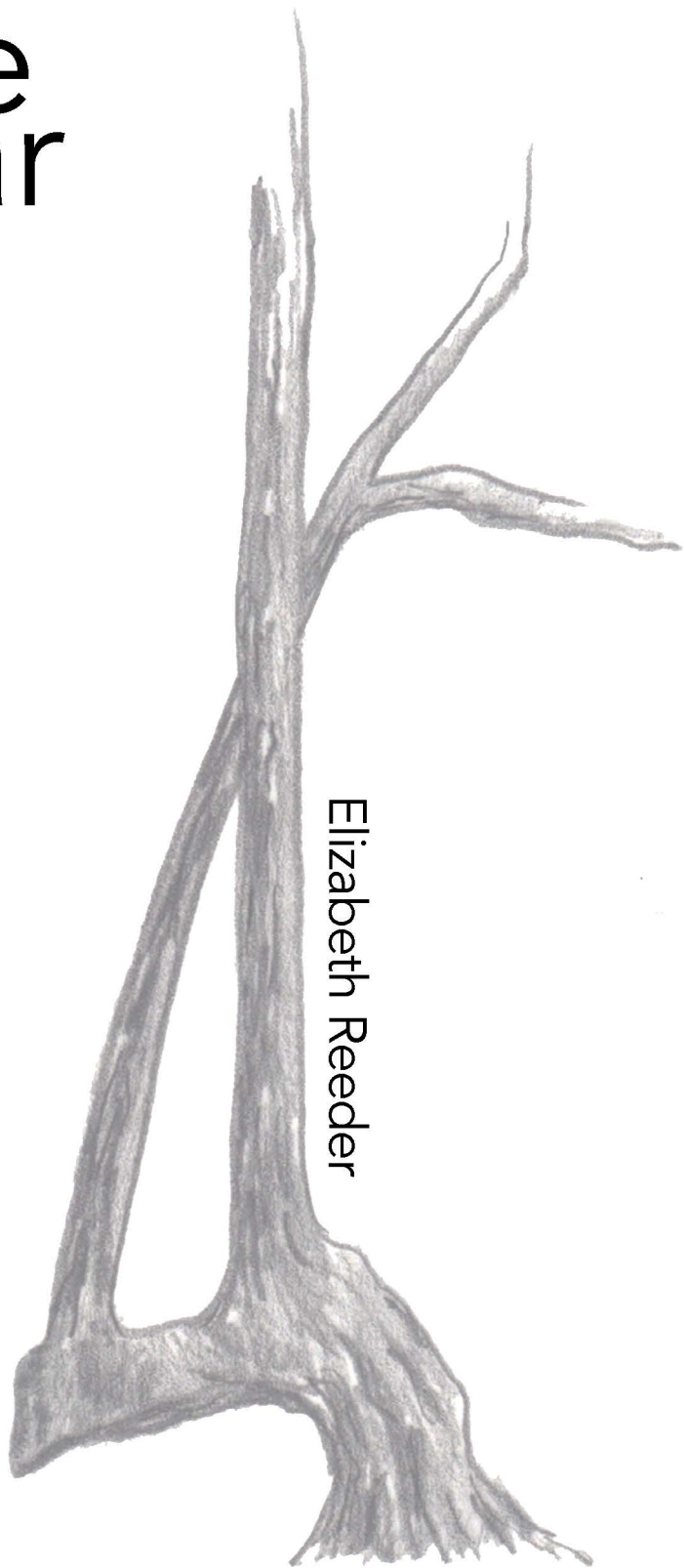


one
year

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.

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

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

ONE YEAR

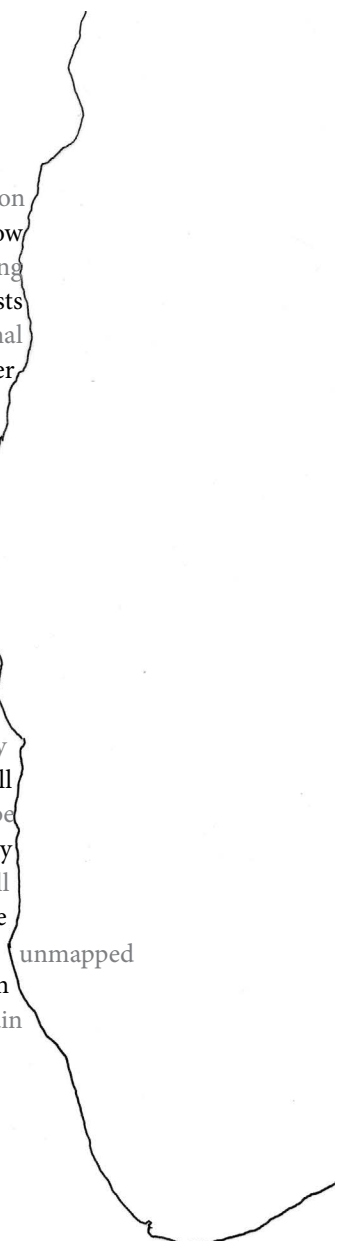
by
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#66

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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 terminal 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 collection exists 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*, and this chapbook covers roughly a year of living in these places between life and death. 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.

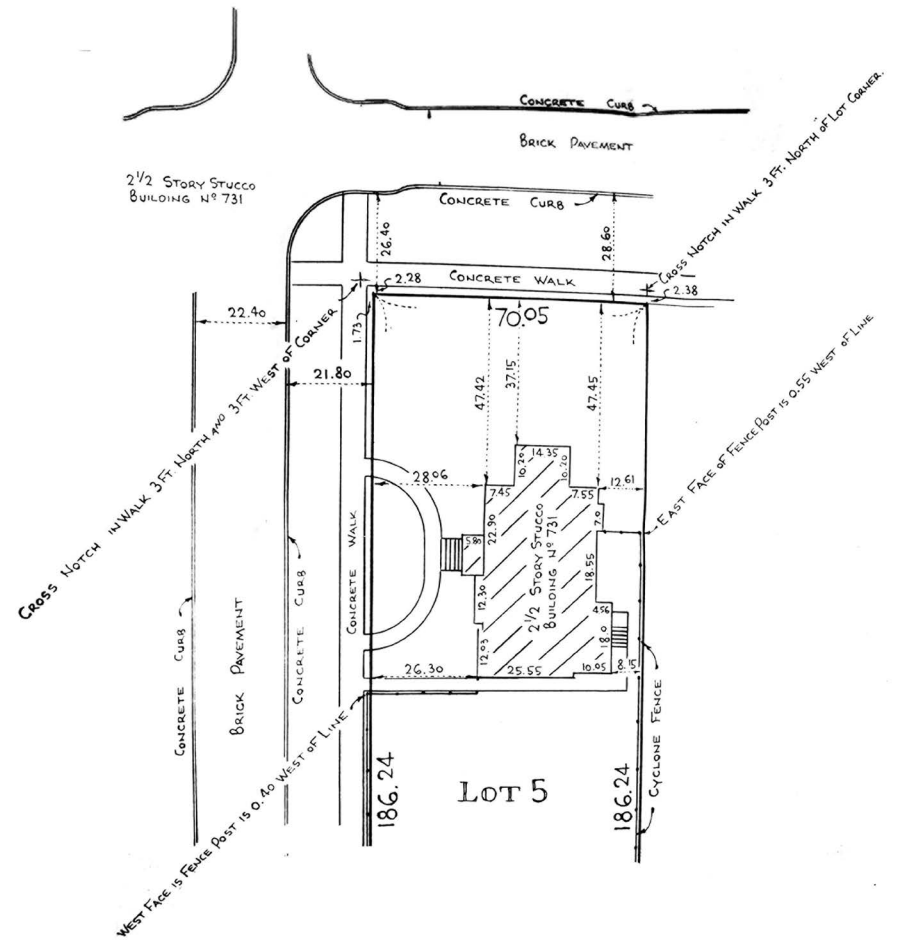
During this first summer we dismantle a home and forget how to talk to each other. We nearly break up, more than once, and then it's autumn and we move from Scotland to Chicago carrying four items of luggage, which we hope will last the two years we'll spend there.

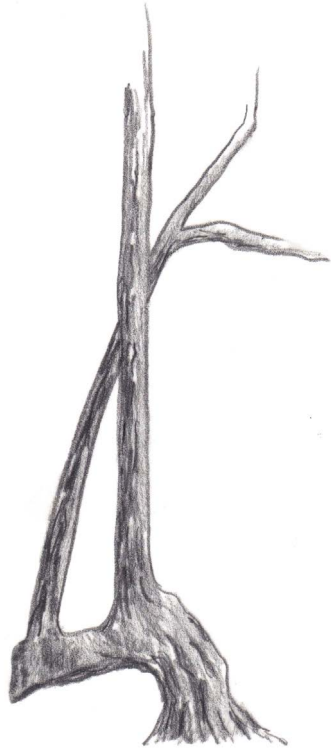
Our new apartment is filthy, noisy and perfectly located for you to travel south and for me to travel north. Your train loops the Loop; mine goes to the end of the line and returns. We're a closed system and there's pressure from inside, and out, to break apart our vicious little circle.

lost wax casting

A wright builds coffins and cabinets and all sorts of things out of wood and often needs other objects to complete the task: lock and key, hinge, clasp; something to line the inside of the box. Seamstress wordsmith wright. A tree becomes a boat or a door; an old joist becomes a chair or something to place across the road for traction when the rains come on. In New Mexico, Walter De Maria forged lightning rods, needlesharp to seduce light and fire to the ground, and under his wooden table I place a single hand on your thigh and later there's a catching of hands as we walk through a lightning field with distance peaks creating and withholding stormclouds. Still later, here, our wedding band is plain, is what is turned and pressed and worried when in crisis, when in doubt, and home can be a foundry for if the band is lost or sold or melted down we are still left with the bond between us.

Genesis is a key pressed into butter, wax, something impressionable. It is clear like the bright call of waxwings as they trill from berry to branch in a clutch of days that can never be predicted. The beginning and the remembered. Remove it, cast it, palm it. Wait for the opportunity to put the key to use, and then pay attention as one surface communicates with another.





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.



witness, dual national

This paper is the size of a truck and used to be a tree. It lies between us, on the floor, and used to be a mulberry growing near here. We sat in its shade, kissed, picked up a leaf, and this found object made it into your art, my writing.

Paper made like this, wisp thin, treelines still visible, is art. And the lifelines of it are pretty: like lips, hips, skin. It's like the place on your back where I touch the shadow cast by your vertebrae after we've made love. You don't let me do this often and today your body is held tight and your eyes are dark and unbound. Our thoughts are brutal, battlescarred, and you've almost had enough of it all. But you're not talking, haven't been talking for a long time. It's your closed hand that gives you away: skeleton bones and thick knuckles, pale broken by red. You don't even know you're upset; I am witness and so live it for you.

There's what's left of a dead tree between us: cut, pulped, reformed. You hold a charcoal in your hand and I have a thin-nibbed pen in mine. Our bodies are connected over this space by invisible threads of fear; I squat, my feet holding down the bark-remnant. You stretch out on your belly, your now open palm splayed on the page like an embossment. Like earth over a new grave. We've never been this close to the end before. If we can laugh it will be okay. A bell rings, echoes through the next minutes. You start in one corner, me another, and we may meet in the middle or you might fly off one edge and me the other.

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.

legend

Some Native Americans look in six directions to locate themselves (add sky, earth) and then they look in. The body a *holdfast*. Others describe the landscape in relation to their bodies, where something stands in relation to where they're facing: I see from here, they say, and I look out; I tell you what I see.

legend

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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.*



Isd

He's in the ICU and I didn't ask enough questions. Six hours later, sleeping at my parents' house, I feel inadequate. I'm not sure I did enough for dad: I brought the wrong mask for his breathing machine, didn't even bring the right attachment. Could do better. This is mine to bear and I don't want to sleep on a single mattress with you, instead I sleep alone downstairs on the couch.

The next day I drive back along lake shore drive to the apartment to pick up some clothes, a toothbrush. The lake churns up algae green and concrete grey, the waves coming in from the northeast, and the wind explains why I was so cold last night. A winter lake, pre-freeze, all the boats in the harbor gone, small stubs of piers. And space. Winter gives vistas. Bare branches, spindly into the ice-blue sky; the sun so clearly defining what is here and what is absent.

thanksgiving

My brother and sister and their families arrive at our parents' house. I've been here since last Friday, when he went into the ICU. Dad has been in some form of congestive heart failure for nearly twenty years and he'd been sleeping for hours on end in an upright wooden chair in the breakfast room because he couldn't make it up the stairs.

It's Thanksgiving Thursday and this house now holds ten adults, two walking talking kids, a newborn, and two dogs. This house used to feel huge and now feels barely big enough to hold us all. In fact, there aren't enough beds, and my sister offers to stay in a hotel. On his first day home, my dad is still falling asleep everywhere, can't remember simple facts of the last week; I keep checking him while he sleeps to make sure he's still breathing. And yet my sister wants to leave her kids in the house with all of us while she and her husband stay at a hotel. We drop hints, try to get her to realize we don't have the time and energy to look after her kids, but in the end my sister has to be asked to take her son, at least, with her.

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.

thundersnow

I sleep while you work on, work and watch tv. When you come to bed you tell me the snow has started, although it sounds more like icy rain. Thick duvet and you strip down for sleep. At 5:30 a noise wakes you, you share it with me, and then we drift. The warm air over the water causes it. It's rare.

The next day, you hang out at the apartment, it's your home too, but having you here makes me restless on a weekday. I create a petty gripe and pair it with a real one, magnified, and the anger is right there, sweet, untouched, and I could punch a wall.

Last night we had thundersnow, but it didn't accumulate much: lots of noise, but no follow through: this is me. You are a storm that appears on the horizon after dark falls and the wind picks up the moment sleep takes us, and when we wake in the morning, we're snowed in.

dnr

Next to the power plant today in Morris, Illinois, was a field superheated in the bitter cold of the day and the fog of it was thick, chopping off, floating, trees; the nuclear hot met cold air curling thick as firesmoke but whiter, white down clouds stirred up by the ground, by actions requiring warning sirens that stand like skyscrapers above the flatness of the fields, sharp boxes to power them and radio stations listed to tell you what to do, just in case of fallout, and we parked in front of a sign as we ate sandwiches and potato chips by the picnic tables but we stayed in the heat of the car because although we're silly, we're not stupid, and shit it was just too cold and barren and plus we'd seen three guys in a pickup truck and even though it said DNR on the side (do not resuscitate, department of natural resources, do not resuscitate) I thought shotguns in the back, and no one'd be there to witness the murder of a white girl and a black girl who traveled all the way to the powerplant's shadow in a borrowed car to see dead winter prairie and it was there we saw a few birds of prey (bop bop): one thin and long and wide and the other huskier, bulky with a white breast, and loads of northern flickers on the ground, and around the curve of the road it was quiet and through the trees we could see the truck and the government building and we stopped and were quiet but we left without walking and in Scotland I'm not always confident out in nature but I don't ever worry about getting shot and buried, sometimes just shot, if it's culling season.

waxwings

We plant pale rowan trees on both sides of a doorway for protection, and in winter they stand with bare spindles for branches, a few hastily crushed berries on the ground. Other trees, bigger and nestled between spruces, are laden. And in the air, bells.

29 january

My mom has surgery to remove a lump on her lung, which should be a relatively clean procedure, two days in the hospital at most, but when she comes out of surgery she can't move her head, can't hold a cup of water or scratch her face or put her glasses on. She can't move her legs on the bed either. She's in pain, but not able to describe it, to do more than moan. Morphine bugs climb the walls, and the men who walk on air between the street lights upset her.

yell

In the middle, I'm quiet. All the talk. I listen, I ask, I don't offer opinions. Enable, offer directions, gentle. I'm quiet. All the talk. All the anger. I think I know. They think they know. I'm efficient. They're being blinded: one by despair, one by hope. That would be fine but it's my life they're messing with too. I'm silent. On the way to my parents' house, the warning light goes on in my mom's car. I meet my dad at the car mechanic's, drive his car to check out the rehab place for my mom (after five days in the hospital, she still can't walk, she's still on oxygen, and can't do the stairs of their house), go back to pick up the car, and I attempt to get back to the hospital. On the expressway, the warning light comes on again. I exit I-94 and make it to 731, hoping dad's home with the other car. He's not. In the garage I roar; I hold nothing back. I stand and yell. I crouch down and I yell and I sob. Like I'm in mourning; what am I mourning? I stand up, go inside, and call the car repair place and say firmly, harshly to the machine: When you say a car is fixed, it should be fixed. My mom is waiting for me at the hospital to be with her as she's transferred and I can't get there. When you say a car is fixed, make sure the car is fixed. My face is salty and red. I pull down my shirt, smooth it; drink water. Hydrate. Hydrate. Stay healthy. My dad comes home, You can't cry, you're our rock. I drive his car to the hospital and I am silent, useful, helpful. I drive back and pick him up, we go out and see mom at rehab. I drive him and me back to their house. That night I hear a loud crash and dad's gone down in his bathroom and has broken his foot. Days later, when I finally get home, I'm rude to my girlfriend.

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I never wanted to be

an old man who fell down all the time

2 february

It's a flail. Involuntary. The wild twitch which cuts a line out of forced stillness, the slurred steps of a shifted gait. This arm here, struck out. Imagine a light held by two pinched fingers (if they could still pinch), lights off, slow shutter speed, and it arcs, a yoyo caught in light, in flight. It's not like she doesn't know, she does.

This man in the wheelchair, a c-curve of a back, his face expressionless, something else that goes. You can already see it, how mom stares a little bit too long, how her face waits

1

2

3

before curving into a smile. But she knows it and her ears, with turtles dangling (the only earrings she has here), turn red. She looks, slowly, He has Parkinson's, she says.

She blinks, hiding her blue eyes just for a second. And when she walks she lifts her legs clearly until the 10th or 11th step when her left leg gets tired and doesn't quite clear the floor. I ignore it and she tries to.

my heart is not still

Tonight standing at the front of the room to teach, I imagine your body along the front of my own. Thighs right here, your hand beneath my shirt still and cool with a small chop of water where an icicle has melted. Standing here I don't say anything about my mother or her stay in rehab or about being up at five a.m., again, or how I cried all through yesterday. I am silent about the bitter walks to the frozen lake. I say nothing about how today at lunch, sitting across from my dad in a ubiquitous sandwich place, we said nothing about how bad mom looked yesterday, nothing about how we didn't talk as we stared out the window at the dirt grey sky or as we drove in silence to visit her.



seven thirty-one

In June my dad keeps falling asleep and has started to slur his words. We spot it early enough and get him to the hospital without an ambulance. From a full to bursting waiting room, he's triaged second because his heart rate is 37. The nurse says, If that was me, I'd be crawling, and adds, under her breath, Or out cold. After a brief check-in in the ER, he's back in CCC (cardiac comprehensive care) for five days. They flush his kidneys and send him home.

His June hospitalization had led to some talks of a move, an attempt to find a new place to live; his August hospitalization turns these talks into action. They put money down for a move to a retirement community.

Dad doesn't want to move but the pain in his hips, his knees, his legs, his lungs will not allow him to do what he wants to do, which is to stay and die in the house, as he looks out over his forty acres. He feels the inappropriateness of the house, how he's been stuck on one floor or another for months and mom and I need to run between all floors to get him basic things. Whatever he wants seems to be on a different floor. It frustrates him not to be independent. No amount of planning, no system we come up with can make this house work for him. After they decide to sell the house (in conversations I'm not privy to), mom cries, not only because it's hard to leave a house you've lived in for thirty-two years but mostly because she's stopped taking her meds. Of course she has.

unmapped

Our Glasgow flat is without tenants for the second month; I spend most of my time up at my parents' house; the start of my book is ten months late, and my parents tell people I've come here to write.

we're a closed system

The great salt lake cannot be mapped with any degree of accuracy, because it lies in a shallow basin without drainage: any slight change in water level becomes an extensive change in shoreline.

This is to say I don't know. And I do. I am lost. I know how to be right here, as a daughter. I know this. And again and again I don't know what to do in the minute, to move us out of that minute and successfully into the next one.



circling the drain

On *The Daily Show*, Ted Koppel was talking about attitudes to terminal illness and death and told this anecdote:

How you doing? Ted asked his 93-year-old neighbor as they both retrieved their morning papers from their front sidewalks.

I'm circling the drain, Ted. I'm circling the drain. His neighbor paused, paper in hand, Remember, Ted, ain't none of us getting out of here alive.

Acknowledgements

“thundersnow,” “dnr,” and “baseball-hail” appeared in *PN Review* 178, 2008.

“driving back to the apartment,” (“lsd”), “the healthy one,” and “buildings define” appeared in *Cleave: New Writings by Women in Scotland*, 2008.

“witness, dual national” was published in the Books Section of *The Herald* on Saturday, 3rd November 2007.

“lost wax casting” and “ghosts” appeared in *New Writing Dundee*, 2015.

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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.

we’re a closed system

“The great salt lake...an extensive change in shoreline.” 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.



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