anthology, I remembered Tiresias from The Waste Land, whom Eliot describes as having “wrinkled female dugs”. And of course when I first read the poem, having a Scottish background, I thought Eliot was talking about two very old dogs! (Laughter) I didn’t know “dugs” was a name for breasts. Tiresias was an interesting character because he lived seven years as a woman and then returned to being a man. So he was the only character who knew what it was to be both male and female.

**BW:** That’s part of the attraction of the figure as well, presumably, that this is a character that has dual sexuality, if you like.

**CAD:** Well, there’s a lot going on in this poem and I’m not sure I know half of what’s going on. First of all I was amused by the idea of being married to a guy who goes out for a walk with his dogs (in this case, actually “dogs” and not Eliot’s “dugs”, a little private joke!) and comes home a woman. So Mrs Tiresias has to cope with that and she tries to do that by saying that s/he’s her twin sister, and he’s gone away, and she lends her clothes. And of course she still wants him and is quite happy because she really loves him, wanting to sleep with him--“holding his soft new shape in my arms”. The implication there is that this is her husband who has become a woman but because she loves him she will now enter into a lesbian relationship with him because love is love, and that’s how I feel---I feel if you love someone, whether it’s a woman loving a man, or a woman loving a woman, or a man loving a man, what’s important there is love. And she’s willing to celebrate that, whatever the kind of relationship. But Tiresias has a problem with that, because the condition of his love has to do with how he wants to be seen. So now that he’s a woman he does not want to be seen as a lesbian; in fact he’d rather leave the relationship than go against convention, whatever. So he does let her kiss him, and he can’t change. And then he goes off and starts to make a career out of it. He won’t make love in his position and goes on television telling women how he knows how they feel. But neither will he sleep with men because he is a man and he won’t go to bed with a new partner. He won’t do anything that isn’t right because he’s trapped in his own conventions. And so his wife, Mrs Tiresias, finds happiness with someone else, a woman, so she does enter into a proper authentic lesbian relationship. Leaving Tiresias completely confounded, because he’s a woman as well.

**BW:** So this is also the story of the deterioration of a relationship, of a marriage ..

**CAD:** Of a love.

**BW:** Though from the start she is pretty scathing about it and him in his patched Harris Tweed jacket, etc. and the fact that he writes up to The Times about the first cuckoo in Spring. So he’s the conventional suburban man who remains the conventional suburban man despite the transformation.

**CAD:** Yes, he’s unable to change, to deal with love or cope with anything other than the conventional man and wife relationship. So it’s about the prejudice against gay relationship on one level. But she, when she does meet someone else, goes for women.

**BW:** I’m interested that when you talk about the poem you give a rather more forgiving picture of Tiresias and their relationship than the poem itself.

**CAD:** Where am I more forgiving? I emphasise that he’s reactionary, short-sighted and so on.

**BW:** But you’ve emphasised here that there’s a disappointed love whereas in the early on in the poem you get this picture of a rather pathetic man…

**CAD:** “Let me not to the marriage of true minds/Admit impediment. Love is not love/That alters where it alteration finds ..“. That’s what’s behind this poem. He changes into a woman, and life goes on, and I could have put love has to go on, and she puts it about that she’s a twin and she helps him out with clothes and whatever and still sleeps with him. But he won’t be seen to be loved, so he does alter because he’s conventional so he can’t do the changes. His love has limits, her love doesn’t, so that he’s punished for being conventional at the end by having to see her with another woman when he could have been that woman. Because he’s her husband. So he should have changed. So he loses.

**BW:** Again, the poem is full of detail about what it is for a man to be transformed into a woman.

**CAD:** I did have fun with the passage about the “period” when he has to spend a week in bed, etc. When I read the poem that always gets screams of laughter from the women in the audience and I think the reason it gets a laugh is that women seem more able to embrace change and radical transformation than men perhaps and are also capable of putting up with a bit of pain. (Chuckles)

**BW:** “Pilate’s Wife” takes us into rather different territory.

**CAD:** Yes. But I like to think there’s a link through the hands at the end of “Mrs Tiresias” to the hands at the start of “Pilate’s Wife”. In fact hands form a sort of motif through the poem. Again, this is a poem written because of my background and I suppose this time I’m writing about my own attitude to Christianity. Being Catholic, it was pretty strict: I wasn’t allowed not to believe. That was a serious and difficult thing to do.

**BW:** Do we ever actually hear anything about Pilate’s wife in the Biblical story?

**CAD:** We do. She writes him a note, which comes into the poem. Pilate’s wife sent him a note. I think she did slip into the crowd to see what was going on and warned Pilate not to have anything to do with it. And so he washed his hands of it.

**BW:** But this is a poem about someone who is estranged from the situation she’s in and who finds this figure, the figure of Christ, attractive. I mean, she doesn’t believe he is a god, but he has power and she is attracted: “he looked at **me**. My God./ His eyes were eyes to die for.”

**CAD:** Yes, I think there I’m exploring the definite charisma, that Jesus Christ had, and that ability to transform people’s lives and to make people believe in him. And people believed in his life-time that he was the son of god, and some did not and he was put to death. And Pilate’s wife doesn’t believe (though I play around with the idea that she might: “My God./His eyes ..” etc); but she recognises his huge charisma and his talents, she desires him in a sense and she writes a warning note to Pilate, wanting him to set him free, and Pilate washes his hands of the whole affair, and we know the rest. And of course she thinks that Pilate did believe so what he does is doubly bad. Because he did believe.

**BW:** But she recognises his power. The dream she has is an erotic dream. This is also a poem where you’ve got a definite form.

**CAD:** I like writing in stanzas or small canvases, because it gives me a structure and forces me to make decisions. “Mrs Aesop” has five line stanzas, and “Mrs Midas” has stanzas of 6 lines.

**BW:** Another thing I wanted to ask you about is the use of the word “talented”, which occurs a number of times in yr books, and which you give a particular, almost personal meaning to. You give it a particular spin. Why do you think that is?

**CAD:** I do mention “talented”. I think it’s a part of being human, so love, childhood, talent, they’re elements of our existence, and I’m interested in talent, as it manifests itself in human life. So Jesus Christ, whatever else he was, was clearly talented.

**BW:** And it suggests a gift, or being gifted, doesn’t it?

**CAD:** I think everyone has talent. And I suppose another thing I write about elsewhere is the idea of people whose talent—whatever it may be-- isn’t allowed to come out, or is suppressed for reasons of injustice, or poverty, or racism. Each individual has talent which is special to themselves. I don’t think that some people are talented and others aren’t. I think that some people express their talent and others don’t. I think it’s moral to allow people to express their talent, and immoral not to. People who express their talent change their own lives and lives of others; and those who don’t express their talent, don’t. So their lives are arrested in some way. Your talent might be for friendship, or parenthood or football, or singing or medicine or anything but to express the talent fully will change your life.

**BW:** I suppose that’s what Pilate’s wife recognises, isn’t it, that whatever the fate of this figure, I mean it’s as much about Christ as it is about Pilate and Pilate’s wife…

And “Mrs Aesop”? I mean, here beginneth a thorough demolition of the masculine ego.

**CAD:** Yes. I like the fact that it begins “By Christ”, making the connection with the previous poem, and that the next poem, “Mrs Darwin”, is in a Zoo, after the animals in Aesop. Again very familiar stories from childhood—Aesop’s Fables. As a child I always liked stories about animals but Aesop’s fables always disappointed me and I think it was because of the moral tacked on the end. He has to make sense of things tell us what the story is about. I re-read as many of the stories as I could and all the references to the jackdaw envying the lion, the hare and the tortoise, sour grapes, etc., are from the tales. I suppose I’m looking at the idea of being bored by someone and looking at clichés—you can’t make a silk purse out of a sow’s ear—and so on.

**BW:** Yes, the fables have become clichés, expressing simplistic truths, and that’s what Mrs Aesop is resisting. She makes an assault on the man through his stories, and the limitations of his stories are the limitations of the man.

**CAD:** She’d like less stories and more passionate love. She wants him to stop strutting about and being big-headed and spend more time on their relationship. So, at the end, I make use of that Bobbitt case where the wife cuts the husband’s penis off. She doesn’t actually do that in the poem but she gets her own back by threatening that. And there’s a pun there with tail/tale, suggesting story and penis. And of course “She who laughs last“ is from Aesop, so she’s also getting her own back on him by throwing his words back in his face.

**BW:** In some ways this is one of the most straightforward poems in the collection, exposing what one critic (Avril Horner) calls “the masquerade of masculinity”, this seems the most direct assault so far, or the most sustained assault, anyway, would you see it like that?

**CAD:** I don’t really see it like that. I don’t see it as an assault. I see it as a way of looking at the stories. So for me it’s a celebration really--of language, relationship. To write about anything at all, even if you’re critical, is to celebrate, is to make something. So it’s a giving thing. So I never feel even in the writing of these poems that it’s having a go at certain aspects of being male, although I can see that that’s part of what comes out of the content. But my aim is to find hidden truths or fresh ways of looking at familiar things. In some ways, a lot of the poems in The World’s Wife are love poems about men; they’re poems of regret that perhaps that the initial relationship has ended through selfishness. But I see this as a loving book.

**BW:** On the whole, I’d agree but I think there are certain voices which are very satirical and there’s not a whole lot of love expressed in “Mrs Aesop”; she calls him ”asshole” and says at the end “the sex/was diabolical …”.

**CAD:** Yes, but she wants the sex to be good and loving ..

**BW:** Yes, but it’s not there, is it, there’s not much that’s loving about the relationship between Aesop and Mrs Aesop, is there? It’s difficult not to agree with her judgement that he is an absolute asshole!

**CAD:** Well, that’s marriage. But she’s still there, in the marriage. I mean, how many people, men and women, are in long, faithful marriages where they’re disappointed? I mean, many of us, and it explains that sometimes in our lives it’s part of the human condition that people lead lives of quiet desperation. Well, not everyone, but sometimes, some people, some of the time ; so the thought in this: but she’s still married to him, she hasn’t left him, she’s still making love to him, she’s just disappointed and is particularly disappointed that… he can’t make it now ! (The conversation breaks up in laughter at this point … )

**BW:** You mean there was something earlier in their relationship which has now gone completely sour.

**CAD:** Yeah.

**BW:** OK. “Mrs Darwin”. Fairly unequivocal – it punctures the male ego, and the assumption that…

**CAD:** … that all great thought comes from the male. I’m sure that if we were able to go back through history we’d find many, many moments where the wife came up with the idea and the husband took the credit! So “Mrs Darwin” is just a squib about that.

**BW:** “Mrs Sisyphus”?

**CAD:** Another Ovid-based poem. Sisyphus was condemned by the gods to push a stone up a hill and then when he gets to the top the stone rolls down again. This poem to me was about men (or it could be women, because it could apply to women as well) who just spend too much time working. And leave their relationship, and don’t work on their marriage. And again in this one I’ve got that slightly Irish-Scottish voice, with words like “feckin”, which I take from my own family. I had great fun with this because I wanted everything to rhyme or half-rhyme with “work”, and so that goes all the way through: “jerk”, “berk”, “dork”, “shirk” and “work” at the end.

**BW:** So the play with words contrasts with the workaholic ethos of Sisyphus?

**CAD:** I had to put in a lot of work on the poem as well. Sometimes I put a buried one in like “deepening murk”.

**BW:** You enjoy rhyme, don’t you, for comic purposes but also it’s a structural thing, and it’s not only end rhyme: you use internal rhyme a lot. It’s almost a trademark…

**CAD:** Is it? I love rhyme. I like writing sonnets, with end-rhymes, but I prefer buried rhymes or internal rhyming or tumbling rhymes because I think that’s closer to speech. And I suppose I think of words as a sort of big crowd, just bumping into each other and meeting and then going away and having little relationships with words themselves, and friendships or hostilities, and they gang up together and then go away. I like doing that.

**BW:** “Mrs Faust”? This is definitely one of several re-tellings of the Faust legend, isn’t it?

**CAD:** Yes. Faust sells his soul to Mephistopheles, to the Devil, for twenty-eight years of power, wealth, time-travel and magic and he can be anyone he wants to be and at the end he has to pay with his soul.

**BW:** They’re a modern couple, aren’t they, Faust and his wife, a modern academic couple?

**CAD:** Yes. I didn’t want every woman in the book to be better than the men. That wasn’t my agenda, so I wanted to look at unpleasant aspects of being female as well as look at ways of being male. So Mrs Faust isn’t a very nice person – she’s materialistic, she doesn’t like children, she loves the life-style, and she indulges herself with all the toys and therapies and pamperings she can have, a sort of AbFab type. She buys a kidney, so she shadows his greed and selfishness. So the poem is a satire of the kind of life we can drift into in this twenty-first century, of being completely selfish and materialistic and not thinking of resources, and being unloving, not only to each other but to the environment and to other countries. She only goes to Africa to get what she can, tries everything –being teetotal, vegan, Buddhist, just as fads.

**BW:** Yes, for all this volume is thought of as a sort of feminist manifesto, it’s not always easy on women.

**CAD:** I wanted to look at ways of being human really. It just so happens that the stories that I grew up with feature men—Faust, Midas, Tiresias, Pilate, King Herod—what I’ve tried to do is put some female into it. So I wasn’t trying to attack the male, but put the female into it, into the story. In this case, the human character I’m being critical of is Mrs Faust, not Mr. He’s hardly there, and a basic question to ask is: if he doesn’t have a soul to sell, does she? How can you have a soul if you buy someone’s kidney with your credit card? Which people do.

**BW:** Yes, as you say, she shadows what he does, in entirely materialistic ways…

**CAD:** She might even be worse. When he goes to prostitutes, she doesn’t feel jealous just irritated-- “not jealousy,/But chronic irritation … “. I had great fun with that, finding the rhyme: “colonic irrigation”!

**BW:** Byronic, the use of multi-syllabic rhyme? The strength of this poem is again the way the voice comes through. The various voices you use all have a certain kind of toughness of attitude and language, you use the phrase “tough words” later on. All your women speak in voices which are unequivocal, and make revelations about themselves.

**CAD:** I suppose that’s a bit like me really.

**BW:** You don’t mind associating yourself with the materialism of Mrs Faustus?

**CAD:** I’m quite materialistic: shopaholic. There is a part of me that is like that, or I wouldn’t be able to write the poem.

**BW:** I suppose each character is a refraction of the self, not necessarily your self, but from a range—insofar as we all have them-- of different selves and possibilities.

**CAD:** “I am a Material Girl”!

**BW:** Yes. Is this true of Delilah?

**CAD:** Delilah, yes. Another Biblical story. But as a child I always had a sneaky fondness for that Tom Jones’ song: “I saw the light /On the night/That I passed by her window .. da da da dum”. So here I was looking at, again, love, and as we know Delilah betrays Samson by cutting his hair and taking away his strength. Though he grows it again to bring down the temple. But in this poem I have her do it so that instead of becoming powerless he becomes gentle. So she brings out the female side of him, the feminine side, she that’s why she cuts his hair, and in a sense he wants her to do that, he asks her to help him become more female. Again, I keep up a series of rhymes and half-rhymes on “hair”—care, roar, bear, scar, war, cure, burr, etc., all the way through—so you’re reminded of the central idea of the story, of Delilah cutting Samson’s hair. But it’s a love poem. But there’s a sadness in it, she locks the door and cuts his hair, and in doing that, she will lose him.

**BW:** It’s interesting, the idea of teaching him how to care, because that turns around the idea of a strong man who glories in his strength, though Delilah remains a rather scheming woman: “I cannot be gentle .. “

**CAD:** She’s sure he wants to change, so in a sense she is doing something she thinks he wants, but there is something sad about it because she locks the door and doesn’t want him to see it, and so something of the Delilah of the original story is still there.

**BW:** In the original story, she cuts his hair to take away his strength whereas in your revision of it she does it with a certain amount of regret, with second thoughts, because he wants to become tender and loving.

**CAD:** He is … while she does it. That’s “the how and the why and the where”. The element of regret is because of what actually happened … but in my poem she does it to bring out his female side, and because she believes he wants to change and she loves him, but if you go back to the original it wasn’t a good idea for him to have his hair cut.

**BW:** It’s interesting how at the end you leave some things unsaid, which implies consequences of the act but doesn’t spell them out because your poem has made us think about what those consequences might be in a different way: it improves him as a human being but destroys him as a “warrior”.

**CAD:** Poems are just moments, so the poet isn’t obliged to say what happens next, she obliged to catch the moment, of intense feeling.

**BW:** This is the case with “Anne Hathaway”?

**CAD:** Yes, I suppose I would call this a relaxed sonnet, rhythmically it is, and the rhyme is “relaxed”: echoed in “a softer rhyme/to his”, doing that in the poem as well as in the relationship. And this is, on a quite simple level, about Shakespeare and sexual feelings, and love, my life, our lives. The poem is challenging the interpretation of his will as being an insult to her.

**BW:** It seems to be a homage to Shakespeare, but also an assertion of the sonnet form and a reflection on the relationship between language and feeling, poetry and the body.

**CAD:** The poem is about memory, and how he lives not only in memory but in love, in poetry; she holds him both in the poem and in her “widow’s head”. But she prefers to have a casket where you might keep ashes.

**BW:** This is a love poem, a lover’s words, there’s no ambiguity about that, as there almost always is in your other poems. You said earlier that you were always attracted to the sonnet form: what is it that attracts you?

**CAD:** They remind me of prayers. And they use rhymes, metre, and are only fourteen lines long, so I think they’re very good for poems which are for all of us--like love poems or elegies or spiritual moments. I think the sonnet form is good for holding those moments, as prayers are or psalms. And you can memorise sonnets better than other forms. So I like to use it when I write in those areas—death or love or spiritual issues. Though they can be used for comedy…

**BW:** But more often than not you use it for tenderer areas of subject matter rather than the satirical or the political.

**CAD:** It’s only because they’re comforting or consoling.

**BW:** And is that something to do with the form, that there’s a kind of completeness about the sonnet.

**CAD:** It’s like the little black dress or the suit that you put on for a wedding or a funeral, a formal occasion. And “Queen Kong”, which follows, is also straightforwardly about love.

**BW:** Although it’s one of the most bizarre love poems in the language!

**CAD:** Well, it depends where you’re coming from! It comes from the film King Kong , and he is tender or tenderly possesses the Fay Wray character.

**BW:** It’s a variant on the Beauty and the Beast story, isn’t it?

**CAD:** Yes. In the movie, when King Kong is taken to New York, and is paraded around and exhibited, even though he loves Fay Wray, he ends up smashing planes and being violent. So, in “Queen Kong”, she falls in love with a human-sized man who is visiting her island to make a documentary, so she’s never quite safe. But when he has to return to New York she can’t bear it and she follows him and pads round NY, peeping in skyscrapers until she finds him, and then she picks him out of his room. And she sits on the top of the Empire State Building as well, as in the film; but she takes him there so that he can say goodbye to New York. And then she takes him to her island in a marriage and they have twelve happy years until he dies. At which point she preserves and stuffs him .. .[laughter] … I’m absolutely insane, aren’t I? [More laughter]

**BW:** What is going on there? It is a Beauty and the Beast story, I mean, you talk about Samson learning to care, so this is Kong in female form learning to care for her little man. It is a love affair, and it is quite an erotic poem.

**CAD:** The thing that amuses me about “Queen Kong”, the poem, is the fact that the man, the little man, actually falls in love with her, that he goes back willingly and allows her to “peel” him. He does love her. And when they’re married, he sleeps in her fur and rubs her eyelids.

**BW:** This begins to remind me of Gulliver’s Voyage to Brobdignag…

**CAD:** O yes, that’s an idea, I could make a story of that, couldn’t I?

**BW:** There’s a sense there of the male entrapped by the woman, and one could read it as about the way all the assumptions the male has about the female are being subverted or even being inverted here, so that all the ideas about being treated as a sexual object are being transferred and reversed here.

**CAD:** Well, yes, but I suppose my interest is that is that I wanted to write about Great Love and so the great love here is literal, and the great love becomes a huge and female and the way that great love doesn’t give up, doesn’t let go, so even death can’t stop it and that’s why she preserves him and puts jewels where his eyes were. And she even feels that when she’s moved and “roars” in bereavement that he can hear her. So it wasn’t so much that I wanted to do this male/female thing, although I do it, but that allowed me to write about this great love.

**BW:** And one does feel the power of her obsession really, the poem does have an “epicness” about, which you are drawing on from the film. It is a very cinematic poem.

**CAD:** And also, because of 9/11, it’s a sort of odd poem now, the landscape of the poem has changed by those incidents, and there are times when I’ve read the poem since that I’ve felt doubly saddened.

**BW:** There’s an ambiguity about the whole thing, isn’t there, because it’s both a powerful expression of an obsessive love but it does also reverse those ideas about who’s strongest in a relationship. “He was mine”--she says--“my man … I picked him, like a chocolate from the top layer/of a box”. (Chuckles all round) As a male reader, I suppose, I feel a sort of ambiguity about that! (More laughter!) I mean, I don’t mind having my clothes chosen but I’m not sure about being a “chocolate”, even from the top layer of the box!

**CAD:** If you loved Queen Kong, do you think you could go and live with her?

**BW:** I don’t know. I might have to read Gulliver’s Voyage to Brobdignag again. Again, you bring a certain kind of humour to the poem—not comic/ha-ha humour but a comedy in the details which points up the discrepancies between Queen Kong and her little man; but also in the lyricism at the end there’s a real poignancy and sense of loss: “He’d sit, cross-legged, near my ear/for hours: his plaintive, lost tunes making me cry”—because this is a love based in unfulfilled desires and yearnings.

**CAD:** Yes. And in “Mrs Quasimodo” there’s another kind of “true” love. This is from the Hugo novel Hunchback of Notre Dame which I knew as a book and then later in Charles Laughton’s film version. Though I suppose I took the noise of the bells from the film! In the novel, as in the film, Quasimodo—who is very ugly, physically—falls in love with the goat-girl, Esmeralda, and rescues her and gives her sanctuary. But here I’m imagining that we move away from the cliché of beauty and the beast, and have beast and beast, and having him looking in a mirror and deciding to marry another beast, against the implication that only beautiful women are good enough even for beasts. So Mrs Quasimodo in the poem, she’s always liked bells, and she got picked on as a child because she was ugly and lame and when she was older she moves to a city and decides to join a bell-ringing class and she goes to the first meeting with the other bell-ringers or campanologists and when she sets eyes on Quasimodo it’s love at first sight. So much so that after the bell-ringing they set to and start making love underneath the ropes. And then they get married…

**BW:** Well, when you say, “making love”, it’s rather more graphic and basic than that: “he fucked me underneath the gaping, stricken bells/until I wept”. This is the reverse of “the sex was diabolical”!

**CAD:** It’s good that students are doing this for A-Level, isn’t it?

**BW:** Well, yes, when you think about the furore some years ago about Tony Harrison’s V, when there were protests about it being used as an A-Level text because of the “language”.

**CAD:** Anyway, it’s a difficult marriage and she celebrates his hard work … and feels and desires that he will be saved. But she notices that his love for her begins to change and he begins to pick on her and become critical and he starts fancying the Esmeralda character. And she realises that he doesn’t find her beautiful … so she develops a self-loathing of her body. But she moves beyond that, driven by a terrible rage, which encompasses self-loathing and moves towards destroying the bells which she has loved since childhood, and which he loves, and she goes up to the bell-tower and attacks the bells, cuts the bell-ropes and pulls out all the tongues in the bells, so she does to the bells what she feels has been done to her heart.

**BW:** This is a poem of quite savage jealousy, isn’t it? Which rebounds on her as well as on him.

**CAD:** I don’t think it’s a poem of jealousy, it’s a poem of betrayal. She sort of works something out with Esmeralda, so she doesn’t feel jealous she feels totally devastated and betrayed.

**BW:** But doesn’t the sense of betrayal lead to a terrible jealousy and a desire to destroy the bells and all they represent?

**CAD:** She doesn’t feel jealousy of Esmeralda; she feels inadequate and she feels self-loathing and she feels fury at him being unfaithful to her. In fact that’s the primary feeling she has: her terrible rage and grief is because he has betrayed their love, so she’s not focusing on Esmeralda, she’s focusing on his betrayal. She acknowledges Esmeralda’s beauty: “tumbling auburn hair,/those devastating eyes .. “. And there she’s saying that it’s better to be like that, because you get all the attention and love, and I’m not getting that.

**BW:** Yes, I suppose there’s almost something loving about her description of Esmeralda, but then it turns into loathing and a desire for revenge.

**CAD:** Her love for Quasimodo has been her “sanctuary”, and now that sanctuary and love has been given to someone else. The love has been taken away, and the feeling of betrayal leads to a terrible rage because she wants to hurt him where she thinks he can be hurt most, which is in the music of the bells. But it’s also herself she hurts. But I was conscious of the poem as being about how women can develop self-loathing and harm themselves.

**BW:** The phrase “the murdered music of the bells” brings across very powerfully the almost tragic feeling of the poem; in some ways, it’s one of the saddest poems in the volume, describing what happens to people in that sort of situation, bringing in the beauty and passion of love and the horror and brutality of its betrayal. Love and betrayal are both associated with the bells.

**CAD:** Yes. It’s was difficult to find a book on bell-ringing. One of the side-effects of writing The World’s Wife was the amount of research I had to do for the book. So I had to find out about bells and what they could do—the stretti and trills and so on. And I like the lines “No more practising/for bell-ringers/on smudgy autumn nights” because there’s a church at the end of the road where I live here, and they have bell-ringing. So it’s a constant part of my life here.

**BW:** Shall we go on to “Medusa”?

**CAD:** Yes, “Medusa”—I suppose I’m putting all the monsters together. Again, another favourite character of mine from Greek mythology is “Medusa” with her head of snakes, and if you looked at her you turned to stone. So this is a poem about jealousy. Medusa feels that her “perfect man, Greek God” will betray her. Her suspicions grow in her mind until they become so poisonous that the hair on her head transforms into “filthy snakes”. So the hair becomes snakes and, if you ever have been jealous, that’s pretty much what it feels like—maddened by jealousy and paranoid. I just thought that was a great image for jealousy, poisonous green snakes. And then, after the change in her hair, her breath changes, her language changes, and she becomes this terrible creature and rather than allowing him to carry out his betrayal in a serious way, actually, she would rather he was dead. So she starts looking at things and they turn to stone: the bee becomes a pebble, the singing bird gravel, the cat a housebrick, the snuffling pig a boulder, the dragon a mountain spewing out fire. She’s capable of turning everything into stone. And in the original story, Perseus, who sets out to cut off the head of Medusa, knows that he will have to use his shield to reflect her head so that he can see what he’s doing and avoid being turned to stone. In my poem, his shield is his heart and his sword is his tongue, and he kills her by betraying her and not loving her. And she says: “Look at me now”, and she means both: you’ve done this to me, I used to be loving and happy; and also “look at me” because she wants to end it, and we know what happens.

**BW:** The poem does seem to connect the with previous one, as poems about betrayal, but also because of the form, the clipped lines which are full of passion and tension and hate, including self-hate.

**CAD:** I don’t think hate, but love. All these poems—from Queen Kong onwards—are about love that’s been betrayed. The women love the men—Mrs Quasimodo adores Quasimodo, Medusa adores Perseus, so these poems are about people whose partners are doing them wrong. The love is there, it’s just twisted. There’s no point at which the women hate the men.

**BW:** Well, okay, it’s “love gone bad”, so Medusa is aware that what was love has become its opposite.

**CAD:** No. Love gone bad has changed her. She doesn’t hate, she’s distressed, and jealous and paranoid and desperate. But she doesn’t hate him. She says: “it’s you I love,/perfect man, Greek God, my own; … you come/with a shield for a heart/and a sword for a tongue”: she doesn’t hate him, she loves him. But love has twisted her as it twisted Mrs Quasimodo and ends in a loss of self-esteem. So that’s why: “Look at me now” is an appeal as well as a look-at-me-now and I’ll turn you to stone. And the look- what-you’ve-done-to-me connects with the next poem--“The Devil’s Wife”, another monster created by twisted love. And of course Medusa is referred to in this.

**BW:** It’s curious that this poem is almost at the heart of the collection, just about halfway through, and it is one of the most chilling poems in all kinds of ways.

**CAD:** Based on Myra Hindley.

**BW:** Yes, it refers specifically to the relationship between Myra Hindley and Ian Brady, and that’s something that’s preoccupied throughout your life, hasn’t it? At least you’ve talked about it as a significant memory from your childhood.

**CAD:** Yes, I suppose most childhoods have their horrors, don’t they? I think for my daughter it might be Holly and Jessica [victims of the Soham murders] which she and her generation still talk about and it’s something that comes out of childhood which changes it and darkens it. And in my case it was the Moors murderers; and in that case it was more complicated because press coverage kept Myra Hindley in our face for thirty years or so. “I gave the cameras my Medusa stare.” And she didn’t help her case by constantly trying to get out of prison and then not revealing details about the crime which might have helped the families. It’s a very complicated case. I’d have preferred it if she had gone to prison, and she’d stayed in prison and the tabloids had stayed away from her. And that she had confessed properly and then in time had been released in a civilised manner. What I didn’t like about that that whole thing was when the tabloids saw her refusal to be truthful, and saw her attempt to be released before being truthful, even after the crimes were admitted.

So I wanted to look at the idea of evil, of women who commit crimes because of their relationship with particular men. I mean, I don’t think anyone would argue that she wouldn’t have committed these crimes if she hadn’t met him and she would probably been just a normal working-class Manchester lass. But she did get involved with a revolting psychopath and embarked on a folie a deux. So the poem, without making any kind of judgement, looks at aspects of that, at something which has been a part of my consciousness from childhood as well as part of a larger national debate. I try to write about how she came to be living with an incarnation of the devil.

**BW:** Yes, although as you say, the story of Hindley and Brady is about a woman becoming involved with a man who is psychopathic, and to an extent has recognised what he did to her, and has taken responsibility, more than she has. The problem here is that she is seen as irredeemable. It’s as if she can’t escape. In your poem—putting aside Myra Hindley for a minute—The Devil’s Wife is unable to face up to what she’s done.

**CAD:** Well, she says: “What did I do to us all, to myself/When I was the Devil’s Wife?” In the poem, she starts by being attracted to the devil, and is completely consumed by that, and then becomes involved in the crimes, and then we have her denial which comes into the “Bible” section: “not me … can’t remember”. And in “Night” she says she will tell in the morning, but her night is fifty years, so she doesn’t tell. And then “Appeal” has a double meaning because getting out of prison involves an appeal but also an appeal involves questions to the reader: would it have been better “If I’d been stoned to death/If I’d been hung …?”

**BW:** This last section of the poem is almost like a biblical chant, or biblical incantation?

**CAD:** Yes, and “Night” is a prayer, and “Bible”.

**BW:** And you’ve spoken of the sonnet as a kind of prayer, and this is a sonnet, and quite tightly organised.

**CAD:** And she did get involved with religion while she was in prison, I’m aware of that.

**BW:** Though there is something irredeemable about her: being the devil’s wife, she can’t escape the diabolical!

**CAD:** Yes, I suppose that what I’m saying in the poem is that the devil shouldn’t have a wife but there are some women who rely on the devil and what I’m saying is: why? And I’m exploring that. The devil should be single, if a devil were to exist, which I doubt. But what I’m saying is that—as in Nazi Germany—they are women who get hitched up to diabolical men. So it’s saying women do this, we’re not a superior species. There are women who get involved with diabolical men. How can that be?

**BW:** The other thing about the poem is the ordinariness of the devil and the relationship: “Fancied himself. Looked at the girls/in the office ..”: he’s a figure we can recognise from ordinary life who is transformed in the course of the poem into something quite horrifying. It recalls the phrase used by Hannah Arendt about Eichmann: “the banality of evil”. You seem to be emphasising how the banality of her life makes her vulnerable to this figure by her own self-doubt. “Nobody liked my hair. Nobody liked how I spoke.”

**CAD:** “He held my heart in his fist and squeezed it dry.” She doesn’t care. “The Devil was evil, mad, but I was the Devil’s wife/which made me worse”. And of course this is what was said about Myra Hindley in the tabloid press.

**BW:** Psychologically, the heart of the poem suggests a conflict in human nature between the capacity for love and the capacity for destruction.

**CAD:** Loving the wrong person leads to terrible events. That, for me, answers the Hindley dilemma: that she does what she does for love, which is horrifying, isn’t it?

**BW:** Yes. The other thing about this poem is that although it relates to a specific case it also can be translated into a more general reality.

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**BW:** We can turn to “Circe” almost with a sense of relief!

**CAD:** Yes, I love this poem! And the recipe at the heart of the poem is a proper recipe for pig’s cheek. If you follow it, you can cook it!

**BW:** You seem to enjoy yourself in this poem, and you have fun with language in the poem, you enjoy the sounds of words so that it is a very sensuous poem, quite appropriately.

**CAD:** She remembers being young, on her island, and the ships come and she would wade out, waist-deep, hoping for men, and hoping that the man of her dreams will be on the ship. So she remembers doing that. But of course she’s subsequently been disappointed by experience, because the men that she’s encountered haven’t listened ever to her prayers or her rhymes. So she’s been not fulfilled in her relationships, so she’s had it up to here, so she’s decided all men are bastards and she’s taken to turning them into pigs and barbequing them. And she’s surrounded by her nymphs and her nereids, who are younger women, so she’s in Miss Havisham mode and training them up not to trust men.

**BW:** This contrasts with the previous poem, which is about isolation and is spoken into a silence perhaps, whereas Circe is addressing her nymphs and assuming a solidarity with them, which explains her confidence.

**CAD:** She’s a sort of guru, isn’t she?

**BW:** We can talk about the poem as a celebration of the sensual but there’s also a hint at the end with those “three black ships” of something else, something full of regrets. What do they signify: death, mortality?

**CAD:** They’re a memory she has of when she was younger and these ships come and did bring a man she loved and it didn’t work out. In the original, she was rejected by Ulysses, wasn’t she? Again, it’s that idea of a love for someone who doesn’t love you. The ships she swims towards, she thinks, are full of hope and love, she’s hoping for men, but the fact that the ships are black is ominous. She might have known then they were carrying a different cargo from the one she was hoping for, a cargo of rejecting love.

**BW:** And so to “Mrs Lazarus”. The celebration of the sensuous and the sensual in “Circe” is contrasted with the horrors of the flesh here.

**CAD:** Yes. This is a poem of bereavement. Many of the poems are about how you can leave love. They can all be read as love poems, of different kinds. So, in “Mrs Lazarus”, the loss is conventional, it’s to do with your partner dying…

***2nd Taped Interview: June 2005.***

**BW:** After the celebration of the delights of the sensuous in “Circe”, we have “Mrs Lazarus”, a poem about grief and the horrors of mortality. A definite contrast. Is that how you see it?

**CAD:** Yes, I think I’ve tried to mix the different ways of loving that the women have experienced, so this is a kind of opposite of “Circe”. Again, the kind of background I had at school meant that the story of Lazarus was a particularly thrilling one. He died and was raised again by Jesus from the dead. I think in the original Biblical passage it was three days dead. In my poem, it’s much longer, but the poem is about loss and grief and bereavement and losing someone you love. But it’s also about time and change and how in the process of time even the most appalling suffering can be healed or move on towards healing. So in this poem Mrs Lazarus overcomes her grief and bereavement and is meets someone else and is able in part to carry on with her life when, all of a sudden, Lazarus comes back from the dead. But it’s too late for Mr & Mrs Lazarus to be together again. He’s—as it says in the poem—“out of his time”—so it’s about accepting things that happen in our lives, and moving on and dealing with them and not wanting to control everything; or about the impossibility of controlling.

**BW:** It’s not only that he’s come back from the dead but that he’s come back “in his rotting shroud,/moist and dishevelled from the grave’s slack chew”—he’s come back as one of the living dead rather than in his living form.

**CAD:** Well, yes, he’s not in a very good state! (Chuckles) But he is alive. The horror on his face is not only at being raised from the dead but also at coming back and finding things changed, and his wife with another man--“Croaking his cuckold name”. And I think having suffered extreme bereavement in my life, losing someone is such a final thing, it takes you to a different place, and I don’t think there’s any way back from that. You’re changed by it, and have to go on. I don’t think the human heart or mind can really conceive what it might be like to have someone come back from the dead. It’s a condition of how we live and understand things, unfortunately.

**BW:** Yes, as you’ve said, the horror is shared by Lazarus himself, a horror at her new relationship, but is there another source of his horror, would you say?

**CAD:** The source of his horror is partly at her having a new man, partly the trauma of being raised from the dead; so it’s the changed state he finds himself in and the changed state of his world. So to him it looks like a nightmare. He’s back but nothing is the same. He’s “out of his time”, his time ended when he died.

**BW:** You’ve spoken of this as another version of love but, as with some of the other poems, it presents a view of a relationship which is far from comforting.

**CAD:** Well, when Lazarus dies she’s in a dreadful state—she cries uncontrollably, she rips her wedding dress off, she says his name over and over again, she tries to get rid of his clothes. She says: “I learnt/the Stations of Bereavement … all those months/he was going away from me”. Even his name doesn’t bring things back to her. So, she’s terribly in love with him and terribly upset that he’s died. But the poem is about that: there are many ways of losing love, and for someone to die is one of them.

**BW:** Yes, the voice of Mrs Lazarus brings across to us the shock of grief but that’s nothing to the shock she feels at his resurrection.

**CAD:** Well, she doesn’t say anything. All she says when she sees him is: “I knew … He lived.” And then the shock is on his face, and the “crazy song” is his mother’s. And the only reaction we get from her is how he smells, “his stench”, the state he’s in and the fact that he is there and shouldn’t be there. I mean I did try to literally imagine the situation of the poem, so it’s not comic. I did try to imagine what it would be like for someone to be dead for a year and then rise up out of the grave and walk towards you. I mean, it would do your head in, wouldn’t it? You might eventually come out of it and be quite pleased about it. (Laughs)

**BW:** Yes, it’s been longer than the three days in the original story.

**CAD:** Yes, it says months in the poem because three days would have been alright, wouldn’t it? (Laughs again)

**BW:** There’s no hint of comedy in this poem.

**CAD:** I suppose the notion of Mrs Lazarus, you know, Lazarus died, she got over and met someone else. And went: Whoo-oo! That in itself might be a bit comic. So here is a little bit of comedy initially perhaps.

**BW:** Comedy of the grotesque? OK. Shall we move on to “Pygmalion’s Bride”? Is there another connection here, as between other poems, between the resurrection of Lazarus and a kind of resurrection here as Pygmalion’s Bride starts “cold … stone-cool” and then comes to life, also with shocking impact. Again was that deliberate?

**CAD:** Yes, I like to have buried connections! Although the thing is, after a few years, I forget. The story of Pygmalion is again from Ovid and Pygmalion is a man who disapproves of the behaviour of the women in his home town—they were quite bawdy and he was a prude. So he stumped off home and make a statue of his ideal woman, and he would ignore the women in his home town and stay with his statue and talk to his statue. And of course slowly but surely he fell in love with the statue and bring flowers and presents. I think actually the phrase “girly things” is a translation for the presents that he brought. Anyway, so much did he love the statue that he begged the gods to grant life to the statue and, as is usual in Greek myth, the gods acquiesced. So, the statue has life. And, in the original, they have one night together which results in a child. But then we don’t hear much else about Pygmalion’s bride. And of course writers from George Bernard Shaw to Willie Russell in Educating Rita have used the story. So I wanted to do it slightly differently. So the woman in Pygmalion isn’t a statue, she’s real but she’s playing at being a statue because she really doesn’t fancy Pygmalion, she doesn’t love him and doesn’t want him. And he won’t go away. So it’s about a woman who’s being pestered by the wrong man. But he won’t give up, he’s crazy about her. So after a while she decides that pretending to be a statue isn’t doing any good because he’s still buying her presents and talking to her and touching her. So she fakes this huge, passionate orgasm and begins to demand his love and she’s all over him and that puts him off and she doesn’t see him again. And that can happen in life: if you play hard to get, people pursue you more; but if you move towards them, they back off.

**BW:** Is the point here that Pygmalion is a prude, emotionally cold and repressed, and while she appears to him “like snow, like ivory”, an ice goddess, he can deal with her, but as soon as she throws off her inhibitions he can’t deal with it.

**CAD:** Yes, he can’t deal with the real woman and all the complexity and passion that involves.

**BW:** And that’s a bit like Shaw’s version because Higgins can’t deal with the real woman when she emerges from the simulacrum he’s produced?

**CAD:** And in Willie’s play when he can’t deal with her when she’s educated. He wants her to squawk in a Scouse accent and know nothing. Yes, the nice thing about taking these old stories is that you can make them new but they’re so solid and brilliant that they still retain their own identity.

**BW:** The other thing that’s intriguing about this poem is that Pygmalion’s bride describes throwing off her inhibitions as “all an act”. It points to a deception in her and then a rather curt finish: “And haven’t seen him since. Simple as that”.

**CAD:** She could be putting on a bit of a tough girl act, and maybe she did love him, and then he leaves her and then she’s saying: I didn’t mean it anyway. Who’s to say?

**BW:** “Mrs Rip Van Winkle”?

**CAD:** Yes, this is another sex-and-orgasm poem.

**BW:** I’m almost inclined to wonder if the poem derived from the final rhyme…

**CAD:** Well, yes, I can see why you might think that. But it didn’t actually. Again in the original story he slept for forty years, Rip Van Winkle. And I was just interested in that and what a woman would do with her time. And indeed many men do sleep for forty years, if you know what I mean, (laughter) and wives have to deal with it. They go to work and come home and fall asleep in front of the fire and the television and that’s that for forty years! And at the time Viagra was just around I think and I remember talking to my own mother (chuckle) and she was saying: this is ridiculous, this Viagra, and these men in their seventies and eighties! And she was appalled at the idea of demands being made on old age pensioners by husbands had got hold of Viagra! So that came into it a bit.

**BW:** So the story of Rip Van Winkle becomes a metaphor about the horror of an aged husband returning to sexual activity through Viagra.

**CAD:** And also it’s about middle-age or late middle-age. Mrs Van Winkle finds herself: she like to travel and see other countries, and she does water colours, and she’s got her own life and she doesn’t feel the need to do anything other than to be on her own. So she’s appalled to be called back to the marital bed. On another level, it’s just a piece of light verse really. A squib.

**BW:** Lighter than the previous two poems certainly. The next poem,“Mrs Icarus”, really is a squib.

**CAD:** Yes, this is just a bit of fun really. This tends to be the one that people who hate the book quote in reviews! So Icarus tried to fly, and made wings with glue and feathers and flew too near the sun and the glue melted and down he fell. Of course there’s a wonderful poem by Auden about this, based on the painting by Breughel.

**BW:** Yes, you say that people criticise the book because of this poem. Do you ever feel that you could have made more of this story, because it is just a sort of slap on the cheek. Did you ever contemplate making a different use of that story?

**CAD:** Not really. I think that most people know the story of Icarus, or should do. So I like the idea that there’s this quite long story that everyone knows--and is in art and poetry anyway--and just doing a tiny little aside without going heavily into it. Like “Mrs Darwin”.

**BW:** Yes, they’re jokes really, partly on the academy. And so to “Mrs Freud”: perhaps this is one of the most provocative poems, and a real tour de force.

**CAD:** Yes, I had great fun doing that. I don’t know a great deal about Freud, but the bit I do know I don’t like. And one of his theories is that women, or some women, in some of the cases that he came across, suffered from penis envy. And I’m taking issue with that, and in my poem Frau Freud doesn’t suffer from penis envy, she has penis sympathy or penis pity. And in order to write about it I looked up all the names that are given to the penis, since I was also aware that men/boys have many names for it, much more than women do, because it’s a sort of macho thing to have lots of names for the penis, and it’s not done by women. So I sort of researched it—I missed out a couple, which I can’t remember now … Anyway, “Hunt-the-Salami” I nicked from one of Martin Amis’s novels. And at the time Clinton was saying: “I did not have sex with that woman, Miss Lewinsky” when all the time they’d been having oral sex in the Oval Office—I nearly said oval sex in the oral office!—so it’s about that as well. So I put Monica Lewinsky in, to introduce a bit of politics and hypocrisy in there. (The wife’s best friend, widow’s comfort, that’s another one, that’s what Adrian [Henri] used to call it!) (More laughter!)

**BW:** Yes, the other thing about this is that you’d expect Frau Freud, coming from that particular bourgeois, middle European, late nineteenth century society, to be rather more polite than this Frau Freud turns out to be.

**CAD:** Well, she does start “Ladies, for argument’s sake, let us say ..” and then she just steams into it.

**BW:** So it’s a deliberate transgression of expectations.

**CAD:** This is someone who has been round the block. It’s not someone who hates men—it’s quite loving! (Amused laughter all round.)

**BW:** I don’t think so! Shall we go on to “Salome”?

**CAD:** I think I put that one next because the phrase “Hunt-the-Salami” seemed to lead on to Salome! All these mad connections. (More laughter)

**BW:** I think that’s what’s called a tenuous connection!

**CAD:** No, they’re both sort of poems of promiscuity. So again the story is from the Bible, the New Testament. And Salome did the dance of the Seven Veils for King Herod, who was a very bad king, and he had imprisoned John the Baptist in the dungeons because John the Baptist was going round saying that there was a new king coming. And Herod had taken this literally and thought it was a king who was going to take all his gold and his lands and his power. And John the Baptist meant Jesus. And Herod had then gone out and slaughtered every child in the land under the age of two; so this links back in a way to the poem “Queen Herod”. And when Salome had finished her dance, Herod offered her any reward and she asked, with the connivance of her mother, for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. And of course there’s a great tradition of using the figure of Salome in art, music, literature. Oscar Wilde was particularly interested; I think he said that it was the greatest image of the erotic in western art. But it’s also viewed as the most decadent image of the erotic, and Wilde believed that Salome had asked for the head of John the Baptist because she desired him and he’d rejected her. And he has her kissing the lips of the Baptist after he has been decapitated. So I had Oscar Wilde very much in my mind when I wrote the poem, he’s a sort of hero of mine, and I just thought: well, all right, let’s get really decadent with this and imagine that she did desire him and did kiss his decapitated head, as Wilde says, and then let’s take it a stage further so the common cliché of I woke up with a head on the pillow beside me, and in this case there’s no body, and she’s hungover and wrecked and she doesn’t know who it is or whatever. And I wrote through the poem aiming at the last word: platter; and tried to rhyme everything with “platter”. There are rhymes and half-rhymes, and I imagined them as drops of blood down the edge of the poem so they are all in a pool on the last line. That helped me to write it.

**BW:** That also confirms the link between sex and violence in the poem, with the blood dripping down the rhymes! And “Eurydice”. This is one of those poems that you would perform at poetry readings, even before the book was published, and direct it very definitely at the audience. That opening: “Girls, I was dead and down”--you draw the audience into the poem.

**CAD:** It’s my least favourite poem in the book, in terms of its quality as a poem. I mean, I don’t write performance poetry, but this works okay in performance because of the story, and there are a few good lines here and there but I don’t like it too much as a poem. Eurydice of course was Orpheus’s wife—Orpheus being the great lyrical poet. And, even now, our image of the poet is this male, lyrical bard. And women have taken a long time to shake that off. And Eurydice was bitten on the ankle by a snake and Orpheus, like Mrs Lazarus, was grief-stricken, but unlike her was unable to overcome his grief. So he wrote a special poem and went down into the underworld and passed all the ghosts and spirits of the underworld, and other characters like Sisyphus, who is condemned to roll a rock up a hill and watch it roll back down, and Tantalus who is trying to get a drink, and passed all these characters of the underworld, and read his poem to the gods, and they were very moved by it, and they gave Eurydice back to Orpheus but say: have her back, take her back but don’t look round until you get out of the underworld or else she will die. And he’s nearly back and just turns round to check and of course she’s lost. So in my poem Eurydice is settled in the underworld and quite happy not living with a male poet anymore because their life together had been consumed by his poetry and if she offered any criticism he’d sulk. And she didn’t buy into this thing about his genius. In fact, if she had her time again, the one thing she might do is write for herself rather than type his poems. So she doesn’t want to go back to that life and does everything she can to make him turn round. But it doesn’t work. But then she says: that poem you wrote was marvellous, can I hear it again? And of course his vanity as a poet, his ego, is the one thing that will make him turn round. I suppose there are some moments in that when I’m talking about life and death and silence and wondering what we can learn from things ending and changing.

**BW:** What she’s resisting is being his muse, isn’t it? She says: “I’d rather speak for myself/than be Dearest, Beloved, Dark Lady, White Goddess, etc., etc.” She quite hostile and resentful about the claim of the male poet to be speaking for her. And you have a jibe at publishers as well: “the Gods are like publishers,/usually male”. So the poem takes in the story of the emergence in the last thirty or forty years of a recognition of women poets and the way in which the whole situation for women writers has changed.

**CAD:** It’s transformed totally and continues to transform. Every few years there are more advances and, I suppose, power-taking by women writers. And if you look at a poet like Alice Oswald who must be, for my money, one of the greatest living poets worldwide. And then there’s a whole range of different women, different ages, different cultures, different classes, writing throughout these islands—England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland—and that has sort of leaked into the male way of writing which has become much more female, so it’s perhaps not fully reflected in the publishing world. So that needs to change.

**BW:** The voice of Eurydice is very worldly-wise, and she draws in the girls as a group who will support her resistance to male domination.

**CAD:** A bit like Circe. It’s a constituency.

**BW:** The last lines always seem rather strange to me. It’s difficult to tell if they are still being spoken by Eurydice.

**CAD:** Yes, I think those are the best lines of the poem. What’s going on there? Firstly, in a sense, that’s the beginning of her own poem. On another level, the dead and the vast lake are silence, and the living walking round that silence are poets. So the source of poetry is that silence. I think a poem is only a way of framing silence, isn’t it?

**BW:** OK. Next, a very different poem. “The Kray Sisters”: like “The Devil’s Wife”, this draws on popular culture and history.

**CAD:** Yes, if I look at England where I grew up, and you were to say what was around in your teenage years, you’d say the Moors murders, when I was a little girl the pop group was the Beatles, we landed on the moon, England won the World Cup, there were these villains called the Kray twins who were imprisoned.

**BW:** A pretty nasty lot!

**CAD:** Yes, but don’t you think that they weren’t seen or treated—well, they’re dead now so it doesn’t matter—as the nasty villains that they were? They were kind of affectionately regarded really through the media. I mean, you’d see a funeral and who would you see but Diana Dors and Barbara Windsor and they were quite show-bizzie and you’d go down to their bit of the East End—and in fact I used to live on Evering Road, where their last murder was committed—and it would be: O it was none of these drugs when Ronnie and Reggie were here, they always looked after their own, and they only went after other villains. So there was a kind of affectionate tolerance of them, and a huge fondness for their mother. And there are movies made about them, and Ray Davies has a song about them, so they’re very much part of a sentimentalised picture.

**BW:** So they become modern legends, through the popular press, and their connections with show business, etc.

**CAD:** And the East End thing. So I wanted to put something of that into the book, partly because it’s part of the popular cultural baggage I carry around. And I also wanted to use up my knowledge of rhyming slang. So this is the place I could used the rhyming slang I’d been taught by Adrian Henri. So my Kray twins are a couple of sado-feminists! (Wry chuckle) And then in the poem their mother died in childbirth, so they were brought up by their grandma, who was one of the original suffragettes. And so they’d grown up knowing these heroic stories of the suffragettes and so it was in their blood that they would be feminists. I mention the Pankhursts in the poem.

**BW:** You give your Kray sisters the voice of tough, independent women in a tough world, don’t you?

**CAD:** Yes, they police their area and make sure feminism is adhered to and anyone who doesn’t adhere to it is well-sorted.

**BW:** You’re impersonating the voice of someone from the East End, making use of idioms like “straight up” and using rhyming slang.

**CAD:** Yes, I love to be able to get the chance to use different kinds of language in poetry. So rhyming slang is part of it. I saw a sketch years ago written by Ronnie Barker—who is such a good writer—and it was all in rhyming slang. He was just reading the news, all in rhyming slang, a real tour de force.

**BW:** And then there’s the nice joke at the end of this poem where you mention: “we leaned on Sinatra to sing for free”; and of course we’re expecting you to be talking about Frank and you’re not, you’re talking about Nancy, his daughter.

**CAD:** And of course Sinatra had criminal connections.

**BW:** Well, allegedly!

**CAD:** But also I’d thought what would their theme tune be and I thought “These Boots Are Made For Walking”, which is sort of triumphant and also sexy.

**BW:** What about “Elvis’s Twin Sister”?

**CAD:** From Sinatra to Elvis. Now Elvis is a massive hero of mine: the longer he’s dead the more he becomes like a fairy tale. To me, he’s like King Midas, or King Kong ..

**BW:** Except everything he touched turned to fat perhaps?

**CAD:** O dear! Elvis, as we know, died when he was barely forty, and was addicted to painkillers and different drugs, and he ate too much and was in a terrible state when he died. And he was a twin, and his twin brother, Jesse, died in childbirth, and that made him very close to his mum. And then his mum died when he was in the army and I don’t think he ever got over that. So he was haunted by the absent twin and very upset at losing his mother. He had this wonderful talent. Someone said: “Elvis is the only thing on which we all agree”--meaning we might disagree about the talent of the Rolling Stones or the Beatles but we’d all agree about Elvis, particularly when he was young. So I always felt very saddened about what happened to him, and the poem is on one level a tribute to his talent, as “Anne Hathaway” is meant as a sort of tribute to Shakespeare’s. In the poem, I keep the twin alive but make her female. And I tried to give her the complete opposite path through life, and the most opposite thing I could come up with was a nun in an enclosed Order who had no celebrity and fame, and was innocent and humble and didn’t consume. So her path through life is different and doesn’t end in death, it ends in life and a sort of grace. And of course Elvis’s house was called Graceland. And then I got a nice quote from Madonna, she was actually talking about kd lang, and she said “Elvis is alive and she’s female!” So she’s in a convent, and works in the gardens, and she prays for “the immortal soul/ of rock and roll”—which is her brother.

**BW:** But she manages to combine the idioms of “Gregorian chant” and other religious music with the language of Heartbreak Hotel!

**CAD:** I did that deliberately, because you’ll remember when rock and roll was first being sung, redneck Americans called it the music of the devil. So I’m taking that back, giving it to a nun, and showing that it isn’t the music of the devil it’s the music of grace.

**BW:** I suppose “Lawdy” brings them both together: the Lord and “Lawdy Lawdy Lawdy Miss Claudy”, a sort of in-joke for a certain generation.

**CAD:** And “Pascha nostrum immolatus est” translates as “our Lamb did not die”—a reference to the idea, held by many, that Elvis isn’t dead.

**BW:** This makes Elvis an equivalent of Christ.

**CAD:** Yes, well, he was the King!

**BW:** And the clothing, too, brings things together: wimple to blue suede shoes.

**CAD:** I like the cunning rhyme there as well: “novice-strewn/lace band” with “graceland”.

**BW:** “Pope Joan”?

**CAD:** Yes, from nuns to popes. I hadn’t realised how much of the book comes from religion and religious stories.

**BW:** You can’t escape your upbringing!

**CAD:** Pope Joan was supposed to be the only female pope—I’m not sure how true the story is—and during a papal procession and whilst she/he was being carried in the papal chair gave birth—to huge consternation! So this is the incident behind the poem. And what I was looking at was the effect, on a woman of considerable ambition, who’s succeeded in a very male world, the effect of motherhood. Everything that she’s achieved, twice as good as the men, is meaningless in comparison with the “miracle” of giving birth. And in a sense that’s quite autobiographical for me because the whole thing of being a vocational poet paled into insignificance with the experience of motherhood. It is quite a personal poem.

**BW:** Though this again makes the connection we talked about earlier between the birth of the poet and the birth of a child. Whatever we think of the truth of the story—it still a matter of debate presumably, within the Catholic Church?—in your poem, the consummating experience is childbirth—“the closest I felt/to the power of God”, she says.

**CAD:** And that’s how I felt when I gave birth. It was like a giant hand picking me up and then throwing me back down again. Amazing! I like this poem. I like the little three-line verses, like little responses or prayers.

**BW:** The next poem is “Penelope” who is taken as the archetype of marital faithfulness. What were you trying to do with this poem? Subvert that idea?

**CAD:** I suppose I was looking at the idea that she waited for Odysseus to come back from his journey, and that she was just “waiting”. And, again, in the original story, she has lots of suitors come in to the house and she embroidered, and she said that she would choose from these new suitors when she’d finished her embroidery. But every night she unpicks her embroidery, so that she never finished it. And the point was that she wouldn’t have to choose, and could wait for her husband to come back. And again, it’s a bit like “Mrs Lazarus”, at first she is waiting for him: “I looked along the road/hoping to see him come”, etc. And then after a few months, she realises that she’s stopped missing him. Again time has taken her to another place. So she resorts to embroidery, and finds a life-time’s industry, in a sense she finds her vocation, she finds what she wants to do, she wants to be creative: “my thimble like an acorn/ pushing through the umber soil”. So things are growing from this creativity. And she loses herself in the work, and also finds herself in it. So when other men come to take the place of Odysseus she doesn’t want or need another man because she’s an artist now. So she’s putting them off for that. And when he does come back, she says” “I heard a far-too-late familiar tread outside the door”—life and events have moved on. So it’s another way of expressing changing love or losing love.

**BW:** Yes, in some ways, it’s one of the most tender poems. There’s a tenderness about her missing him but also finding her own life and her own world: “self-contained, absorbed, content”. It’s a different story, of course, but the end has a similar poignancy to the end of “Mrs Midas”. And you haven’t changed the story all that much. She remains a faithful woman, though in this case also faithful to herself.

**CAD:** With all of them, I’m looking at the story, and I’m thinking the events are the same but I might change the interpretation of events. And of course the main change is from male to female views of things: that’s what you say, but what does she say? And in any situation there’ll be a different explanation of events, won’t there? In that sense, although the book has been called a feminist manifesto, and I am feminist and it is feminist, but my aim was larger that that, and I wanted to be able to expand the stories and to bring in extra layers of truth. I wanted to add, and not take away from the originals.

**BW:** Yes, one can see why it might be thought a feminist manifesto, because the voices are of women otherwise “hidden from history” and so on, but the story is complicated by your recognition of the complexities of love and sexual relationship. I suppose that’s why the Penelope story could easily be missed because it’s not straightforwardly an in-your-face demolition job on the male ego and male vanity. Its strengths derive from the sense of Penelope’s strengths as an artist.

**BW:** And “Mrs Beast”? A very complicated figure, in many ways, and the poem starts with the words: “These myths going round, these legends, fairy tales,/I’ll put them straight”—so it’s almost a reiteration of what you’ve been doing throughout the book.

**CAD:** Yes, and it also contains a whole list of women who haven’t been dealt with yet: Helen, Cleopatra, Nefertiti, the Little Mermaid. I had great fun writing this poem. As you know I love poker, so there’s a great set-piece poker game in the middle of this poem—a head-to-head between Frau Yellow Dwarf and the Bride of the Bearded Lesbian, a very tense poker game. And anticipating internet poker by some years!

**BW:** From “Little Red Cap” through “Queen Kong” and “Circe”--“Mrs Beast” incorporates something of all those characters, doesn’t she?

**CAD:** Yes, she’s Little Red Cap grown up, with her own money.

**BW:** And also there’s a connection with the Kray Sisters, a world of gambling and slightly shady meetings. Some of the characters here certainly come from the other side of the tracks, in terms of polite society. The tough, hard-headed, even hard-hearted, woman who emerges in this poem picks up on similar figures earlier in the collection; but as well as asserting the solidarity of women (you talked earlier about the “constituency” of women) it does also draw in other female characters who have shown less capacity to survive perhaps?

**CAD:** It’s a sort of elegy really.

**BW:** Yes, after the poker game section, there are references to Marilyn Monroe, Bessie Smith, Diana, Princess of Wales, and these women could be seen as in various ways victims of a male society.

**CAD:** Yes, particularly, Marilyn and Diana. So the poem is an elegy, and Mrs Beast—like Marilyn and Diana—is a hugely loving person: these women have loved with everything and been hurt. The last line of the poem—“Let the less-loving one be me”--is an echo of Auden’s poem where he says: “Let the more loving one be me”. But I think Mrs Beast doesn’t want any more hurt and she doesn’t want anyone to be hurt by love. I think it’s a hugely sad poem--“Mrs Beast”.

**BW:** Well, yes, it is because the poem shifts from the tough-minded opening, where Mrs Beast reverses the usual roles of male and female in the story, but by the end there’s a suggestion that the self-dependence, the strength, is at a cost.

**CAD:** Yes, it’s the cost of a broken heart, I suppose. I think Diana hadn’t long died when I wrote that poem, and so I was conscious of the national trauma about her death. Attitudes have changed since then, but I did feel terribly sad at the time, as did many others.

**BW:** But the image of Mrs Beast at the end of the poem—after the assertion of solidarity earlier on—is an image of isolation: “standing alone/on the balcony, the night so cold I could taste the stars”—it’s a very beautiful image, but the idea at the end is that she is making “a prayer … words for the lost … “—it’s elegiac and tragic.

**CAD:** But she’s going back in and she’s got the Beast and the bottle of wine! So she’s not alone at the end of the poem.

**BW:** Yes, wine, Margaux 54!

**CAD:** That’s the year of her birth, not mine.

**BW:** Close though!

**CAD:** But I deliberately didn’t make it mine.

**BW:** And finally to “Demeter”, the last poem in the collection. This both does and doesn’t fit into the sequence, because in this case the story is not about a woman and her husband or partner but about a mother and her daughter, and is a very beautiful poem of maternal love.

**CAD:** There is a sort of back-story, of a relationship, of “my broken heart” …But, yes, it is a total celebration of motherhood and the world is transformed by having a child and, in this case, by having a daughter. When Persephone returns she brings Spring with her, but is only allowed to return for those months, from the Underworld. So I wanted to end, not with Mrs Beast but with what is, I think, probably is the most important thing in life, being a parent. I think that being a lover is very important, but parenthood is more so.

**BW:** The poem has a beautiful form about it. You always seem interested in form and use it in a creative way. This is a kind of sonnet, at least it’s a fourteen line poem, and—like the “Anne Hathaway” poem—you hold off the rhyme until the last couplet, but nonetheless we’re aware of a certain formal elegance to the poem. The three line stanzas—which you’ve also used elsewhere—also recall those last poems of Sylvia Plath, and she is another poet who has written very movingly about a mother and her children. Was there, in any way, a drawing on that?

**CAD:** They are lovely poems, but I not aware of Plath being a particular influence on me but I think generally she is in the air as an influential twentieth century poet. So it’s a bit like you might inhale a bit of that without choosing to, she’s around, and like a number of those poets who made a huge impression during their life-time, her influence is general rather than specific.

**BW:** The form and movement of the poem is gentle, even hesitant and seems to emphasise a hesitation about how this transformation takes place. Until we come to the wonderfully fluent “I swear/ the air softened and warmed as she moved” and the nicely balanced “the blue sky smiling, none too soon”.

**CAD:** The eleventh hour: yes, that’s true of me because I had Ella, my daughter, in my late thirties. There the story ends, in a way.

**BW:** Yes, it resolves the poem, but also takes us back to the beginning because the flowers at the end take us back to the flowers mentioned in “Little Red Cap”, creating a sort of cycle of events and experiences.

**CAD:** Which is all I wanted to do really. And it is for me quite an autobiographical work, and isn’t the popular entertaining book, as it’s seen, if you look a bit deeper. It is that as well, but I like the idea that—buried in there—is a hidden, personal narrative.

**BW:** Yes, I know you’ve often said that you’re very aware, in your other books, of putting together a collection, and perhaps this is even more the case with this book.

**CAD:** Yes, and it’s interesting that quite a number of theatre companies have performed this, and I think it’s because it has a narrative and lots of characters…

**BW:** And different voices.