

one
year

Elizabeth Reeder



ESSAY PRESS GROUNDLOOP SERIES

In Essay Press's Groundloop series, curated by Aimee Harrison and Maria Anderson, we seek to bring together authors exploring diverse subjects through loud, innovative architectures.

Series Editors

Maria Anderson
Lia Bogoev
Andy Fitch
Ellen Fogelman
Aimee Harrison
Courtney Mandryk
Emily Pifer
Victoria A. Sanz
Travis A. Sharp
Ryan Spooner
Randall Tyrone

Series Assistants

Cristiana Baik
Ryan Ikeda
Christopher Liek

Cover Design

Aimee Harrison

Interior design, artwork, and photography

Amanda Thomson

one year is an excerpt from the manuscript of collected of essays: *direction is the moment you choose.*

Italicized sections of text are taken from other original sources, which are detailed in Notes and Influences at the end.

ONE YEAR

by
ELIZABETH REEDER

design, artwork, and photography by
AMANDA THOMSON



#66

contents

introduction

what we did not know

ghosts

timescale unknown, as a daughter

buildings define the space of the street

the buzz

the healthy one

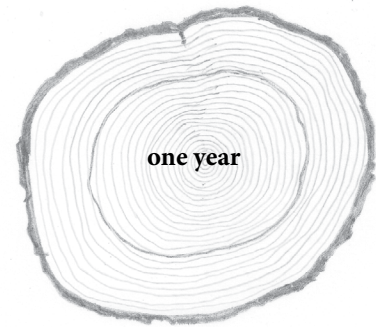
27 november

introduction

Being within intense times of illness and death is an experience many of us share. These essays give entrance to a time of living grief when we are completely, almost obsessively within the smaller world of illness, family and crisis, and yet, also, functioning as individuals, friends, and lovers in the wider world.

Initially, I thought this collection would be about my father, but when my mom received her diagnosis, life itself made it clear that there were three narratives here: my dad's, my mother's, and my own. Once I'd completed the draft manuscript, I worked with a visual artist, Amanda Thomson, on the design, images and formatting. This creative, critical and editorial collaboration impacted the essays themselves, how they can be read and, and in this final version, the narratives exist in a lyric and visual tension.

one year is taken from the manuscript of my full collection of hybrid/lyric essays, *direction is the moment you choose*. These essays are about the places between life and death; memoir and poetry; making and letting go. Here, essay is elegy: part poetry, part inevitable narrative.



what we did not know

On some hills, where rocks balance on inclines, there is a point geologists call the angle of no strain. Rocks repose despite steepness because all conditions allow for rest. I sleep lying down, pace upright, and when I lean I need a wall or a chair or a person to lean against.

During this first summer we dismantle a home and forget how to talk to each other. We nearly break up, more than once, and then it's autumn and we move from Scotland to Chicago carrying four items of luggage, which we hope will last the two years we'll spend there.

Our new apartment is filthy, noisy and perfectly located for you to travel south and for me to travel north. Your train loops the Loop; mine goes to the end of the line and returns. We're a closed system and there's pressure from inside, and out, to break apart our vicious little circle.



ghosts

On the edge of the lake sits a house, half built in depression, half in wealth. With the help of friends her dad raised it from the ground, with his bare hands, in hard times. But that was years ago and now it's the neighborhood eyesore on such a sought after piece of land beside the water. Storm surges beat at her door as her husband locks cupboards and opens drawers, inappropriately. Just before it's razed, I stand on the potholed driveway and can see right through the place, past closed drawers and open cupboards and out to the water. Two blocks away, at seven thirty-one, my mom is dizzy and my dad says he's doing fine but he often says, Honey could you just run and get this for me. This afternoon they've got what they need; I'm on my way home to our apartment and from the L tracks I see lakescapes and skyscrapers and flags flying at Wrigley Field and when I was fifteen my dad nearly died, the lake rose and retreated, he came back and the lake the lake the lake in all seasons.

timescale unknown, as a daughter

You limp and pause. It looks like your hips are sore, like the sockets are too wide to hold your weight. You never talk about your hips. Or your congested heart which struggles, lets water gather in your lungs, your legs. While you are physically heavy, your spirit is light, held aloft, high like your breaths. I can't quite feel that you're here on earth; on some days you're away, simply split between places, between here and somewhere else. Somewhere dead. And then you come back, laughing, eating donuts and drinking coffee, finishing the crossword in a flash, yelling at the sports on the tv, and you're all you dad and you're never going to die.

You shuffle your tall thin frame, you can't quite always lift your feet. They are too heavy, so is your head, and it leads you when you walk. We can't talk about your heart, it's weary, terrified, does it have to keep beating? If it stops, you don't want it started again. It flutters like your hands, trembles to flight. But your heart will keep beating because there is nothing wrong with it besides a little calcification, normal for a woman your age.

buildings define the space of the street

My dad nearly died when he was forty-nine: heart attack and triple bypass; blood clots in his legs; another heart attack. Halloween, Christmas, New Year, Valentine's Day. The bypass graft didn't stick and he was given no more than five years to live.

Two decades later and he's not walking very well, my mom is dizzy nearly all the time, and I've moved back to my home town and am drinking coffee and watching a peregrine split a halo of pigeons wide open. The bird makes daring dives between the buildings of Ashland Avenue, the speckled lines of her tail sleek in front of the bright sky. She's honing in on the dirty grey spread of pigeons, the predator's eyes on a slow one, and there she goes, a fast slice down and to the side and up and out of sight.

Those pigeons live on top of the car park and I watch; they don't settle for ages. They fly around and around, looking more like starlings, those smaller dark mice with wings. On the wing. On the wing when their cluster has been split open.

the buzz

A hummingbird feeds on my mom's hot-pink jerusalem roses in the early sun, thick heat, and it's almost still at the bud. The mesmerizing buzz of wings, the bright exposed neck. Days pass and cool and with a broom an old woman shakes an apple from a tree across the way, bites in, and music falls through a floor, into a ceiling, into my room, and *my memories, those elusive, fragmentary patches of color and feeling are gone, they've been replaced by the work.*



the healthy one

Dad is still slurring his words, so out of it that he doesn't take any of his meds on his first night home from the hospital, his skin hanging off him, and yet he's still puffy, his memory affected, his breath, halted, cut off. His short gait, uneven, and I can see the straight pain shoot through the roundness of his hip joints. His legs, which he insists aren't retaining water, are, nonetheless, hardly bending at all on his way up the stairs. His left leg goes first. His right follows. Six half, halted breaths per step, not like he's been asked to do it - in through the nose out through pursed lips to give him more oxygen - and I'm worried about him by the third step. Worried because he's too heavy for me to stop if he staggers backwards, or if he stalls. Seven more stairs to go. And then five. And then a dozen flat shuffled steps to the folding chair unfolded in front of his bed. His stride is shorter than it used to be. In two months time, after my mom's had surgery, when she can't move her head on the bed, or when her hands shake so much she can't put on her glasses, or hold a cup of water steady enough to drink, he'll say he's the healthy one.

Lost really has two disparate meanings. Losing things is about the familiar falling away, getting lost is about the unfamiliar appearing...Either way there is a loss of control. Imagine yourself streaming through time shedding gloves, umbrellas, wrenches, books, friends, homes, names. This is what the view looks like if you take a rear-facing seat on the train. Looking forward you constantly acquire moments of arrival, moments of realization, moments of discovery.



27 november

Dad is not well. He sleeps for a full 24 hours. When we try to give him his meds the next day, my brother and I are sure we'll give him the wrong pills, the wrong doses and, with this many pills, surely we'll kill him. Dad forces them down with water; refuses food. He won't let my brother help him to the bathroom but my brother sits outside the door for over half an hour to make sure dad's okay. It's possible dad's fallen asleep; it's absolute that he's nauseous with the meds. He makes it back to bed, sleeps more. We help him down the stairs the next day, Friday, for our delayed Thanksgiving dinner. He's a patriarch in name only, not feeling any better on Saturday, and talks about going to the doctor's open clinic the next day. He's barely walking, can't focus his attention long enough to carry on a brief conversation, and we say we think it's unsafe for him to drive. My brother and I, separately, more than once, offer to take him the next morning. He wakes up before seven on Sunday and asks my sister-in-law to move their car so he can get his car out. She does.

What should I have said? she says comforting her newborn after she's rushed upstairs to tell us, I didn't know how to say no.

Dad's already gone. He could kill someone, kill himself, and he's made my sister-in-law complicit in anything that might happen.

Excuse me, I say, and go back into the room where you are still in bed. I close the door, Pack up our stuff. If they don't fucking want my help then I'll not fucking give it.

My brother knocks on the door, Let's go get him.

It takes three phone books and a few phone calls to find the right address. We're just over the train tracks sitting at the lights and both of us stare at a tree fluttering with birds; as we drive by and see plain old starlings rustling there I say, I thought those were waxwings.

So did I, he says.

The doctor's office is quiet. We introduce ourselves to the nurse at the desk, who disappears, finds dad, and asks if it's okay if we come in. He says yes and she shows us to where my dad sits in a room waiting for a doctor. He's slow and measured speaking to the doctor, it's a long history he has to explain to the newbie, who doesn't say much of anything at all. I'm fine, dad says as we leave, I'm fine. But he lets me drive him home.

Acknowledgements

“the healthy one” and “buildings define” appeared in *Cleave: New Writings by Women in Scotland*, 2008.

“ghosts” appeared in *New Writing Dundee*, 2015.

A bursary from Creative Scotland supported the writing of this collection.

Notes and Influences

the buzz

“my memories—those elusive, fragmentary patches of color..” Annie Dillard
“To Fashion a Text” in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, William Zinsser (ed.). First Mariner Books, New York: 1998 [1987].

“Lost really has two disparate meanings...moments of discovery.” Rebecca Solnit, *A Field Guide to Getting Lost*. Canongate, Edinburgh: 2006.

Author Bio



Elizabeth Reeder, originally from Chicago, lives in Scotland and is the author of two critically acclaimed novels: *Ramshackle* and *Fremont*. *Ramshackle* was shortlisted for the 2013 Scottish Mortgage Investment Trust Best First Book of the Year Award, the 2012 Saltire First Book of the Year, and long-listed for the Authors' Club Best First Book Award (2013). Her short stories, dramas, and abridgements have been broadcast on BBC Radio 4, and her stories, poems, and essays are widely published. She teaches Creative Writing at the University of Glasgow and is co-convenor of that program. She is on [twitter](#).

Artist Bio



Amanda Thomson is a visual artist who graduated from The Glasgow School of Art and gained an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She earned her doctorate in interdisciplinary arts practice, based around the landscapes and the forests of the North of Scotland, in 2013. Thomson's writing has been published in academic journals, and she exhibits her artwork internationally. She currently works as a lecturer at the Glasgow School of Art.



Essay Press is dedicated to publishing artful, innovative and culturally relevant prose. We are interested in publishing single essays that are too long to be easily published in journals or magazines, but too short to be considered book-length by most publishers. We are looking for essays that have something to say, essays that both demand and deserve to stand alone. We particularly welcome work that extends or challenges the formal protocols of the essay, including, but not limited to: lyric essays or prose poems; experimental biography and autobiography; innovative approaches to journalism, experimental historiography, criticism, scholarship and philosophy.

Essay Press, like other small independent presses, needs support from its committed readers! Please consider [donating to Essay Press](#), so we can continue to publish writing that we and our readers admire.

