



roam

Issue 1

September 2019

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table of contents

This Stillness <i>Karen Neuberg</i>	page 5
Lost Time: Kipton <i>Bill Abbott</i>	page 6
Sacred Sorrows <i>Gerard Sarnat</i>	page 7
Next Exit: The Coldest Body of Water in the Country <i>Robert Sikorski</i>	page 8
Revenge of the avant-garde <i>Colin James</i>	page 14
Edema <i>Robert Beveridge</i>	page 15
Favorite Flavor <i>John Davis</i>	page 16
31 30 Flavors <i>Joe Cottonwood</i>	page 17
Foot Rubs <i>Adrian Slonaker</i>	page 18
Home Home on the Range Regrets <i>Gerard Sarnat</i>	page 19
Rumpelstiltskin <i>Kim Jacobs-Beck</i>	page 20
Seven of Wands <i>Robert Beveridge</i>	page 21
Groin <i>Robert Beveridge</i>	page 22
The Circle Spins <i>Robert Beveridge</i>	page 23
Doodlebug Disaster: Cuyahoga Falls <i>Bill Abbott</i>	page 24
The Pond is Whatever Age I Choose <i>John Grey</i>	page 25
half <i>Barbara E. Hunt</i>	page 26
Cradle Gifts <i>Karen Neuberg</i>	page 27
It's the Only Flavor She Likes <i>Kathryn Niemeyer</i>	page 28
Particles of light <i>Fabrice Poussin</i>	page 29
Alternatives to Nursing Home Whiffs or Other Institutional Tiffs <i>Gerard Sarnat</i>	page 30
Self-Fulfilling Prophecy <i>Gerard Sarnat</i>	page 31
Favorite Word <i>John Davis</i>	page 32
Alternatives <i>Sarah Henry</i>	page 33
Someone <i>Bill Abbott</i>	page 34

Dear reader,

Welcome home to the first issue of *roam*.

This issue has been a long time coming. In October 2018, we as friends and editors got together to decide what to do about the literary itch that had started creeping across our shoulder blades. What came out of that first meeting was the seed for *roam*—a project that would sate our desire to immerse ourselves in the writing community, to provide a place for good work.

We love writing. We love reading. Our mission statement says it all:

roam exists so that writers, placed at a common starting point, can journey toward conclusions only they can reach...and so that readers may enjoy the paths in between.

And so, we now can present to you our first issue. There are 25 pieces in this first volume: one short story and 24 poems.

In our original call for submissions, we provided themes for writers to draw on in their adventures. In some of these pieces, the theme that inspired the work is obvious—as in Kathryn Niemeyer’s “It’s the only flavor she likes.” Others have to be teased out and worked to see which prompt caught the artist’s eye. No matter what, all of these pieces are profound, or funny, or sparkling.

We hope you love and cherish these pieces as much as we do.

Keep reading, and keep exploring.

Michelle Sikorski, Eileen Winn, and Elizabeth Jenike
roam editors

This Stillness

Karen Neuberger

I'd like to be one of the ones with
clarity and sharp tact and leaping
ability taking me
into the unexpectedness
of delight.

Instead, weary,
I hear this stillness—

the future—

holding its breath.

Lost Time: Kipton
Bill Abbott

The villain in this tragedy
was a watch, four minutes behind.

In April of 1891, in Kipton,
mail and passenger trains collided.

Train cars turned to splinters and one
car slid onto the platform, breaking
the station windows, as
one engine reared up and came to rest
on top of the other, a clear victor
in the surprise joust of steam knights.

Eight people were crushed and dismembered,
burned in place and scalded. The train cars
piled higher than the nearby station.
The passengers further back, only shaken,
stumbled their way to safety.

Time may be a construct, an artificial,
agreed-upon invention. But the only way
to keep the trains on time is to
believe in it to the second.

Sacred Sorrows
Gerard Sarnat

Dear family hears
but then fears me
when I slide off
the rails to star
in my own story

whereas inanest
thoughts flutter
round second
to second 'bout
our done bodies

now put inside
underground
boxes, maybe
shoved into
fire or rivers.

Jolting events
jotted down –
how does one
cross this flood
water to repose

after alchemy
commutes us
where money,
sex even food
do not matter?

Every out/ in
breath, Buddha
famously said,
Death is king of
contemplations.

Next Exit: The Coldest Body of Water in the Country
Robert Sikorski

Lucy was watching the farm equipment move just beyond a row of trees. The view from the hotel lobby was so familiar, she could almost imagine she was sitting back in her childhood bedroom.

Her reverie broke with the chirp of her phone.

Sumit: 'How was the reunion lol' 'Sorry again for bailing'

Lucy sighed but quickly replied: 'It's chill, I didn't end up going...'

Sumit: 'Super sorry for real I know it was shitty to ghost'

Lucy started typing a snide reply, but deleted it before even finishing the thought. Instead, she sent: 'nbd I'm going to hit up the old sights!!'

Sumit: 'Oh sweet send some pics'

Lucy: 'lol obviously'

"Guess I have a plan now," Lucy said to herself, taking one last look before getting up and heading to her car.

Lucy took off for what locals called the trap road. The city's proximity to a huge national park meant it got its fair share of tourists passing through. This naturally caused touristy attractions to pop up, culminating with the creation of a tourist trap strip mall.

Lucy pulled into the lot out front of "The Smallest Reptile Zoo in the World". She ignored the opening time on the front door with practiced familiarity, making her way to the front counter.

"Anybody home?" asked Lucy, calling out in the empty lobby-slash-giftshop.

"We're not open yet," said a man's voice.

A scuffing sound of a chair followed and soon a familiar face entered the room.

"What are – holy shit, what the hell are you doing in a place like this?" asked the man, recognizing Lucy.

"What, am I not welcome here anymore?" said Lucy. She laughed as the man shook his head in exasperation. "How are you doing, Chuck?"

"Better than some," said Chuck. "What are you doing back here?"

"I was in town so I had to stop by to see my favorite old man," said Lucy.

"You mean Rupert," said Chuck, and she nodded, laughing.

Chuck shuffled into the exhibit room to get the zoo's lone occupant, a python named Rupert II. Chuck helped Lucy drape the snake around her shoulders.

“You didn’t really come to catch up with a snake,” said Chuck.

“No, I guess I basically came to bail on a class reunion,” said Lucy. “Honestly, I’m relieved I didn’t go.”

“I went to all of mine,” said Chuck. “I think I was bored at every single one.”

“Yeah, that’s kind of what I figured. Like, I don’t know why I was interested, but I was only sold because Sumit was supposed to come. When Sumit didn’t show up, I just realized I didn’t want to go.”

“Hey, at least you got to drop by the snake shake. You were Rupert’s favorite back in the day.”

“What, like I’m not now?” asked Lucy, bringing Rupert’s head next to her own.

“No,” said Chuck bluntly. Lucy pulled a face. “We got a new seasonal kid. Basically a snake whisperer. You should come back in a month when he starts again, see what I mean!”

“I might have to,” agreed Lucy. “Hey, can you take a picture for me?”

“Sure thing,” said Chuck. He chuckled as Lucy mugged for the photo.

“I don’t have a lot of time, but is there anything else I oughta check on while I’m here?” asked Lucy. She added, “I heard at a bar last night that things have kind of slowed down.”

“Kind of slowed down?! That’s a way to put it. People are stretched damn thin since that new expressway opened some ten years ago. Right after your family left. These days, open season is practically down to two months a year.”

“Wow, seriously?” asked Lucy.

“Dead serious.”

“Jesus,” said Lucy.

Chuck sighed.

“Try your luck, though,” said Chuck, “If you catch anyone, I’m sure they’d love to see an old face from the business!”

“I will,” said Lucy. She handed Rupert back to his caretaker.

“I’m glad you stopped by, Lucy. Take care.”

Lucy drove down the road past a couple of obviously closed attractions. She pulled into a longer building shared by four stops. Three were closed, but not the one she had come to see.

She was holding her breath as she went to knock on the door to “The Coldest Body of Water in the Country”. She let out a small yell when the door opened before she even touched it.

“Mary, you about scared the,” started Lucy, but her mouth went slack when she saw who was standing in the doorway.

The young woman in the doorway wasn’t Mary O’Conner but Leigh O’Conner was nearly her mother’s twin, down to the sarcastic smile, although her voice seemed sharper.

“Well, well, what are you doing round here?” asked Leigh. She crossed her arms.

“Uh,” said Lucy. She paused. “I’m taking in the sights.”

Leigh laughed, turning back into the building.

“Where’s your mom?” asked Lucy.

“What, not going to ask how I am?” said Leigh. She’d returned to doing inventory.

“Sorry, yeah. How are you? Been ages, I guess,” said Lucy.

“Years. Although you could have stopped by the reunion last night, seeing how you’re in town and all.”

Leigh spoke without looking up from her work.

Lucy bit her lip.

“Seriously, where’s your mom?” asked Lucy.

“She died almost eight years ago,” said Leigh. “That’s why I’m running the shop.”

“What?”

“Hit and run. Probably some fucking tourist too busy speeding out to the big park to pay attention to the road.”

“Jesus,” said Lucy, “I’m so sorry.”

“Like I said, that’s why I’m here.”

“Leigh, I had no idea.” Lucy was tearing up, but couldn’t bring herself to cry in front of Leigh.

“I know,” said Leigh. She shook her head. “I’m sorry, I feel like I’m being a dick. I know how much you and Mom got along. Like, how much she meant to you.”

“But why did you take over here? You always seemed like you hated all these tourist traps.”

“I did,” said Leigh. “Still kind of do. Glad Mom didn’t have to see how shitty everything’s gotten, it would have killed her if the car hadn’t. But I had to help out the family since Dad’s job didn’t make much. And when my brother left town, I felt like I had to stick around just to help Dad. Don’t know if I’ll ever leave anymore.”

Lucy chewed her mouth.

“I’m sorry,” said Lucy. “That fucking sucks.”

“Maybe,” said Leigh, looking back up. “But I’m doing alright. How about you, Lucy, what have you been up to?”

“I’ve been good,” said Lucy. “I’m actually in town because I meant to go to the reunion, but I kind of chickened out.”

Leigh laughed and shook her head.

“You didn’t miss much,” said Leigh. “The people who left town didn’t come down for it, and so it basically wasn’t that different from any other local get together.”

“That doesn’t sound like the worst,” said Lucy, with a shrug.

“No, I had a pretty good time. But it’s the five year, right? Not many people showed up already. If it only gets less from here, I don’t fancy my luck organizing the ten year.”

“Right,” said Lucy. She look around the lobby. “So, seems like this place is doing okay despite all of the, you know.”

“Yeah, we’re doing okay. I can’t hire any help anymore, but we still manage to get pretty much anyone who stops in town, coming or going,” said Leigh, pointing over to selection of T-shirts in the shop. “They come for a shirt, but once they’re inside, they always check out the water.”

Lucy smiled at this.

“Classic tourists falling for a classic trap.”

“Right? Who knew anyone still cared about T-shirts?”

“So, since I’m here,” said Lucy, raising her eyebrows.

“What’s that face for?” asked Leigh laughing. She tapped the sign on the counter for ticket prices.

“What, really?” asked Lucy, still smiling.

“I gotta make a living and you don’t work here any more, so,” said Leigh. She held her hand out, and rubbed her fingers cartoonishly.

“Alright,” said Lucy, and she pulled out her wallet. “Break a ten?”

“Yeah, right!” said Leigh. She took the bill and put it directly into the tip can.

“Sure, what the hell,” said Lucy.

“My dude,” said Leigh, “Follow me and prepare to be amazed. Or underwhelmed, since you’ve already seen it.”

Leigh lead her down a familiar stairway. The walls transitioned to natural stone and soon they were in the cave under the shop, looking over the cistern. It was a fairly large, questionably natural basin, full to the brim with clear water.

A small rope separated them from the basin. Several signs hung about the pool, including a bold “Extremely cold! Do not touch!”

“There she is,” said Leigh.

“Just like I remember,” said Lucy.

They stood quietly. Eventually, Leigh broke the silence.

“Man, I had already started with Mom a bit by the time you’d left town. I remember her giving the run down to this one family. The dad was really interested in touching the water, but you remember how my mom was!”

“Did she show them her frost bite toes? I saw her whip that out and she about made this bratty boy cry.”

“You know she did! They backed down after that. I just remember her just like going into full hyper mode and all I could think was like, ‘Mom, chill out! You’re scaring them!’”

They laughed, and let it die out to silence as they started at the pool together.

“You know, I don’t think I’ve been down here without showing some tourist around in... maybe ever,” said Leigh.

“Really? I used to come down here all the time,” said Lucy.

“Yeah. I mean, I loved my mom, obviously, but this, I didn’t really understand it. I never really got the point. It’s like, ‘Wow, cold water. Never seen that before.’ But I guess that’s it.”

“That’s funny,” said Lucy. “I used to eat my lunch super fast so I’d have time to just look at the pool. I remember once time I had snuck down a stick to dip in.”

“No shit?”

“Yeah. I actually did it, but Mary had some kind of sixth sense about the water. She was there before I even had the stick completely out, and she scolded me for messing with the pool.”

“How cold was the stick?” asked Leigh, turning to look at Lucy.

“She took the stick, but when she was taking it some of the water landed on my arm and,” said Lucy, “I have this really clear memory of it just being, like, shockingly cold. I was actually super surprised.”

“That’s crazy,” said Leigh, laughing. “I’ve honestly never even thought to mess with the water. Mom kind of ingrained the rules in me too much. Gotta say, it doesn’t look as cold as when I was kid.”

“I know what you mean,” said Lucy, also turning back to the pool. “It doesn’t look different, but...”

“It doesn’t look like it did.”

They stood quietly a moment longer.

“It doesn’t feel that cold down here,” said Leigh.

“Yeah. It’s cool, but hardly cold,” said Lucy.

“And the water doesn’t feel cold from the here.” Leigh was holding a hand above it.

“I swear I remember it being so cold,” said Lucy, “But I guess I don’t know.”

“Dare you to jump in,” said Leigh.

“No way,” said Lucy, laughing. “Remember your mom’s foot?”

“Dude, I don’t think she ever busted out the frost bite until the year after she and dad went on a ski trip in Utah.”

“You jump in, then.”

“I will if you will.”

They made eye contact for a second. Lucy chewed her lip.

“On three?”

“On three.”

“One, two, ...”

Leigh and Lucy hopped the short rope into the pool. Their laughs echoed in the cave as they splashed into the lukewarm water together.

Revenge of the Avant-garde

Colin James

Once a year at the summer solstice
we traveled up into the black hills
ran around naked, conspicuously belt-less.
Independent, trailing behind
a strand of what we were famous for.
Sure as shooten this belligerence
would pester us for days.

Edema

Robert Beveridge

Turf expands, contracts, corpuscles
take out random red cells. This
neighborhood went to hell years
ago but its inhabitants fight on,
for where else can they settle
not fraught with the same troubles?
Your right calf the corporeal
equivalent of Poland. You wonder
if eventually you will sit down
with one bottle of absinthe, one
of pomegranate nectar, and one
of tea tree oil and exercise
the nuclear option. For now, though,
a calf resembles a baby cow more
than an endless black glass desert.

Favorite Flavor

John Davis

Something there is about cinnamon
the taste of glazed rolls, the sugary sweet
that sticks on skin after biting in
to the folds of chewy dough.

Sprinkle it in—cinnamon in casseroles
in stews and French toast. Not abrupt
as pepper or pungent as paprika. But sensual
on the tongue. A tangy two-step, fluttered

eyebrow wink. Nothing sad-eyed or required
about cinnamon. Mix it in chocolate,
hot coffee and tea. Make eyes in the night
sipping cinnamon liqueur. It's the sins

we did and sins we do, tanned skin, the long
linger of silent fire in our mouths. Serve up
scoops of cinnamon ice cream and the world
will go to war no more.

31 30 Flavors

Joe Cottonwood

A little brown lady with hair in a bun
name tag MIMI
spoons out samples from frosty buckets
amused by your thoughtful lipsmacks,
then says 'Here, this one.'

The plastic mini-spoon offers a color
not of the rainbow. Smatters on the lips
as splash from a waterfall.
Shafts of sunlight tickle the tongue.
A scent of sap, a sound the rush
of wind in pine, the mass of ocean fog,
the touch of feather, the clutch
of oriole's tiny feet.

'Yes, that one' you say.
'What do you call it?'
Before she can answer comes the stink
of gasoline, taste of chainsaw.
Then no flavor at all.

As Mimi vanishes
her lips form the word Birdsong.
To the other scooper, a bored teenage girl,
you say 'What happened to Mimi?'

She thinks you're an idiot.
There is no Mimi.
Your chocolate sundae
never the same.

Foot Rubs

Adrian Slonaker

“Rub us!”

Her pale toes wiggle as
he grips each one with
proper respect, never slipping a digit
between them because those spaces are
the mouths of the feet,
and he wouldn't want them to gag.
The massages have been guaranteed each evening,
once her keys collapse on the counter
and her flats are flung off,
for two decades bookended by
student ramen and osteoarthritis,
every squeeze a symbol of solidarity
through flu and SlimFast failures and
families crumbling like
Gondwana.

“Get the heel!”

When tension seeps from a knob of bone
repeatedly plastered against
the steps of Robie Street,
she grinds her green eyes
into giddy slits and
festoons the cramped bedroom with
shrieks of relief.

Home Home On The Range Regrets
Gerard Sarnat

Teen art of
unclasping
bras
unbuckling
belts

adult dolt
abattoir
shooting
bolts in
cow brains

now all
the Mrs.
'n I can undo
is each other's
hearing aids.

Rumpelstiltskin
Kim Jacobs-Beck

Men keep their names
Bad daddies trade

daughter for favor.
Say Rumpelstiltskin. Say it.

My uncles laugh when I refuse.
They think I can't say it

but I can. I know
the tale—the daughter

trapped, imposter under
her father's lie, unable

to spin. I plan my escape
from laughing uncles, teasing

father, a long line of
bullshitters and thieves.

Groin

Robert Beveridge

You watched big balloons
fly over jars of aging tonic
and could not help yourself
sang, hummed. Berlioz,
perhaps, or Puccini,
you could never tell
the two apart
and you drank what rain
you could hear
beyond the mist. You
stepped into the flooded
bookshop and lost
all strain of hope.

The Circle Spins
Robert Beveridge

Chicken soup and endless aspirin
for the head that won't stop
the boogie. Lines of copperheads
mambo, the guys with the keys
and the nuclear codes do
the Charleston at your neighbor's
backyard barbecue. Feral cats
waltz through the trees while
their blind mice slamdance.
The last thing you see before
the world ends is the entire
Appalachian range doing
the jitterbug, dripping liquid sun.

Doodlebug Disaster: Cuyahoga Falls

Bill Abbott

On a normal summer day in 1940 Cuyahoga Falls,
The Doodlebug, a gas passenger train car, made
its regular run on the tracks from Hudson to Akron.

Then it slammed a freight train at 40 miles per hour.
350 gallons of gas on the Doodlebug exploded.
The burning gas covered the car, all 43 passengers, the tracks.
No one survived.

The engineer had lost his ability to function clearly
because of a buildup of carbon monoxide in the cab.

The fire was too hot to allow anyone near enough to even
try to rescue the passengers for a half hour.
150,000 people came to see. A few tried to help.
Most wanted the spectacle.

Locals remember it was dinner time. The Cleveland
Indians were just finishing a game in overtime. People
remember hearing it crash from their front porches.
Just another slow summer Ohio day.

The Pond Is Whatever Age I Choose

John Grey

In a past that not even the excavators can damage,
that honeycombs into sweetness for lack of a bitter taste,
that sideswipes adolescence, barrels toward childhood
at the speed of laughter and woodland glade,
that succumbs to dirt roads and ball-fields,
hangs out with engravings on tree trunks,
says you can't go wrong if you cherry-pick your own nostalgia
gets me to this pond now—halcyon, innocence—
the words don't even have a taste for alcohol as yet.

The egret won't call me on it.
The fish still leap into the air as if to catch
a glimpse of a man in a young boy's dream.
Those good old oaks and pines—
they live long enough to never feel their age.
They're just what their reflection tells them.
It helps if I part the waters.

In a past that can contain a body of fluid this large
and not spill a drop,
that can drown every call from the elders
but float a child from one bank to the other,
that catches trout, that makes fires,
that cooks and eats without distraction,
in a sunset so red and orange
even dead fish heads smile,
says I hate to bother you at this late date—
but it's early—so it doesn't bother me one bit.

Half

Barbara E. Hunt

the coral of
that 1400-mile swath;

(the longest, greatest reef
on earth) has in these past

three years been bleached
beyond suffocation

to slow-starvation
in overheated waters

and died.
Gone,

amber-coloured staghorns
and flat,

fan-like tubulars.
One billion

fragile pods bled out
their orange algae

from shocked
symbioses. Dead-standing

in balmy, toxic ocean,
they are reminders

that autopsy
should never precede

prognosis.

Cradle Gifts

Karen Neuberger

Our latest polarizations
along political lines moving further
into camps, then escalating into battles.
Add war, mass migration, new
weather, once coming,
now arrived. And our beloved
plants & animals dying off
across the globe.

Dearest rock-a-bye-baby, go ahead
and cry. We're gifting you
all this as yours to carry.

It's the only flavor she likes

Katie Niemeyer

She buried her face
deep and
the dirt
tasted of
fresh air

Her feet in
the clouds and
earth
in her lungs
her mouth filled
with the bitter
sweet taste at
every movement of
her tongue

Hands tugged
through tufts
of grass and
flowers
followed the tips of
fingers traced
The earth shuddered
beneath
her, with
her, in
her

She tasted
the salt of
the earth

Particles of light
Fabrice Poussin

They jump with the glee of young children
fast playing hide and seek in the night
lightning bugs caught in a mason jar.

One may think they are ghosts in the depth
of a forgotten graveyard beyond the abyss
dots of glows like little souls in the ether.

Sisters they are aware of each other's essence
identical in the energy they project upon
the invisible walls of the universe they create

Swirling they laugh without a worry
little girls in the making they hover
seeking the seeds of lives they will awaken.

Particles humanity cannot see they are free
so far away, so close, as fluid as time
they may be here now, then in another plane.

Soon they will come together as once they did
little boy seeking the adventure of a lifetime
to come to a wholeness he knows well.

Alternatives To Nursing Home Whiffs Or Other Institutional Tiffs
Gerard Sarnat

All our dogs have gone to one young neighbor's barn to die.
I asked her if it would be alright for me to do about same.

Kate said she'd likely think regards that, but wondered
vis-a-vis my wife whose plan is suicide at eighty-five.

Each of 3 kids seems miffed we are considering
probable endgames which do not involve them.

Where will you go when the jig appears up?
Remember those good old commune days?

Fantasizing about living together forever?
Perhaps passing on a Yellow Submarine?

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy
Gerard Sarnat

Insatiable delusions
of grandeur—like Peter
denying Jesus three times,
thrice before required
to be scrubbed from head to toe preceding hip replacement
transported to be reborn,
Christ I continue refusing
to believe barbaric
surgery come to pass
in the morning when
the procedure's cancelled.

Favorite Word

John Davis

You love the word fuck-it
which is actually two words
hyphenated into one
a splendid expression
that makes you grin Fuck-it
reduces your blood pressure
and that deep breath you release
like a long belch you've held
in your belly...so fuck-it nice
which should be so fuck-itly nice
but let's not bring out the red grammar pen
just a simple fuck-it
when your boss wants you to work
the night your son plays Ook
in the fourth grade Stone Age Play
Fuck-it you cut across the neighbor's yard
or dive naked off the public pier
Later you crack open a beer
fuck-it let the lawn grow
You flop on the deck and nap
because you can.

Alternatives

Sarah Henry

I might mention murder
and mayhem
and untoward diseases.
There should be a guardian
angel for drunks
who fall backwards
from boats at night.
A lawyer dashes
to the scene of
a slip and fall accident
in a hospital parking lot.
Buildings collapse.
Objects drop from windows
as we run down streets
paved with open manholes.
Too many things can
happen and no doubt will,
but for now I'm just
relieved we haven't
made it over the final
doorstep and left
our killer shoes outside.

Someone

Bill Abbott

“Someone needs to set an example,”
you said,
“someone needs to create a legacy,”
but you were getting old
and I was getting drunk
on the choices available.

Someone had to build an empire,
to splice the wires together
that would burn the house down
so completely, in one go.
Someone had to raise the children,
scape the goats, level the
playing field, sacrifice the lambs,
smear the blood across the doorframes.
Someone had to do something,
do something, do something.

