Fall 1991

Canto Fall 1991

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CANTO

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VOLUME 4  FALL 1991

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CANTO is published by the students of Kent State University Stark Campus and is supported by Student Government and the Writing Program.

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**Acknowledgements**

Plates 137 and 192 on page 5 and plates 60, 94, and 138 on inside back cover reprinted from *Catchpenny Prints*, Dover Publishing Inc., New York.
are these hands mine?

with fingers as dark as the printmaker's
littered with knife cuts of toil and age
whose valleys run small eels of
dust
and dirt--

* * * *
on a cold paycheck Friday

inserting my paycheck into the
dead teller's computer-mouth,
they feel themselves upward into noticing:

"It seems I haven't seen my hands for ten years..."

* * * *
hands once ageless,
and soft to the touch, kind like the breasts of sparrows,
marvelous as the backs of dolphins risen out of the sea

but such as those

are not these,

which before my eyes
are fleshly banners

flags
my future corpse signals back with
saying the day of death
has an hour, a minute, and a precise second...
Suspended in time and returned as you were,
Three boys—no men, look at their eyes---
Who fought through the horrors of the Vietnam jungles.
Now they are home—like many still in dirty fatigues.
First stop—the monument that honors their efforts.
My God! we didn’t lose a battle, how could we lose
  58,000 brothers!
Oh God! Not him too!
Didn’t anyone make it?
Oh God, No------

American look at their eyes, see their pain. Look long and hard, see their memories?
American, how could you? These are your children. They did your bidding. They gave all they had to give and somewhere got brave enough to give more. You called them murderers, they were warriors. Honorable children who fought an enemy too vile for words.

Mothers, how could you? They were your babies. Can’t you see, they stayed alive by any means possible. Lift them up to Jesus, but hold them tight—they need your arms—not your condemnation!

Fathers, how could you? They are your pride, your firstborn, too young to vote you sent them to war, then denied them when they came home—no longer pure!

The eyes, they tell it all. Pain, horror, nightmares.
Oh God! No—I’m not asleep. Watch the eyes long and hard,
No, their eyes will have to do---
The words can’t come—rejection is reality—a fact of life.
No, they won’t tell, you had to be there.
Their youth, it’s gone—sold to Jungles,
The price for their life.
The eyes will make you ache with tears, even while they laugh.
For Jane

(brain tumors are operable aren't they)

Take my rhyme-ribbon
To tie your sign.

Swaddle in its bow breadth
To bind your mind,
To knot your thought.

Lace love fast,
Let it last,
Until

(a brain tumor is operable isn't it)
Mountains

Amor, you made just one request from me here: a poem of mountains.

These are slow, beautiful ones covered with thick growth. Had there been less rain, I'd have walked, lost myself in them; but I was unprepared.

One evening, they were a herd, their wet spines unconcerned, grazing their way toward plains.

Today, they were a woman lying down, looking at sky, her profile common, her face kissing clouds.
Bullish Power

While visiting my cousins down in Leslie County, Kentucky, one summer, I learned a very important lesson about trying to get out of hard work.

"The weeds are about to take over the garden," Uncle Arnold informed my cousins, "Little" Bev and Kelly and myself. "You boys had better get the hoeing done today." Since we had been looking forward to a little fishing and swimming in Cutshin Creek, this was not exactly welcome news. We figured that to spend the day at the blister end of a hoe was not the way to visit. You see visiting, you are supposed to visit and play, NOT work!

Of necessity, they always grew a large garden down home (also a large family to take care of the garden). They would grow beans, tomatoes, cucumbers, corn (for the animals); most of the necessities for life in the mountains, they stored by canning or drying the crops (Now that's another story!).

The responsibility for controlling the weeds and tilling the soil fell to my cousins. They had a team of horses and a row cultivator, so normally these chores did not take long. But at this particular time, however, one horse had been loaned to a neighbor and the other had injured his foot and was temporarily on the retired list. The garden had to be hoed by hand while the cultivator sat idle.

Now, we were somewhat inventive when it came to shortcutting work. We thought we planned rather well for our ages. I was around 13, "Little" Bev was around 12, and Kelly was around 10. We felt it was an unreasonable situation to have a modern convenience such as a row cultivator and still be required to revert to a medieval and menial tool such as a hoe. The proper machinery was there---all we needed was a power source, and we might still have time to go to Cutshin Creek.
While mulling the situation over, “Little” Bev’s wondering gaze fell on Blackie, a three year old (white) bull Uncle Arnold had chained to a stake in a grassy corner of the garden.

“Buck, there’s our horsepower!” “Little” Bev shouted.

Bullpower I thought. Or something similar.

Now, Blackie was reasonably gentle. At least he hadn’t killed anyone—yet. But bulls are unpredictable. Blackie had no nose ring; only a chain around his horns. Uncle Arnold led him with the chain each time he needed to be moved. Sometimes, Blackie would get in a playful mood, cavorting around and butting him gently in the backside, but Uncle had only to give the chain a light jerk and gently growl, “Blackie, behave,” and the bull would settle down.

However, Aunt Nancy was always ill-at-ease about the situation and often reproached Uncle Arnold. “Arnold, you stop handling Blackie that way,” she’d say. “Someday, he may turn mean and hurt or kill someone. Put a nose ring on him.”

“Oh, Nancy,” Uncle Arnold would reply, “he’s just like a big playful dog.”

Enthusiastic about his brilliant idea, “Little” Bev quickly unfastened Blackie’s chain from the stake and we led the bull to the barn. I was somewhat apprehensive, but warming to the plan as I considered the alternative of working all day with a hoe handle.


“Just look again,” “Little” Bev replied proudly. “A bull’s neck is built just opposite a horse’s neck, which is narrow on top and wide at the brisket. A bull’s neck is wide and heavy at the top and narrow at the brisket.”
“By folly, that’s right!” Old “Little” Bev is a common-sense sort of a guy, I thought. On went the harness, upside down, hame straps buckled at the top of the collar, the belly band, and vice versa. We hooked the traces to the single tree on the cultivator and jubilantly headed for the garden, dragging the cultivator on its side.

For a few rows, everything went fine. “Little” Bev led Blackie by his chain back and forth between the rows and I held the cultivator handles, keeping it upright and controlling the depth. The weeds were uprooted and soil was properly loosened. As I walked along, I began to marvel at how smart we sometimes were when I was suddenly brought back to reality as I crashed into the stalled cultivator.

Blackie had balked. The concept that plowing was the ultimate in monotony must have seeped into his bovine brain. No amount of jerking on his chain and shouting would make Blackie move.

“Hit him with something,” “Little” Bev yelled, as he continued to tug on the chain. I flipped the traces, Kelly began to pelt him in the rump with clods of dirt and he finally moved. It is amazing how fast an angry bull can cross a garden, not once, but many times, pulling a cultivator with its teeth buried deep in the earth. It is more amazing how “Little” Bev could match this speed and remain in the lead. I recall thinking, even during this hectic situation, that if “Little” Bev would only run back and forth between the rows, we could be finished even sooner than anticipated. However, in order to maintain his narrow lead, it was necessary for “Little” Bev to zigzag occasionally, much as a rabbit will do when closely pursued by a hound.

At length, our erratic course led us near one edge of the field and I shouted, “Hit the fence!” Performing another of his classical zigs or zags (I don’t remember which), “Little” Bev caused the bull to crash into the fence while making a turn. I lost my grip on the cultivator handles and “Little” Bev made it over to safety.
Not having been blessed with extremely rapid thought, I stood in awe, watching the performance unfold before me much as a spectator at the arena, spellbound by the skill of the matador. The bull had no such distraction and quickly gave me his undivided attention, so the hound-and-rabbit game resumed. Around and around we raced. The number of garden plants was rapidly diminishing.

I pride myself that I finally concluded the game in much the same manner that “Little” Bev ended the first half, but perhaps Blackie was losing interest in the whole thing. With both “Little” Bev and me on the safe side of the fence, he continued running and bellowing all over the garden for a while longer, dragging the capsized cultivator. I believe his goal was fifty percent destruction, for when he had reached that point, he suddenly stopped and began to graze. Oh! Kelly was the smart one—he ran the other way when Blackie started forward! In a few minutes, he was his old docile self, and we were able to take him back to the barn, hang up the harness, and again chain him to his stake.

When Uncle Arnold and my Dad returned home from town that night and learned of our escapade, they hit the ceiling. “How are we going to keep you fool kids alive long enough to grow up?” they roared. “Nancy, where’s my switch?”

The next morning, while gathering tools to perform another assignment, “Little” Bev suddenly brightened and exclaimed, “Say, let’s sit down and figure out an easier way to do this. I have an idea.”

“No,” I groaned, gently feeling the seat of my pants. “Let’s do our figuring standing up!”

Our Dads’ dispositions remained very sore for three days, and so did our backsides!
Skinny Dip

pacifist moon striptease
trees sleaze
(don’t hide)
dark skied why
whittle fog gauge my age
muraled in this
thin cloud of lightness

flew diver skive water
foot slips flip
fell in enveloped
laughter
us alias someone else

alibi that splash

and who’s there
who you blue in aquarium
womb weightless
faint stars far over noses
rockroses hock holly
    (hey
who’s there)

over the fence chains
to the alley over
dampened open-minded
we dry gravel-blinded
and the pebbles blushing
giggled under toes.
The Devil Made Me Do It

There is a reason and a result for each and every wrongdoing ever committed. This is the conclusion that Poe must have come to when examining the nature of man in a society where wrong sometimes seems to be right. In “The Tell-Tale Heart,” Poe reveals to us what would happen, in an extreme situation, if we were to give in to our sinful nature for no reason and try to avoid the inevitable result of excruciating guilt.

Although few of us would ever actually murder someone, the fact that we all have an inborn tendency to sin is still evident, establishing a certain relationship between the murderer and mankind. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language defines “sin” as being “any offense, violation, fault, or error of a religious or moral law, especially when deliberate.” In addition, it is important to remember that any sin, whether extreme or seemingly trivial, is still a sin, and that everyone has sinned at some time to some degree. The murderer, depicted by Poe, is definitely an extreme case. Luckily, most of us can control our anger from resulting in such acts of violence. In order to do so, we redirect our anger (although this sometimes gets us into trouble too), rather than let it get the best of us as the murderer did.

In addition to the ability to control anger, sane people usually have a reason for it in the first place. “It is impossible to say how first the idea entered my brain” (41). From the outset of the story, the murderer stated that he was unable to explain how the thought of killing the old man had come to him. We simply assume that the motive behind the murder is his evident madness, and rightly so. The man is a sheer lunatic; there is no other rational explanation, as insanity isn’t even rational. He tries to say that he is sane, like we try to say that we are so good. Just because we think we can justify our actions doesn’t make us any less guilty than the murderer. Sin is sin.

While we are busy carrying out our evil deeds, our conscience constantly keeps a watchful “eye” on what we are involved in.
The old man's eye, an excellent example of Poe's imagery, could figuratively see right through the murderer's facade, revealing, in his mind, his own evil intentions. It is important to point out that the conscience does not solely deal with evil attributes. It also magnifies good deeds. Obviously, the man had nothing to feel good about, possessing a very low self-esteem; this was what caused his "blood to run cold" (41). The eye acted as a mirror to his soul, revealing his black heart. All he could think of doing was destroying the eye; his conscience. Of course, it is impossible to destroy your conscience, and that is why we always feel guilt when we have done wrong.

After the murder, the guilt he felt was represented by the beating heart. It was like the guilt we always feel within ourselves after we have done wrong. This leads us to believe that the heartbeat, the guilt, came from within the murderer. Yet it was his own actual heart beating, not what he believed to be the heart of the old man. The fact that it came from within him is representative of his pent up guilt. The manifestation of this guilt is directly related to his own personal madness.

Fortunately, we are not capable of totally suppressing our guilt; there is a natural tendency in (sane) human beings to talk about it. By discussing our guilt with someone else, we are able to vent it and prevent it from growing within us causing us to lie (another sin), not only to others but also to ourselves, in an attempt to cover up. In the same way, when the police called upon the murderer later that night, he thought he could lie his way out of it. He tried to make himself believe that it was the old man's heart beating loudly because he refused to admit that it was his own. That is, he wouldn't admit that he was feeling guilty.

"I smiled, for what had I to fear" (44). In his own mind, he believed that he had totally gotten away with this act of violence. However, he forgot one thing: his guilt. Since the time he had killed the old man, his guilt had been suppressed and delayed from affecting him. Now his transgression was bearing down upon him. So literally, his heart beat so hard and fast that it scared the hell out
of him! He actually thought that the police officers could hear it. This drove him mad causing him to blurt out the truth about the murder. Through his confession, figuratively, he repented, and the police represented his Maker. In this same way, we can either repent, admitting our guilt, or let it torment us eternally.

The final result of our wrong doing can be found in our attempt to justify our actions. Briefly turning back to the beginning of the story, the man opened his narrative by trying to deny his madness and justify the murder he had committed. We too try to rationalize our way out of trouble. We try to deny our sinful nature attempting to make ourselves believe that we had logical reasons for doing whatever it is that we did.

"The devil made me do it." We have probably all said this phrase at one time or another with total awareness that the devil did not, in fact, make us do anything at all. Whether it was for the thrill of debauchery or because we thought we had no other choice, we still simply fall victim to our own sinful nature. Poe was quite aware of the potential of every person's sinful nature under the right conditions, as he depicted in "The Tell-Tale Heart." Further supporting this concept at a recent lecture, Kurt Vonnegut was quite clear in expressing his own views about the human condition in society. He probably summed it up best stating that "It is our responsibility to strive to be decent people in this utterly indecent world" (October 4, 1991).
Here comes dawn,
    pink-and-purple first light
thundering across the sky.

Rope them clouds!
Head 'em off at the pass -- too
    late, a stampede.

It's day.
Faithful

As I know this plum --

odor proclaiming peak;
blush and haze taut
over ripe flesh;
slopes inviting touch
where the stem fit;
flesh holding silent,
surprising juices;
skin's piercing bite,
untasted;
burst seed spread inside,
unseen --

thus we knew each other.
"You don't try to forgive Hitler," Ellen Bass explains in her book, *The Courage to Heal, A Guide for Women Survivors of Child Sexual Abuse*. When violent crimes are committed they traumatically affect all the survivors. How important is it to forgive a criminal? It isn't. Yet gaining an understanding to why a crime occurs is almost vital. Without explanation, the effects of a heinous act become distorted, blurred and magnified. Thus, in his nonfiction novel *In Cold Blood*, Truman Capote takes on the task of explaining and understanding why a family that seemed to symbolize American goodness, virtue and fortitude was viciously destroyed. Four human lives were ended by two enigmatic men. Capote spent many years researching the murders, the townspeople of Holcomb, Kansas, the surrounding areas, and the two killers, Perry Smith and Dick Hickock. In no way should Perry Smith in particular be excused for what he did as the triggerman. But, even while Capote devoted many pages of his book trying to evoke understanding and even sympathy for Perry Smith, in his writing, the author eloquently and skillfully muted certain aspects about Perry and his life. Perry was half Native American Indian. His mother was a full-blooded Cherokee. If Perry and his mother had been able to live unsuppressed as the Native Americans they were, perhaps Perry would not have experienced a miserable childhood. Capote suggests it is Perry's sad life story that leads him to murdering the Clutter family of Kansas. Capote could have also addressed the issue of Perry's personal Native American plight directly. But throughout his book, in at least twenty allusions, Capote only hints at the Native American aspects, influences and consequences in Perry's life. For the sake of brevity, at least three major aspects can be discerned and should be discussed. The first is the misfortune of Perry's mother Flo Buckskin, before and after she gave birth to Perry. The second is Perry's association and ability to relate to animals better than to humans. The last is the Native American influences that were elusive yet lingered in Perry's life.
Flo Buckskin, Perry Smith's mother, represented a culture long abused and all but wiped out by the white man. That she "had been a full-blooded Cherokee" (27) was her unfortunate fate. The history of how the White man fought, robbed and murdered so many Native Americans and forced the surviving "Indians" on to reservations is widely known. Little known is that the reservations (United States government "controlled" communities) are the worst places in North America to live. It is the dream of most Native Americans to one day leave the poverty of the reservation and live free. Many would do almost anything for such freedom. In Flo's case, she must have parlayed her talent with the horse into her ticket off the "res"; if that is indeed where she was living long before she even met Perry's father Tex John Smith at the rodeo. Capote is omissive with Flo's Native American beginnings. In medias res, he discusses how she became "a professional rodeo performer, a champion bronc-rider" in the Western rodeo circuit (153). Later, when "forced by ailments to retire," Flo and her husband Tex John tried to build a life for their family of six near Reno, Nevada. Life didn't progress well for Tex and Flo. "They fought, and Flo 'took to whiskey'..." (153). Science authorities speculate that Native Americans have an extremely low genetic tolerance to alcohol. Most become alcohol abusers once exposed to "the drink." When Flo took her kids to San Francisco, leaving Tex behind, her worst drinking manifested. As a result, she could not support her children and eventually sent Perry to two institutions that became living nightmares for him.

The first institution Flo sent Perry to was a common hostelry for Native American children, a Catholic orphanage. Perry had a problem with bed-wetting, which led to punishment. The nuns there were "shrouded disciplinarians who whipped him...." Perry explained one episode, "'She woke me up. She had a flashlight, and she hit me with it. Hit me and hit me. And when the flashlight broke, she went on hitting me in the dark'" (110). After Perry's brief stay at the orphanage, Flo installed him in a Salvation Army shelter for children. Here he experienced extreme prejudice-induced abuse because of his race. Perry states:
They hated me, too. For wetting the bed. And being half-Indian. There was this one nurse, she used to call me “nigger” and say there wasn’t any difference between niggers and Indians…she’d fill a tub with ice-cold water, put me in it, and hold me under till I was blue. Nearly drowned…I caught pneumonia…almost conked…was in the hospital two months.” (154)

In addition to sending Perry off to such cruelty, Flo’s drunken behavior left her other children to “cleaning up Mama’s drunken vomit.” Flo was finally “free” when she “died in an alcoholic coma…” (212).

Where in the book were the Native American sacred ways, folklore, traditions? Was there any influence on Perry at all in the ways of the Cherokee people? Capote is once again indistinct. Native Americans revere animals. They consider animals closer connected to their higher power Wakan Tanka (or Great Spirit) than the Human Beings (Indians’ name for themselves). Perry felt significant association with three particular animals. The large yellow parrot in his dreams, the coyotes of the western landscape and the squirrel in Perry’s Garden City jail cell meant more to Perry than all the humans he encountered in his thirty-one years. In addition to these major instances were three minor ones in a dog, cats and Perry’s father. Given Perry’s ethnic background, it hardly seems coincidence that Perry would associate the large yellow parrot as his “hovering avenger” against his nemeses in the forms of nuns, his taskmaster father, a faithless girl or a sergeant in the Army (110-111). Birds in Native American culture are considered to fly close to the heart of Great Spirit (Christian equivalent of God). Was Perry ever taught this and in his innocence of seven years old first found his own “saviour”? And what of the coyotes? Indian folklore names the coyote “Trickster.” Perry had certainly come to know coyotes from personal experience during the lean times with his family on the Western frontier and later in the northern wilderness with his dad. As Perry is riding in the patrol car back to Garden City with Alvin Dewey, for his trial for the murders, Perry observes and counts “the carcasses of shotgunned coyotes festooning ranch fences”
Later Perry, in his autobiographical statement at court, writes of when his mother was always too drunk to properly care for him and his siblings, he would "'run as free & wild as a coyote'" (309). Possibly the only real friend he ever had was Big Red, the squirrel Perry befriended in his Garden City jail cell. After being apprehended in Las Vegas by the Kansas Bureau of Investigation detectives, and brought to Garden City for trial, Perry felt more alone, frightened and defiant, like an animal himself. He coaxed this squirrel into his cell, with patience and gentleness, from the tree outside, and taught a usually timid creature tricks, "to play with a paper ball, to beg, to perch on Perry's shoulder" (286). "Perry's tamed squirrel" developed such a trust and companionship with him that when Perry was moved to Kansas State Penitentiary in Lansing, Kansas after his trial, Red would often return to the cell in Garden City looking for him. The undersheriff's wife, Mrs. Meier, tried to feed the squirrel but she said, "he won't have anything to do with me. It was just Perry he liked" (346). Capote makes other subtle references to Perry's deferring to animals more than humans such as Perry's disgust when Dick Hickock kills the old dog on the road to Mexico, and how Perry felt his life had been like those of the scavenging cats of the Courthouse Square in Garden City (133,297). An ironic mention (and once again "Capote-evasive") is made of Tex John Smith's nickname. Perry's father was a wilderness man, despite his Irish-White ethnicity. He lived like a hermit, off the land, in the wild, much the way Native Americans of old did, but without his Cherokee wife. He liked to call himself "Lone Wolf" (205), which is practically a contradiction in terms because wolves are almost never alone, except when hunting. These animals are immensely family oriented and travel in "packs." Surely Perry had been given some Native American instruction particularly in the area of the sacredness of animals.

The last aspect Capote touches on but does not indulge in is Perry's fascination with the moon, and sun, and his appreciation for Native American philosophy. The moon and the sun have mystical connotation for the collective of Native American peoples who refer to these orbs as Grandmother Moon and Grandfather Sun, revered by all, especially the shamans (medicine men). Perry's sister Barbara
explains, "...when he was a little boy [Perry] used to cry because he thought a sunset was beautiful. Or the moon" (208). In The Private Diary of Perry Edward Smith, authored by Perry, which Capote refers to as an anthology, Perry highlights an area of his jottings with red ink and green ink stars, "to emphasize 'personal significance'.":

"What is life? It is the flash of a firefly in the night. It is a breath of a buffalo in the wintertime. It is as the little shadow that runs across the grass and loses itself in the sunset."
-Said by Chief Crowfoot, Blackfoot Indian Chief (170)

In addition to the simple beauty of the verse, Perry was especially drawn to the phrase (one more animal reference), "...a breath of a buffalo in the wintertime' - that exactly evoked his view of life" (170). It must also be made clear here that among the Plains Indians, Blackfoot inclusive, the buffalo is considered to be the most sacred animal, almost on the same level as Jesus Christ to Christians. Perry was more than exposed to Native American culture and sufferings, yet Capote remains consistent in his subtleties.

Truman Capote spent about five years researching and scrutinizing all aspects and principals relative to the Holcomb, Kansas, murders of late 1959. His claim was that his book recounts the events, before, during and after the murders, factually, perfectly. He boasted of his journalistic objectivity. However, if the reader takes a closer look, an extreme bias can be found showing a favoritism for Perry Edward Smith. And yet, even with his partiality towards Perry, "Tru" placed many hidden meanings and unexplained references in his copious text. If he wanted to evoke such sympathy for the "half-breed", surely he found in his years of research enough evidence to bring into better focus Perry Smith's maligned Indian heritage. Why did Truman Capote leave out such important insights? Tru's hidden intentions remain as much a mystery as Perry Smith.
WORKS CITED


WORKS CONSULTED


Breakfast

The waitress at the Allnight
voices her opinions like an
alarm clock at
4 in the a.m.

Yawning people with the early Times
walk past the man in a booth,
his face in his french toast. Is he
dead, or just
tired? but it’s his own
business, and besides

there’s a day coming that’s going to require
all their concern.
Distant Mountains

It sounds brutal
to us today--
the way Spartans
took infants deemed
too sick and weak
from mothers to
die lonely deaths.

Soon after your
conception, doctors
suggested tests
for Downs Syndrome,
and other defects,
should we want
to abort the pregnancy.

As we listened,
I could see in
your mother's eyes
faint images
of women sobbing
at the base
of distant mountains.
Father...

I could hear the wind howl and the thunder crack as I sat motionless in a chair beside my father’s bed. The lightning flashed causing eerie shadows to dance across the walls within the otherwise pitch-dark room. I could feel my heart pump in an uncontrollable frenzy. I struggled to relax my muscles and slow my breathing as my mind slowly wandered to that tragic turning point in my life ten years earlier.

I was on the playground at school one day, when I got into a fight with another student over who would be quarterback. Naturally, I overreacted to the situation by kicking him in the crotch and hitting him in the face with the football. The playground supervisor quickly broke up this fight and sent me directly to the principal’s office.

I sat alone in the principal’s office trying to calm myself as I awaited my punishment. Then, just as I thought I was composed, I heard the doorknob turn and the door open; my heart skipped two beats. I immediately knew that I was about to be paddled as the stone-faced executioner loomed above me clenching the tool of destruction in his hand.

There was very little to discuss considering that I had willingly attacked the other student. So, he instructed me to “assume the position.” The sweat ran down my face as my body became as rigid as a corpse. I waited for what seemed to be eternity until finally ... thwack, thwack, thwack! The pain pounded inside me with each stroke. I fought to hold back the tears as I straightened up my body. After this, he excused me, and I returned to class.

When I arrived home from school, my parents had already been contacted and briefed about the events that day; they were infuriated. Especially my father. He instantaneously went mad striking me in the face repeatedly. Soon, my nose and mouth were
bleeding, and my face was turning a shade of black and blue. My mother screamed at him to stop as the tears ran down her face, but he just continued to hit me like he was demon possessed. She finally could take no more and left the room.

After she was gone, he seemed to beat me with even greater fury. As he took off his belt, he bellowed, "You will never disgrace my name ever again!" He then proceeded to whip me as I lay there defenseless on the floor. I could only pray to God that this agony would eventually stop.

Finally, with all the strength I had left, I blindly lashed out at him. To my dismay, he caught my arm and twisted it behind my back as if I were a rag doll.

Suddenly, to my and my father's surprise, sirens blared as red and blue lights flashed across the living room walls. Apparently, my mother had phoned the police in terror. The police burst into the house and violently slammed his body up against the wall. When he finally calmed down, he tried to tell me that he was sorry and that he loved me. The only emotion I felt at the time was pure hatred.

The next few months were simply a blur. The only things I could remember were the facts. My parents were separated soon after, and when my father's case came up in court a year later, he was found guilty on all counts of assault. In addition, the courts decided that it would be in my best interest to place me in a boy's home. In the next ten years, my every waking moment was dedicated to planning and crafting my revenge.

Boom! The thunder cracked once again waking me from my sleep. As I turned my head to look at my father, I gazed at the utter beauty before me. He lay in bed drenched in his own blood. The blood still oozed freely from his throat, mouth, eye sockets, and the multiple stab wounds that covered his body. I licked the dried blood from my hands as I smiled in triumph. Maybe he really did love me. Maybe not.
It is raining. I am in a Ford station wagon. It is three days after the nuclear accident. The rain is sick. The well-cut suburban lawns are cobalt blue. A mother screams to her child who is stupidly playing outside. Dead sparrows are strewn on the black street and the pale sidewalks. I am the only car in the city. I am not wearing a rain coat. I drive to the hospital. I get out of my car. I walk in under the red EMERGENCY sign. There are moans and plaintive cries coming from every curtained place. An old man lies on his side, holding his head in his hands. A doctor with his face burned by the rain passes me in the hall. I start walking into each room. I extend my hand. I heal.
Gary Gildner: The CANTO Interview

Gary Gildner - poet, novelist, memoirist - visited the Kent Stark campus on October 24, 1991 as part of the 1991-92 Artist/Lecture Series, speaking on “Contemporary Poland.” This interview was conducted after his lecture and reading for CANTO by Vi Dutcher, Robert Miltner and Tim Miller.

CANTO: How did you first become interested in writing?

GILDNER: The last spring when I was in high school, and playing good enough baseball to be scouted by major league baseball people, I broke my leg sliding into third base. I had a cast from my toe to my hip, and started spending a lot of time just lying in my parents’ backyard getting three-quarter suntan—feeling sorry for myself and becoming disgusted or impatient with the typical kinds of reading I was used to -- sports magazines -- I was no longer able to identify with this life, this world I had become a part of.

Anyway, I’m out in the backyard wearing this cast from my toe to my hip, and my sister’s on her way to the library, and she asked if there’s anything she can get for me and I said, “Yeah, get me something by Hemingway,” because I had done a book report on The Old Man and the Sea and I rather liked it. I thought it was a good fishing story. She brought me The Collected Stories of Hemingway, and the first story I read was “The Big Two-Hearted River.”

This was a major turning point in my life because I had done what Nick Adams does in that story. That is, I had gone into the woods, and I had pitched a tent, cooked my breakfast over a fire, and fished in the stream -- I had done all those things. But the language in that story -- I was paying attention, really paying attention, and I don’t know why -- maybe because my future was so uncertain -- but I was paying attention to this language, or trying to, and I was taken by it in a way I’d never been taken before; it was wonderful. I was caught
because the subject matter was so familiar, and yet the treatment of it was so different from typical kinds of accounts that I had read, you know, sport magazine language, and I found myself thinking, "Well, maybe I'll do this with my life. Maybe I'll go have adventures, camp-out, fish, and write about it. But I knew there was a big difference.

CANTO: Did Hemingway function, then, as a "literary mentor" to you?

GILDNER: The Hemingway short story was the first thing that moved me, and then of course I had to go through a stage where I imitated him when I was an undergraduate. I understood very quickly that to have favorite writers that I read all the time over and over again was a mistake, because I would imitate them in some way, especially writers like Hemingway with a very distinctive style. But I also read a lot of different people. There are so many good writers. I like H.E. Bates an awful lot. I like Thurber. John Cheever was a favorite of mine for years. I like Alice Monroe a great deal. Flannery O'Connor was a big favorite of mine -- wonderful. Mark Twain--who doesn't like Mark Twain? I suppose because I was reading a lot of the French, the Russian, and the German prose writers that Thomas Manns was a great favorite of mine when I was a student, and I still read him from time to time, particularly the short stories.

CANTO: In addition to reading, what was the next step in your learning-to-write process?

GILDNER: When I went to college at Michigan State, I fell in with some people who were serious about reading. That was the real beginning of my desire to try to become a writer. The conversations I was having with these students about writers--they were serious about them.

Then there was a competition at Michigan State for writers of poems, essays, and short stories. I entered the short story in the competition, and won it. That was
a great reinforcement! The original screening was done by faculty members, and the final judging was done by New York editors which was very impressive. I was not an English major. The contest was sponsored by the English department. I was a journalism major.

CANTO: Did you work as a journalist? Because you were a professor at Drake ....

GILDNER: Well, I got an M.A. in Comparative Literature from Michigan, but then I went to Detroit after I graduated, and I worked in journalism there all day.

At night I would come home, have a couple of beers, eat supper, and I'd go to bed right away. Then I'd set the clock for 10:30, and I'd get up, and I'd work on my own writing from about 10:30 till about 2 or 3 in the morning. Then I'd get back up again early.

I was doing this for several months, and I realized that I could not keep this up for very long--trying to get two days out of one. So I applied for a teaching job and got one at Northern Michigan University in Marquette. I took this novel, which I had started in Detroit, and for five years I rewrote this novel every year--writing it over and over for five years, learning an awful lot about writing from a novel that was never going to fly, and I knew it. It simply was my own little exercise to practice. I like to practice. Practice was what I was used to as an athlete, so I considered this just practice.

CANTO: When did you begin to write in other genre - poetry, for instance?

GILDNER: Moving to Iowa (to teach at Drake) I thought of myself only as a novelist. My nerve wasn't quite strong enough to start a new novel right off the bat, so I thought I would work on some short stories.

I had a half dozen ideas that I'd been turning around so I summarized each of these ideas on a separate sheet of
paper one day in Des Moines, and I got these five fat little paragraphs, and tried to expand them. None would grow. Everything that needed to be said seemed to be right there. I was very frustrated, and I thought they were way too short for short stories. In great desperation I thought, "Well, maybe they want to be poems because poems are short."

I had never written any poems although I had read poems. As a student, I was very fond of Chaucer, John Donne, Whitman, and Dickenson, but I'd never written any poems except to try to impress a girl once in awhile, and most of those were cribbs from Whitman. So I fussed and I fussed with these six little texts till I finally got what I thought were poems. They looked like poems. I knew I couldn't just arbitrarily chop these sentences into bits and call them lines. I finally got what I thought were poems.

I found six magazines that I liked, and I decided to send one poem to each of these magazines. I didn't want to send all six to the same magazine because I didn't want to get them all back. One by one they were all accepted. It was astounding!

So I naturally began writing poems like crazy. The rest of that year I was writing two and three a day—most of them were terrible, but I got enough by the end of the year to make a little book. I had seen an announcement in the library that the University of Pittsburgh Press was sponsoring a competition. So I sent my little group off, and they took it so I had a book. So I was now a real poet. I kept writing fiction all this time, but not nearly as frantically as I was working on these poems.

CANTO: From what you've been telling us, you are a self-taught writer?

GILDNER: Did I have to learn and study the craft? I never took a writing course. I'm not a product of the writing programs. There was no "creative writing" in Michigan State.
My writing course was rewriting that first novel over and over again. That was significant—and talking with fellow students at Michigan State who were serious about reading—reading was my first and greatest teacher and it still is. That’s the way I came up—privately.

That’s why silence is such an important factor in my work—particularly in my short stories and my poems—the conversational tone that I like to have. I work very hard to get the tone of the piece, the rhythm of the piece, the proposal of the piece to sound like someone might be just saying it casually at a dinner party or a gathering around the table.

CANTO: What are you working on now?

GILDNER: I’ve been working on a book about my grandfather. A number of people who read the Warsaw Sparks would comment from time to time on my treatment of my grandfather—my Polish grandfather—although there’s not very much about him in there.

I don’t know very much about him. He was buried on my eleventh birthday. But the memories I do have are keen, so I just finished the second memoir, and this one is about him. It’s about the immigrant experience, and it’s also about me and my family.

CANTO: That’s interesting that you had the opportunity to do that, because of the way families are so diverse and are losing that sense of family ...

GILDNER: It wasn’t easy, because I did not find one piece of paper that my grandfather had written on, for example. Nothing, no letter. I couldn’t find his signature anywhere. Now isn’t that odd? Here’s a man who was a great reader—I know he was and he read good writers—and yet he himself, if he was a writer or wrote anything down, none of it’s been left. I had a hard time finding a photograph of him. He didn’t want to have his picture taken—a very private man.
CANTO: What is your day like now that you are writing full-time?

GILDNER: I like to relax and just be an ordinary person. I'm terribly self-conscious about getting my work done. My routine is very simple. I get up in the morning when I'm home, I have breakfast, I go to my studio and I work until lunch. Then after lunch I try to do something physical—take a walk, ride bike, go for a swim. I like to cook. I like to cook the evening meal. It's kind of an extension of the morning's work—putting things together.

CANTO: What advice do you give to beginning writers when they ask you for help in getting started?

GILDNER: Reading is certainly among the three. Second, keep your overhead low—I mean, I think you do have to make a choice—if you want the toys of the world, if you want to indulge in the world's distractions, if you crave that sort of thing—I suppose that's alright. Then you should understand it comes with a price.

I guess if it could be made separate, that third rule would have to do with seeking privacy. Once you become beholden to the bank or the other institutions that really don't care about—it runs counter to the whole idea. Can you imagine going to the bank with a sheaf of poems and saying, "Here I have these poems here. This is what matters to me." That's a big question—find out what does matter -- what really matters. When I finish a poem or a story or any piece of writing that feels right—that matters to me.
Mari Artzner, Art Editor of CANTO, feels she is emerging. Spring Semester '92, she will be a sophomore at Kent Stark. As a non-traditional student, and as an Art History major and Fiber Arts minor, she is pursuing her commitment to preservation, especially in textiles, within the museum genre.

Tim Calhoun is a graduate student at CWRU in Comparative Literature and Interdisciplinary Studies. His poems have appeared in THE MANHATTAN POETRY REVIEW, DARK HORSE, THE COVENTRY READER and CANTO III.

C.H.Callahan, originally from Leslie County, Kentucky, is a non-traditional student pursuing a degree from Ohio University. A long-time advocate for prisoner's rights, his poems have appeared in a number of places, including the Poet's Corner at St. John's Cathedral in New York City, and CANTO III.

Vi Dutcher, a junior at Kent Stark, is a non-traditional student pursuing a degree in Rhetoric and Communications. She enjoys writing essays, free verse, amateur public speaking, and has enjoyed an active semester on the CANTO staff as Managing Editor. She has previously appeared in CANTO III.

Michele Fernandez is originally from Columbus, Ohio. She is a sophomore at Kent Stark working towards a degree in Journalism, specializing in Latin American Politics. She is interested in photographs and writing that both tell a story and make a statement.

Betty Ann Foulk is Director of Student Services at Kent Stark. Her work previously appeared in CANTO I.

Gary Gildner, formerly professor of English at Drake University, is a poet, novelist, and memoirist. As a result of a Fulbright Scholarship to Poland, he authored WARSAW SPARKS. His most recent publication is a selection of his poems, BLUE LIKE THE HEAVENS.

Bobbi Haak is pursuing a double major in Journalism and Soviet/East European Studies with a minor in Graphic Design. She hopes to have a career in Europe in one of these three fields.
Brooke Horvath is an assistant professor of English at Kent Stark. As CANTO advisor, Prof. Horvath schedules the CANTO readings by poets and fiction writers. Additionally, he is an Associate Editor for REVIEW OF COMTEMPORARY FICTION.

Angie Malatesta is a sophomore at Kent Stark concentrating her studies in the field of Biology. She likes to paint and write poetry in her free time. She joins the CANTO staff this year as an Assistant Editor.

David B. McCoy, of Massillon, holds a Master’s of Liberal Studies Degree from Kent State. He edits SOLO FLYER and has recently published OHIO CITIZENSHP PROFICIENCY REVIEW TEXT. This is his second appearance in CANTO.

Jack Mc Whorter, studio art instructor, has been at Kent Stark since Fall of ‘89. With this issue, he joins CANTO as Art Advisor. He looks forward to helping expand the accessibility and appreciation of the visual arts at Kent Stark and the surrounding community, especially through CANTO.

Timothy R. Miller is an English/Pre-Law major at Kent Stark and is the Non-fiction Editor of CANTO. He plans to attend college in Maine next year. This is his first appearance in CANTO.

Robert Miltner, Developmental Education Coordinator at Kent Stark, advises CANTO. His poems appear in a variety of magazines.

Kelly Morris is a freshman at Kent Stark who enjoys drawing and writing poetry in her free time. After attending several Poetry Workshops at the Stark Campus, she decided to join the CANTO staff as an Assistant Editor.

W. Lee Porter, a writer and photographer from Canton, is a former Kent Stark student. His work appeared previously in CANTO I.

Patty Roberts, Student Development Center secretary, word processes CANTO on WordPerfect 5.1 and, as “Production Assistant”,
keeps track of what's where and when. She is a 1983 graduate of Kent State with a Bachelor of Science degree in Conservation.

*Tracy Rodriguez* is a junior at Kent Stark, pursuing a degree in Advertising. Her personal interests include writing, art and music.

*Richard Sater* lives in Peru, Indiana, where he is a public affairs officer for the 930th Tactical Fighter Group (U.S. Air Force Reserve). He received his Masters from Purdue in 1988 in English/Fiction Writing. His work previously was included in CANTO III.

*Brian Smith* is a junior at Kent Stark, majoring in Computer Science. This is his first appearance in CANTO.

*Scot Smith* is a freshman at Kent Stark, majoring in Graphic Design. He is excited to be taking university level art courses and finds this opportunity freeing for his need to express himself.

*Stephanie Space* is a senior at Kent, majoring in English and minorning in Art. She lives in Dover, Ohio, with her three sons, where she owns The Enchanted Forest, which sells art work, gifts and books. This is her second appearance in CANTO.

*Karen Sykeny*, Fiction Editor for CANTO, is a first semester freshman at Kent Stark. She is a Student Senator and is also involved in Student Activities Council. She enjoys reading and writing fiction.

*Ruth Tams-Fuquen*, originally from New Jersey, is married and a mother of three. She has been a Canton resident since 1982. She has been locally published in SOLO FLYER and in THE SHOESTRING ANTHOLOGY (Canton Writers Guild). She is a graduate student at the University of Akron where she is pursuing a Masters Degree in Spanish.

*Amanda Warren*, CANTO Poetry Editor, is a second semester freshman who plans to pursue a Ph.D. in English. In her spare time, she enjoys writing poetry, teaching ballet, competing in pageants and working with elderly citizens.
Copper Plate Printing.