

# ABIDE // LYLA RYE

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## MEANWHILE THE WORLD ESSAY BY HEATHER WHITE

There are truths we avoid telling kids --ostensibly to not scare them, but also because they pain or confuse us to say. To name them would be to pull back the curtain on ourselves, to expose our paltry wizardry. Some truths feel like failures: that we can't vanquish pain. Can't stem time's tide. Can't keep anyone close forever.

*Life is short, though I keep this from my children*, begins a poem by Maggie Smith [1] that has trended online several times, following several different (but related) political tragedies. The shooting at Pulse nightclub; the election of Donald Trump; the assassination of Jo Cox. Smith's poem also names assaults of innocents—not specific or systemic violences, but granular and fundamental ones. *A stone thrown at a bird, a child broken, bagged, sunk in a lake*. And the cruelty that begins it all, too terrible to tell a child: *that life is short*.

If life's shortness isn't exactly a violence, it is the condition that makes the other violences so terrible; life's limits make it sacred. And if privilege affords us safety (or belief in safety) from violence, there remains that other, whimpering cruelty, that other crime against the sacred: the mundane. The tedious. Its preponderance.

Life is short, and still it can end without fanfare. The fan will just faintly ripple the sheets. If we're lucky—this is if we're lucky!—while we die we may have a calm clockface nearby, or a window that a plane will cross, occasionally. If we're very lucky, someone could bring flowers; a petal could tremble. *Abide* testifies to these banalities kept from children. Existential absurdities, sometimes indignities, that children one day do find; most of the footage here comes from the hospital room where the artist's mother lay dying.

*Tell me about your despair and I'll tell you mine*, invited Mary Oliver in another poem [2] famous on Instagram. Tell me, even though (or perhaps because) the world won't stop for the exchange. *Meanwhile the world goes on*, continues Oliver. We'll despair, but the world will proceed with its chores, the weather. *Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain / are moving across the landscapes, / over the prairies and the deep trees, / and the rivers and the mountains*.

The weather that persists in here, despite the despairs, is video that interrupts the hospital tableaux. Riots of colour and life burst in and play over the placid room. The footage is from the artist's daughter's cell phone, and the scenes are sideways, loud, vivid, spontaneous. The artist's mother is dying; meanwhile, the world goes on. The artist's daughter, either in honour or in protest of life's shortness, sees to this.

It's a poetic sensibility that attends this meanwhiling, feels how dying and playing dovetail. Which is not to say the sensibility is based in words. W.H Auden admired the Old Masters' treatment of suffering in their paintings: *how it takes place / While someone else is eating or opening a window, or just walking dully along*. [3] Auden writes of works that show children who keep playing, ships that sail on past, though Icarus falls from the sky. *Meanwhile the world goes on*.

Or, as Grace Paley put it, writing of the responsibility of poets: *earth and air and water continue and children also continue*. [4] She was writing not of the cognitive dissonance the heartbroken feel, but of necessary resilience. The line is about continuing as a condition of freedom—which we need poets (storytellers, activists, sculptors, videographers) to notice and inspire and demand. The thought begins: *There is no freedom without fear and bravery there is no freedom unless*.

[1] Smith, Maggie. "Good Bones." Good Bones. North Adams: Tupelo Press, 2018.

[2] Oliver, Mary. "Wild Geese." Dream Work. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1986.

[3] Auden, W.H. "Musee des Beaux Arts." Another Time. London: Random House, 1940.

[4] Paley, Grace. "Responsibility." Begin Again: Collected Poems. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1985.

Heather White is a writer and psychotherapist in Toronto. Her writing on art has appeared in many magazines, including *Canadian Art*, *C Magazine*, and *MOMUS*, and alongside many exhibitions.

Lyla Rye is a Toronto based artist who began her studies in architecture. She works in installation, sculpture, video and photography to explore our experience of architectural space. Her work engages the viewer physically, optically, and conceptually, calling attention to our perception of time and space. Rye studied at the University of Waterloo, York University and the San Francisco Art Institute. For over 25 years her work has been exhibited in galleries and screenings across Canada and internationally including New York, San Francisco, Adelaide, Paris, and Berlin. She has exhibited at The Power Plant, The Whitney Museum of American Art, Southern Alberta Art Gallery, The Textile Museum of Canada and Olga Korper Gallery among others. She has work in the public collections of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, York University, Cadillac Fairview Corporation, The Tom Thomson Art Gallery, The Robert McLaughlin Gallery and as part of Ways of Something at The Whitney Museum of American Art, NY. She has received numerous grants from the Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council and the Toronto Arts Council.

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