

## Striving for “some version of the truth”: A Conversation with Helen Humphreys

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# Striving for “some version of the truth”: A Conversation with Helen Humphreys

SCL/ÉLC INTERVIEW BY KILEY KAPUSCINSKI

**H**ELEN HUMPHREYS'S NUMEROUS works of historical fiction remind us that the past is anything but behind us. While her turn away from poetry after the publication of *Anthem* (1999) has led her to self-identify as a “former poet,” Humphreys' more recent interest in historic prose has permitted new tensions and tellings to surface from past events, and led to a burgeoning of critical acclaim for this Kingston-based writer. Her first novel, *Leaving Earth* (1998), was honoured with the City of Toronto Book Award and named a New York Times Notable Book; *Afterimage* (2000) was awarded the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize; *The Lost Garden* (2002) was a finalist for Canada Reads 2003; and *Wild Dogs* (2004) won the Lambda Literary Award and has recently been adapted for the stage by Anne Hardcastle. Humphreys's most recent prose works, *The Frozen Thames* (2007) and *Coventry* (2008) — both of which cast a backward glance on her English homeland — have similarly been applauded by critics as works that “speak for the long-dead” (Decarie) and “bring to vivid life the brutality and violence of [the past]” (Hansen).

Despite the temporal range of Humphreys's fiction — which explores a variety of histories from the forty winters in which the Thames River has frozen to the endurance flights of 1930s Toronto — her works consistently argue for personal narratives as the very material of history; they are dialogic texts that negotiate between the past and the present, the public and the private, truth and fiction, image and text, urban and rural life, and belonging and isolation. Moreover, such negotiations signal Humphreys's disbelief in the writer's ability to uncover an objective Truth or to explain the past *tout court*. Rather, she squarely situates her writing within sites of tension, taking stock in the writer's capacity, as she puts it in this interview, to “slow a moment down so that [the reader] can have a good look at it . . . and feel something in response to it.”

This interview took place on 22 January 2009 at Queen's University in the Memorial Room, a space established to honour the young Canadians who fell in the two world wars.

*KK* Your most recent novel examines the infamous bombing of the English city Coventry by the Luftwaffe on the night of November 14<sup>th</sup>, 1940, an event that has since been known as the “Coventry Blitz.” What does your novel add to the story of that night?

*HH* *Coventry* is meant to be a look at the citizens of the city during the night of the bombing. It's not meant to detail the bombing from a military perspective, but rather to recount what happened to the people who lived in the city. I followed the chronological events that happened that night, including what buildings fell when, so as the characters move through the night, they move through the city as it would have been.

*KK* This approach must have involved an incredible amount of historical investigation. Can you elaborate on the research you conducted for *Coventry* and whether or not it was different from the kind of research you conducted for your earlier works?

*HH* In writing historical fiction you can't be faithful to everything. It's so hard to get some version of the truth that actually feels true. With *Coventry*, what I wanted to be faithful to were the eyewitness accounts of the people who had survived the night of bombing, so these accounts were my main research focus.

*KK* An image that particularly struck me in the novel was that of the burning library, which you describe as an immeasurable loss. Yet because you used eyewitness accounts from people who had lived through that night, you never encountered the barrier of missing historical documentation while researching *Coventry*.

*HH* The Second World War is very well documented, both in terms of printed material and recorded oral histories. I actually had more material than I could use. I also used accounts from the bombing of Baghdad, because when cities are standing they are individual, but ruins resemble one another. Similarly, the same things happen to the citizenry in a city under attack — whether that attack happened sixty years ago or yesterday. With the image of the burning library I wanted to show the resonance of loss, how many people would have been affected by the fall of a single building. During the night of November 14<sup>th</sup>, 1940,

when the main library in Coventry caught fire and burned, not only were the books contained in that library lost, but also the associations those books had for the thousands of people who had borrowed them.

*KK* Is it necessary for you to travel to a place before writing about it, or do you prefer to read about and imagine your settings?

*HH* Usually I do travel. For *The Lost Garden*, I went to the particular location where my story was set, and for my new book, which is set in 1830s Paris, I went to Paris to do research. But I decided not to go to Coventry when I was working on the book, mainly because the city was rebuilt after the bombing and it no longer resembled its former self. I didn't want the new city to be the thing I remembered visually, so I depended instead on film footage, newsreel footage, photographs of the old city, and written descriptions of the buildings that had been standing on the night of November 14<sup>th</sup>, 1940.

*KK* You have cited a number of pictorial records, including those by Alton Douglas and Norman Longmate, that helped shape your writing of *Coventry*. In what ways did the visual imagery of the Coventry Blitz impact your imagination differently than written accounts of the event?

*HH* Because I had three characters who were traversing the city during the night, I had them go to particular places at particular times — chasing the events of the evening. For example, when the library was burning, the characters had to be near the library at that moment. Their route through the burning city had to correspond with what was happening to the city. The pictorial records were fantastic for that.

*KK* For imagining the changes that the city underwent?

*HH* Yes. The pictorial records would show what a building had looked like before it fell, and they would show it burning or collapsed. I depended heavily on these visual records to inform my written descriptions of the night.

*KK* In researching your other works of fiction, you similarly collected numerous photographs, maps, and paintings of things that are later described in your narratives. This seems to suggest that, for you, there is a natural connection between images and texts.

*HH* I work visually and, being a former poet, I'm fairly visually oriented. Images come to me before anything else and when my ideas are taking shape, I sometimes do my own sketches. Drawing helps me look at something hard, which is always good for writing. But my actual ability as a visual artist is bad. Worse than bad, actually [*laughs*]. I'm really quite terrible, but I like to do it nonetheless.

*KK* As an author, you know that writing historical fiction, perhaps more than other genres, requires you to negotiate the line between truth and fabrication. When writing, how do you imagine the relationship between fact and fiction?

*HH* It depends on the book, you see. Because with each book I choose one thing to be faithful to and I really try to get that one thing right. In that one thing, I try to follow the historical record as closely as I can and not have a deviation. But in the other things I, of course, deviate to serve the purpose of the story. I'm always conscious of what I am trying to be faithful to, but then I'm also conscious of the other things that I can manipulate to serve the story.

*KK* Does this mean that, in your writing, historical fact and imagination come together in service to the narrative?

*HH* Yes, though one is more in service to the narrative than the other. Whatever it is I am trying to be faithful to in a story has precedence. If the first-person narratives of the Coventry bombing had said things that went against my story, I would have bent the story to support what the narratives said.

*KK* Is it possible for fiction to tell the "truth" in a way that non-fiction cannot?

*HH* Definitely — because thoughts and feelings are the truth. Right now, I am writing a fictional biography of a real person, so I'm sticking pretty close to the events of his life, but I'm making up his thoughts and feelings because my book is essentially fiction. But is it any less true, because of this, than the other biographies I've read of my subject written from the subjectivity of the biographer?

*KK* It sounds like your version might hold more truth than "official" versions. I'd like to shift gears here to talk a little bit more about the setting of your novel, which takes place almost exclusively in Coventry.

The city's name, of course, also comprises the novel's title. Because of this, and because of the ongoing attention you give to the cityscape, you allow Coventry to be seen not only as the setting, but also as the eponymous character, or perhaps the tragic protagonist. How, if at all, did your understanding of the city alter as you wrote your novel?

*HH* That's a good question. I don't think it changed because I had never experienced Coventry as it was before the attacks, so it was always a city in ruin to me. But what is interesting is that the Germans altered their understanding of Coventry after November 14<sup>th</sup>, 1940. After that night, the Germans made a word, *coventrate*, which means to entirely destroy something, and they added it to their language. So the destroyed city created its own word after that night.

*KK* Why is place so important to you as a writer?

*HH* Probably because I was born in one place and I grew up in another, but had vague memories of the first place and I went back to it a number of times. Existing in two places made belonging an important theme for me; belonging lends itself well to place.

*KK* Does place also shape one's thoughts?

*HH* Yes. There is something to knowing somewhere. It's an intimacy. When you know somewhere, it's like knowing someone. You know all these little particularities about the place and it is a kind of intimacy that gives you comfort. It ties you very securely somewhere.

*KK* You take a similarly prolonged look at place in *The Frozen Thames*, and at one point you compare one of Coventry's city parks to "the bottom of a riverbed." Do you see any connections between your writing about Coventry and your writing about the Thames River?

*HH* Well, I was working on *Coventry* when I wrote *The Frozen Thames*, so they are directly connected. *Coventry* gave me a great deal of trouble because, in creating the premise for the novel, I also created the problem of writing it. Setting a story during a night of bombing means that it's hard for the characters to talk to one another, or to see very clearly. But my characters were essentially strangers to one another, so they needed to talk. I went through many many drafts trying to make these two things align in a believable way. At one point, I got so frustrated that I stopped working on *Coventry* for a time. I had the idea for

*The Frozen Thames*, so I just decided to write it. I went back to *Coventry* after *The Frozen Thames* was done.

*KK* It seems to me that they are almost in dialogue with one another, in that one examines a thematics of fire, the other of ice. Was this intentional?

*HH* No, not at all. I wasn't conscious of this. It's just how it worked out.

*KK* While *Coventry* seems transformed by events going on outside the novel, it also seems that the city is transformed by the events occurring inside the novel, which change *Coventry* from a home front to an unexpected front line of war. This translation of the city forces characters to interact more intimately with one another and, to my mind, undermines the assumption that people living within an urban space can remain psychically isolated. What compelled you to write about this latter transformation?

*HH* I was examining what happens when there is a disaster that is common to all the citizenry and they all band together. Like during an ice storm, there are all these stories of people getting to know their neighbours when they haven't spoken to them before. It's the same thing with war. War brings people into a closer intimacy and comradeship. But I think people in the city do like to exist in an isolated way as well. They like to be strangers until it serves their purpose to come together when they are all threatened by something.

*KK* It's as if crisis creates community.

*HH* Yes. But I don't think people would like to be that way all the time.

*KK* Might Maeve's son, Jeremy, be the exception?

*HH* In terms of his particular character, he had wanted to go to the war. He's a young man who wanted to fight but couldn't because he is colour-blind. So he is left with this desire to be involved. When he and Harriet first go to the aid shelter, he is into helping people and it's Harriet that makes them leave the shelter. So yes, it's more in the nature of his character that he wants to be involved; he wants to be in the war and helping others was a way to be in the war.

*KK* Unlike Jeremy, many characters attempt to escape the city by retreating to the rural areas surrounding Coventry, and Harriet learns that, during World War One, many soldiers similarly found respite in Sanctuary Wood, just outside Ypres. Yet I find it interesting that you go on to problematize this dichotomy of cities as danger zones and rural areas as refuges. This leads me to wonder how you imagine the relationship between urban and non-urban areas. Are these spaces more similar than we like to think?

*HH* People are similar, whether they live in the country or city. But the experience of living in the city is different from the experience of living in the country. A city offers the unexpected. You can step out of your door and walk a hundred feet and you will see different things from the day before, encounter different people, witness different events. In the country what you value is the sameness of the environment — watching the birds feed at the same time every day, witnessing the change of seasons. This is what's desired. So, essentially they are different experiences, although, of course, you can also seek out patterns in a city and unpredictability in the country.

*KK* To what extent has your understanding of rural space been shaped by your urban upbringing in Toronto?

*HH* The area of Toronto that I grew up in was, at the time, still haunted by the rural. We lived in a brand new subdivision, so new that there was just dirt behind the houses, no fences, and no yards. Across the street were a field, a pond, and an old barn. Down the street was another old barn and further down the street was an abandoned farmhouse. Gradually these buildings were all pulled down for the purposes of development, but we spent our time as children playing in these spaces. The past rural use of the space was still visible, and now, of course, it's disappeared forever.

*KK* At one point, Harriet travels to Ypres and feels that this city is haunted by the men gone missing in neighboring areas. Similarly in *The Lost Garden*, Gwen is haunted by the image of Virginia Woolf while in London. In your opinion, what is it about cities that makes them likely spaces for haunting?



*HH* In the city there is the palimpsest of lives that have gone before you. Any public building you enter has been entered by so many other people. The lives before you are endless.

*KK* Is it also the potential for whole areas of a city to disappear without a trace?

*HH* Yes. Areas of the city do disappear, like the rural spaces in the subdivision where I lived. Things are getting rearranged all the time. Land use changes with population ebb and flow.

*KK* In your unpublished typescript *Watermarks*, you examine how large features of Toronto, such as the Garrison Creek, have similarly vanished. Do you feel that certain Canadian cities, despite their relative youth, are also haunted spaces?

*HH* Yes. I can't speak for other Canadian cities, but I lived for many years in Toronto and can speak to the constant destruction of buildings in service to development that happens there. This has been going on since the city began. The city itself used to be a series of creeks and ravines, used to have a north/south orientation. This was changed so the western end of the city could be developed. The ravines were filled in, the creeks buried under landfill. Today, most of the major streets run east to west, which feels strange because there is a natural slope from Davenport to the lake. It is a very arrogant thing to do, to change the natural orientation of a place. Toronto has a history of destroying its old, beautiful buildings, so it is a haunted place. I can go to Paris and practically everything that was there two hundred years ago is still there, still the same. A hotel is not only still a hotel, but still the same kind of hotel. In Toronto the city landscape of fifty years ago is unrecognizable. This impermanence is unsettling, I think.

*KK* I want to return to Harriet's trip to Ypres for a moment because, while there, she participates in a unique kind of tourism that developed in and around the city after World War One. Can you talk a little bit about this particular industry?

*HH* That tourism was created largely for the families who had lost their loved ones in the war. Because there were so many soldiers who were missing or believed killed, many families wanted to go and see the place where their sons and husbands had last been. So a particular kind of tourist industry sprung up around this desire. Guidebooks were pub-

lished, guesthouses were built, and agencies like Thomas Cooke organized tours. But the people, mostly wives and women, who took those tours weren't voyeuristic tourists; they were visitors who had a personal investment in going to Ypres. It was a different kind of tourism than what exists today when people visit the World War One battlefields.

*KK* While traveling to a historic site is not necessarily an act of voyeurism, it seems that it is, potentially, an act of exposure, allowing tourists to see, first-hand, the original site of past destruction and violence. How would you respond to the notion that tourism can potentially transform the tourist into a witness?

*HH* In Ypres, I think this is what happened because the city was still blown apart when the "tourists" came to see it. The city was rebuilt eventually, but not in those years directly after the war. So the guidebooks that were published were full of photographs of the ruined buildings, sometimes with another photograph to show what the building used to look like. The visitors also went into the trenches, which, having been so recently vacated, were still stuck with bits of shrapnel and probably, if you were inclined to dig around in the mud, body matter. So, yes, these post-war visitors were very much witnesses.

*KK* It also seems to me that it is not just visitors that can potentially take on the role of witness but also readers, in the sense that readers can often experience the things they read. What kind of writing style or literary structures, do you use to draw the reader into your fictional world?

*HH* I try to write about the emotional lives of people. I try to create an intimacy and an emotional understanding between the reader and the characters. I think that usually helps to pull the reader in. As well, I'm naturally a visual writer, so I try to make things visual, which often works for pulling people into a narrative. But the thing about being a reader is that you get to experience something without having to worry about it. The people experiencing a night of bombing, or any major threat, have no idea how it is going to turn out, so they are always afraid and apprehensive. Even if you are a witness to a moment, you have no real idea where that moment is leading. But in a book, you can read about an event in your room where you are relatively safe and where nothing is going to happen to you. So you can be more emotionally vulnerable when you are there. You can let yourself feel things because

you are safe. That's the great thing about literature; you can experience something without suffering any of the consequences of actually experiencing an event.

*KK* Do you feel that fiction and poetry serve different purposes?

*HH* Poetry is solitary, really, and fiction is social, because fiction is about lives. Novels are, really, a kind of life. So yes, I think people read the two forms for different reasons. I think people read poetry often for comfort, or a more spiritual purpose. They look to a poem when someone has died; they look to a poem for some kind of essential truth. You read a novel to learn about somebody's life or experience. It's a different thing that you go there for.

*KK* What inspires you to write?

*HH* I don't know. I've always written. I can't separate it from who I am. I get ideas for things and just follow them. I've been a writer for so long that I can't have an idea of how it is separate from me. It's too enmeshed.

*KK* This deep sense of yourself as a writer is perhaps due to the fact that there are other writers in your family. In *Coventry*, the letter that Harriet receives from Owen is based on a letter that your grandfather, Dudley d'Herbez Humphreys, wrote during World War One. Can you tell me a little more about how you discovered this letter and what it means to you?

*HH* This letter was from my father's father who fought in the trenches in World War One at Ypres, and who became a pilot for the second half of the war. In World War Two he disappeared on a night flight to Malta at the age of forty-five. He wrote a lot of letters home to his mother in the first war, and he was a very good writer, I think, so I wanted to include some of his writing in my book.

*KK* Do you remember discovering these letters?

*HH* I've known of the letters my whole life. They were passed on to my father, who was the eldest child, and they've always been in my parent's house. I reread them periodically, and when I was working on *Coventry* I remembered the particular letter I included in my book and went looking for it. I liked the gentleness of the letter, even though it was written under horrible conditions.

*KK* Was your grandfather also your inspiration to write about other missing soldiers, such as Harriet's disappeared husband in *Coventry* and Jane's fiancé in *The Lost Garden*?

*HH* Yes, because the story of his complete disappearance was a story I grew up hearing, and I was always intrigued by it, by him, and by the life he had, which was entirely circumscribed by the two world wars.

*KK* In the typescript for your unpublished novel *Franklin's Library*, you pose the questions, "How far can the story go? . . . What can be imagined?" And in your other works of fiction you often explore the limitations of language. What topics or events do you find particularly difficult to write about?

*HH* The war was difficult to write about, and I don't think I will write about it again. Or historical England, for that matter. Like reading, the good thing about writing is that it is a space in which you can look around, see things, and contemplate them from the safety of your room. But writing is always inadequate to the experience it is describing. It creates something else, rather than recreating what happened.

*KK* So there are, in some regards, limits to the imagination.

*HH* The act of imagining is always worthwhile, but some things are hard to imagine from our contemporary vantage point. I do not think everything can, or should be, written about. Some things should just be approached with silence.

*KK* Is this where the importance of images comes to bear, given that visual representations transcend language, and can express feelings and ideas that words cannot?

*HH* Yes.

*KK* You've commented that some of your fiction is, in part, autobiographical and one cannot help but notice that several of your female protagonists are also artists. Do you particularly identify with any one of your characters more than the others?

*HH* It's funny, but the character that I most identify with is the male character I'm writing about now. He's the one that I feel an incredible kinship towards. In terms of women, Gwen and Harriet have simi-

larities to me, but I wouldn't say they *are* me. Harriet is more modeled on my grandmother. There are elements of Gwen and Harriet that I identify with, as I identify with elements of all of my characters, but I would have to say that the character that I am writing about now is much closer to me than any of my women characters.

*KK* How critical are you of your own writing?

*HH* Very critical. And I think that I'm a good critic of my writing. I can be unsentimental and get rid of things if they don't work. I trust my criticism of my writing and I go by it. I don't show anybody my manuscripts until I've written a few drafts and had the opportunity to decide what is staying and what is going.

*KK* Which of your manuscripts has been most extensively edited?

*HH* All novels have a built-in problem, but the problems of *Coventry* were, by far, the most difficult to work with due to the problem of the night and the sounds of the bombing.

*KK* I'm intrigued by this relationship between war and destruction that *Coventry* foregrounds, but I'm also intrigued by the relationship that develops between war and faith. Your epigraph from Philip Larkin's "High Windows" brings religious faith into question, and Harriet repeatedly finds that she cannot pray, even during the darkest moments of the Blitz. Do these reflect your sense that people struggle with their faith during times of absolute uncertainty?

*HH* I think that if you're religious, you seek religious guidance during times of uncertainty and it's a comfort to you. But if you're not religious, I don't think that your beliefs would change during these times. You are who you are through whatever is going on. Harriet is someone who is not religious, so she periodically tries on religious faith, as she would try on a coat, but it is never for her. It doesn't fit. But the symbol of the cathedral is important to the novel and links to the idea of faith because Coventry Cathedral was the only cathedral in England to be destroyed in the second war and this structure meant a lot to the people in the city. The cathedral made the city; it was at the very heart of it. Even if you weren't religious, its destruction was a big deal because it was such an impressive building and it had existed for so long.

*KK* It seems that the rebuilding of the cathedral was also meant to work on a figurative level.

*HH* Yes, because when they rebuild the new Coventry Cathedral at the end of the novel they attach it to the ruins of the old cathedral. Figuratively speaking, this is what happens to the lives of the two women; they have to rebuild their new lives by attaching them to the ruins of their old lives. People who have survived something that is traumatic and life changing, like a bombing, have to make their life anew by attaching it to a ruin. The rebuilt cathedral was a visual embodiment of this new life I was writing about in my characters.

*KK* Do you consider yourself a religious person, or are you, like Isabelle in *Afterimage*, using “Religious symbols [to] stand for moral values”?

*HH* I’m not a religious person. But I believe in art, nature, and love, and that these are redemptive things.

*KK* Is writing an act of faith for you?

*HH* When I write, I do operate on a faith or drive. I have to trust in something unknown or unseen. I have to trust that the story is going to move forward in a way that is right, that my instincts towards doing certain things are right; I have to trust in this. Writing is about dealing with the unseen. Before writing *Leaving Earth*, I talked to a lot of women pilots, and they would all describe flying as a kind of vocation. Their descriptions sounded very similar to my sense of writing, in that they could fly as if by instinct, and they could in some ways know where they were by an act of faith or imagination.

*KK* During the bombing of Coventry, your characters at times sing patriotic songs instead of reciting prayers. To what extent do you feel that nationalism is also a kind of faith?

*HH* People living within a nation are bound together by the physical and cultural properties of the place. When there’s a threat to the place, these nationalistic properties become stronger and more in evidence, and are encouraged. For example, during World War Two, the English were a very nationalistic people. So yes, in a way it is a kind of faith.

*KK* While not born in Canada, you've spent most of your life here. Do you strongly identify as a Canadian?

*HH* I used to think that I wasn't much of a Canadian because I was born in England and still identified with an idea of "Englishness" that I now realize probably belongs more to my parent's generation than to my own. Now I feel firmly Canadian. I am very attached to the vastness of Canada, to the fact that it still has wilderness (even though that is constantly being encroached upon), when so many places in the world don't have anything wild anymore. When I was in Paris last summer, there were no songbirds and, lovely as Paris is, I couldn't imagine living somewhere where there were no birds singing.

*KK* How, if at all, has your dual nationality influenced the community of writers you identify with?

*HH* I became a writer on my own. I didn't go to university. I didn't operate inside of any community, so I have this rather maverick stance towards writerly influence. I didn't even meet any other writers until well after my first book came out. So, I can't say that I identify strongly with anybody. I just want what I've always wanted — to be a good writer and to have a readership.

*KK* While your writing may not be shaped by other writers, it certainly considers them. In the closing lines of *Franklin's Library*, for example, you imagine the final moments of the English poet John Keats before his death, and you write, "We are far from home, and this is what we can hope for, that someone will fashion us a light to hold against the gathering dark." Do you feel that we live in dark times?

*HH* I think we always live in dark times. I don't know what part of human history hasn't had a dark time. As well, on a more personal level, we all have our demons, and we are all afraid.

*KK* Generally speaking, is it the responsibility of the writer to act as a bearer of this light that stays the "gathering dark"?

*HH* I don't think that writers have that power. What writers can do is to slow a moment down so that we can have a good look at it, think about it in terms of our own lives, and feel something in response to it. But we all have to face the ultimate darkness. We all have to die, and writing certainly isn't going to help with that.

*KK* In *Coventry*, and especially in the “Afterword”, you look forward to suggest numerous connections between World War Two and the present-day political climate, but you also cast a backwards glance into the past and to the mythology of Lady Godiva. Can you talk a little bit about why this myth is meaningful to you?

*HH* The myth comes from Coventry and is attached to the city; they even used to have a Lady Godiva festival. I used to have Lady Godiva much more in the novel, as well as other things that were attached to Coventry at one point: for example, its cloth trade and cloth-dyeing industry. But much of this got excised in one of the rewrites.

*KK* What do you feel is the value of myth in an age predominantly governed by science and technology?

*HH* Myth is story, and story is completely essential to life. In medieval castles, they used to have men to shoot the arrows, others to cook and others to tell stories; all these people were seen as essential to life in the castle. Throughout history, our desire for narrative has been an essential hunger within us, and it will always be there.

*KK* By the end of the novel, the city of Coventry is almost entirely demolished, and you describe a process of starting over that seems less idealistic than popular, hackneyed narratives of rebirth would have us believe. To what extent do you think change and renewal, for an individual or for a community, are possible?

*HH* I think it depends largely on where the person is in their life. If you’re an older person, starting over is difficult. After the bombing of Coventry, those in their sixties who had everything taken away from them would’ve found starting over difficult because all of their associations, memories, and things were lost, and they wouldn’t have had the same physical energy or flexibility. As well, I don’t think individuals can make new lives endlessly. We can change and renew ourselves so many times, but not as many as we think, and at a certain point it becomes undesirable.

*KK* You also intimate that “the moment you fix something, it starts to break down again” (*Coventry*) Do you feel that the processes of death and renewal are endless and balanced, or have we forced this cycle out of alignment?



*HH* These cycles are stronger and more immovable than we can know, and I think they remain in place despite all our interference. I trust in that. The world has been going for a very long time, and we're here for a very short time, so we don't control as much as we think we do. And that's a good thing.

*KK* In what do you place hope?

*HH* Those three things that I believe in — art, nature, and love — and all those people who believe in them also, and who keep faith with them.

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