Spring 1990

Canto 1990

Kent State University - Stark Campus

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CANTO is published yearly by the students of Kent State University Stark Campus. CANTO invites submissions of poetry, short fiction, essays, black & white photography, pen & ink drawings and prints. While acquainting Kent Stark students with hands on publishing experience, CANTO also provides a forum for local talent. Submissions should be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Following publication of each issue, all rights revert to writers and artists. A copy of the new issue is offered as payment for contribution. Address all correspondence to CANTO, c/o The Writing Center, Kent State University Stark Campus, 6000 Frank Avenue, N.W., Canton, Ohio 44720.
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CANTO, noun, from the latin cantus, “a song,” (1) a major division in a long poem, (2) an art and literary magazine published by students at Kent State University Stark Campus in Canton, Ohio.
Loyalty to petrified opinion never broke a chain or freed a human soul.
--Mark Twain
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Great dreams have always found violent opposition from mediocre minds.

Albert Einstein
The Editorial Staff dedicates this issue of *CANTO* to the memory of

Dr. Inga Mullen.
Terry Sosnowski

All that's left of Elysium

Ashes -- soft, grey ashes,
do you gently rest
in your little oaken box
tucked among the tendrils, rootlets
of a sapling oak?
Do you lie there -- all that's left of
joy and intellect, bereft of energy,
lifeless, lustless bits of dust?

To myself I muse:
these ashes ought to twist
little hurricanes in that box.
These ashes must have,
should have, enough tempest in them for that.
They should swirl about in there.
Tucked warm in the earth,
they should be an ultimate
source of earth quakes.

Ashes do not, of course, make little hurricanes.
I know they only lie there -- waiting.
No, not even waiting, they merely lie
there in the unseen dark
until the little casket
rots away -- letting in the water
and the roots. And the grey, old ashes will
feed a stately oak. And that oak will
spin acorns, spout leaves to shade those
who come to mourn, shade a little spot,
a small grassy plot that is
all that’s left to us of Elysium.
AN INTERVIEW WITH ELTON GLAZER II

Elton A. Glaser II is an award winning poet who has received the Iowa Poetry Prize and the Individual Artist Fellowship from the Ohio Arts Council. Glaser has two complete books of poetry published: RELICS and TROPICAL DEPRESSIONS. Previous to these publications, he published two chapbooks: TEN POEMS and PERIPHERAL VISION. Seven poems are anthologized in various publications. Over 300 poems have been published in literary magazines. Glaser is currently a professor of English at the University of Akron. He received his B.A. and M.A. in English from the University of New Orleans and his M.F.A. in Creative Writing from the University of California at Irvine. In October Glaser conducted poetry workshops at the 1989 Midwest Writers' Conference. He agreed to do an interview with CANTO editor, B.J. Warner.

B.J. Warner: Welcome to the Midwest Writers' Conference here at Kent Stark Campus. As editor of CANTO, I would like to ask you a few questions regarding the art of crafting poetry. Perhaps you can offer our readers some insight into the world of poetry as you perceive it.

Elton Glaser: Of course, I would be glad to.

B.J.: Thank you. The process of writing often seems problematic for those writers who know that they want to write but are unsure as to how to begin. What process do you use when you write?

Elton Glaser: A very slow process usually, although it's speeded up over the years. As I was explaining this morning in the presentation section, I always start from a word or phrase or image and just follow up on the natural implications of that; I see what kind of associa-
tions come when I just let my mind play with it. Robert Frost says that "play is the thing" and I think part of what happens in any kind of literature is just mugging around with the language to see what you can get, but you want to surprise yourself into saying things that you didn't know you wanted to say. Otherwise, you keep going over and over the same store of information that you have available in your conscious mind. Franz Kline, the painter, said, "If I paint what I know, I bore myself. If I paint what you know, I bore you. So, I paint what I don't know." And to do that, I don't want to come with any kind of preconceptions to the poem. I let the poem take its own course and give the poem its head and I follow where it wants to go. Now, frequently that means there are things I want to put in a poem. I have an image that I really like and I want to get it in this poem so I stick it in. Three weeks later, I realize that I'd been jimmying with something that should have been left alone, so I could take that image out again. It takes a while to figure out what the genuine associations ought to be.

In terms of when I write, how I write, I can write almost anytime, now. It used to be that I would write only at night. I felt that darkness was necessary to the creation of poetry. Charles Lamb once said that, "No true poem ever owed it's birth to the light of day," and I believed that for a long time. There was something too mundane about the sunlight and you needed the darkness and moonlight. It was a stupid romantic idea. If the poem is going to come, it's going to come whenever it wants to. So, I prefer fiddling around, playing around, endlessly revising, reading things out loud so you have the sound of the poem in your ears, you have the feel of the poem in your muscles, you have the taste of the poem in your mouth. Writing has to be a physical process in itself, not just a mental process.

B.J.W.: O.K. Once you have wrestled with the process, what makes the difference between "acceptable" writing and good writing?

E.G.: Acceptable writing is what has come to be known today, I think, as the workshop poem. The workshop poem is a poem that doesn't really fail because it doesn't risk very much. It's a safe sort of poetry, highly accomplished, but with very little passion or sense
of its own necessity. For me, the better poem is the poem that takes chances that risks failure and perhaps fails in some spots, but only by trying to do something that hadn’t been done before, at least by that particular poet. It can get past what the poet is familiar with, what the poet knows he or she can do already. You know, you work so hard to achieve a style, to achieve a way of writing that you’re comfortable with and then the only sane thing to do is to abandon that style as soon as you become comfortable with it. That’s why I don’t think good poets can ever wear themselves out, because they keep shedding skins and they keep getting new poetic identities, new ways of writing.

B.J.W.: Who are some of those writers who have influenced or inspired you?

E.G.: That’s an endless question because I think everyone I’ve read has influenced me one way or the other, that is, positively or negatively. So, I hate to even single out a few because there would be other writers that people could recognize in my work. Wallace Stevens I would have to say, is definitely one of those writers. If you look at some of my poems, you can, in fact, see the Wallace Stevens’ moments in those poems and I just recently published a poem about Wallace Stevens, so, that should be no surprise to anyone who is familiar with my work. Most lately, I think James Wright has been particularly effective as an inspiration for me. Maybe because I’m living in Ohio and he’s an Ohio poet who wrote about Ohio (among other things). But, also I think I like the kind of (what Frost calls) “passion of the tension” James Wright brings to whatever subject he’s writing about and for me, intensity is one of the hallmarks of good poems, especially linguistic intensity although that seems to be a relative term. E.E. Cummings said he didn’t care for Robert Frost because Frost wasn’t intense enough. I’ve never really understood that because Frost seems to me, in his better moments, an extremely intense poet. So, I’ve named two people, shall I name a third? Very early on, Gertrude Stein was an important influence and I’m sure that’s because I had a professor when I was an undergraduate who loved Stein and partly because Stein was not very well known. She’s still not taught very often. I teach her every chance I get. Stein frees you up because you don’t have to pay attention to what she’s saying. That’s not the important part anyway. If fact, it’s
impossible to figure out, on a literary level, what she’s saying sometimes. But, she’s playing with words the way a painter uses paint on a canvas and I think we’re getting to one of the real mysteries of poetry when we do that. We’re getting to the essentials of poetry. Words on a page, sounds and rhythms operating with each other and against each other.

B.J.W.: Thank you, Elton. Next year when you return to the Midwest Writer’s Conference, perhaps we can talk again. I am certain that our readers will appreciate your comments.

E.G.: Well, I hope so. You are welcome.

Editor’s note: Recently Elton Glaser received a National Endowment for the Humanities Grant, a prestigious award giving this poet national recognition.
The light in the mirror
is too bright
it destroys shadows
and leaves
nothing to the imagination

wordsas people n eed thei r space o r they be g int olo set thei r cl arity
BEAUTY

Can there ever be beauty more simple than your stubby fingers twirling my pink curlers, pretending your name is Lynn Caroline and I am Mary Brown married to "George" (not your daddy)? In your Snoopy coloring book, my appointment scribbled with upside-down twos. Restless white hightops shuffle under whistling red corduroys.

Beaten tunes I have forgotten. My chipped cuticles healed by your lavender strokes. I lean my autumn head to your lap--above me a tin cup and your clatter shimmer like a baptism for my Saturday shampoo. Intense heat from the yellow blow dryer covers us with a daisy umbrella and my brimming love for this flawless beginner...

Lynn Caroline--a fairy--who picks me fresh bouquets of fleeting violet moments.
Jeanne Bryner

PIZZA

i live in a small town.
when i order pizza
on fridays--they know
my voice, realize my kids
hate hot peppers and like
extra cheese.

in the summer
our big events are the
fourth-of-july parade,
pee-wee baseball games, and
melting dreams of glory from
the edge of vanilla cones.

our town has six churches
and twelve bars. we try
to save twice as many fiery
sinners in half the time
it takes to bury them
in our one graveyard.

steel built our valley
and even the links holding
our porch swings sound
like shackles
on the black ankles of night.
at dusk,
middle-aged men jog--
trying to overcome their
silver shadows, the phone
rings and a pretty girl
with an italian last name
says, "i know, no hot peppers
and extra cheese."

in a small town,
you can shower
before they slice
your reality
into eight pieces.

16 · Pizza
Brenda Varner Davis

MA’AM-ERY

Young maiden, prepubescence, wistfully waiting womanhood’s essence; seeks the signs of budding breast regularly, on her (still!) flat chest.

Naked, she will stand and preen, close her eyes and secretly dream she owns a body like Norma Jean.

Old woman, past her prime (nursed some babies in her time) seeks the signs of still-full breast once by lovers’ lips caressed.

Naked, she will stand and preen, close her eyes and secretly dream she owns a body like Norma Jean.
Brenda Varner Davis

SADIE AND THE LADY

Little Sadie met a lady
    at a country fair.
The lady liked the looks of Sadie's smile,
    her eyes, her hair;
Bought two dreamy, creamy sticks,
    bought two so she could share.
Gave one to Sadie. Happy Sadie
    laughing, danced a jiggle-spin,
Giggled up a great big grin.

Her heart was full of joy, was glad,
but the lady's face was lookin' mad.
Her toe was tappin' icily;
"Where are your manners, girl?" said she.
"Why don't you thank me nicily?"
Poor Sadie thought she had.
COLORS IN THE FALL

IN THE DAYS OF BUSH AND BAKERS,
BIBLE PUNCHERS — LOGO MAKERS,
LAND OF CONTRASTS, GREYS AND BLUES,
ON PINK GUM ONE OFTEN CHEWS,
DISMAL DOWNTOWNS, HARDLY PRETTY,
WHITE FLIGHT OUT OF INNER CITY.

EASTERN PILOTS ON THE PICKET,
BLACK MAYORS WIN ON RAINBOW TICKET,
BERLIN GOES AT ONE — O — ONE,
WHITE CHRISTMAS IT GOES . . ON AND ON,
JACKSON — HE STILL STOMPS AROUND,
DUKAKIS . . WELL HE CAN‘T BE FOUND.

A FOETAL VIEW OF T.V. PREACHER,
NO EXTRA CASH FOR GRADE SCHOOL TEACHER,
RED NECKS ACT LIKE WHITE FACED CLOWNS,
HAPPY DAYS FOR CLEVELAND BROWNS,
IT’S VICTORY FOR THE FORTY-NINERS,
THEY MADE IT FIRST AT HILL GOLD MINERS.

DEAD BIRD CARDINALS HIT THE GROUND
CHICAGO CUBS WORLD SERIES BOUND,
BLACK IRISH HEARTS AT NOTRE DAME,
AND SATELLITES RISE FOR UNCLE SAM,
RACE, RAPE AND DRUGS IN L.A. STREET,
BLOOD, CRIMSON RED, FLOWS AT YOUR FEET.
THE CAPE CRUSADER — COMING SOON,
WHAT RIGHT THE CHILD WHILST IN THE WOMB,
THE COURTS SUPREME IN INDECISION,
YET FREE DOC MORGAN FROM THE PRISON,
SONY NOW THE MOGUAL MAKER,
PIERCE THE FIFTH AMENDMENT TAKER.

GREEN LEAVES TURNING AUTUMN HUE,
STREET FLAGS FLYING RED WHITE AND BLUE,
HUGO STRIKES THE CAROLINAS,
OIL SLICK TARNISH OCEAN LINERS,
PANGLOSSIAN — HOPES THAT NEVER DIE,
STARS AND STRIPES ON FLAGPOLES FLY.

A PLANE FLIES INTO MURKY WATER,
THE CREW LEAVE QUICKLY FROM THE SLAUGHTER,
REG EATS McMUFFINS IN THE MALL,
THE STOCKS ARE RISING — THEN THEY FALL,
A WELCOME TO THE WORLDS OPPRESSED,
THIS IS AMERICA AT ITS’ BEST.
George Klee

1

Cigarettes on wet walks—
Minus signs in the sum of Life.

2

Male mantid
    from mate to meal;
an exquisite recycling.

3

Fall sunrise,
igniting color
in infinite botanical bonfires.

4

Fall colors
filling the senses
against winter’s coming starkness.
Robert Miltner

DRIVING IN THE DARK

Vague shapes lurk
in my periphery;
road signs are flashcards
impressed by rote;
exit signs, named,
numbered, spotlighted,
act like invitations
to civilization.

In front, tail lights
are ruby-eyed
signals to go;
in back, headlights,
arrayed like a search party,
become stars
in my rearview mirror.

Windshield wipers
metronome the
radio jazz.
A passing truck’s
tire hum and wind rush
suggest the sounds
of whitewater rivers.
The white lane lines
stretch like a tightrope
and the road's surface
seems bracketed
by a dark abyss.

I imagine myself
balancing on a wire
over a canyon,
poised where what's ahead
equals what's behind:
I feel halfway home.

The line of highway lights
strings like pearls,
like the runway lights
pilots must see
coming in for night landings.
THE SUBJECT AT HAND

I watched you study. 
Your earphones deliberately positioned, 
Your every thought focused, 
On the subject at hand.

I watched you study, 
Though to you, I was not there. 
Just you, your book and your thoughts 
Of the subject at hand.

I watched you study. 
An occasional word you’d say to me, 
Then quickly your attention returned 
To the subject at hand.

I watched you study. 
Sometimes you’d nap, books set aside. 
Then awakened, your mind rebraces 
To the subject at hand.

Everytime I watch you study, 
I wish I were the object of your mind. 
That in the pages that you view, 
I could be the subject at hand.
I beheld the beautiful Elizabeth
Sailing on a quiet sea.
Sailing, ever safely sailing,
On gentle waters, ever sailing,
Gliding softly, within me.

Standing proud, she sails always onward,
Her rigging full and fine.
Sailing onward, ever onward
On peaceful waters, always onward,
Forever guarded in my mind.

With devotion, I will tend her essence.
With love, I will treat her kind.
Diligent, forever vigiland,
Protecting, ever diligent,
I will love her through all of time.

Through tears, I watched her sail away,
On the wharf, I stand alone.
Sailing, softly sailing,
Horizon bound, ever sailing,
My beautiful Elizabeth, forever gone.
Donald Revell

FOR BROOKE, AT CHRISTMAS

Say a miracle happened, then what? Then the stars live, then whatever moves you lives in a real world and can be got to. When the miracle happened, every star that forgives the world, forgave you. Think of it that way, then, and believe of the stars that each of them believes that once, in a low place, a mere girl bent her head to weep for her son, just born. In love’s perfection, miracles return love. When she bends her head, whatever it is that moves you lives in a star’s world, weeps, and only then accepts your miracle, only then believes.
Beverly Rodgers

THE BEST CHRISTMAS YET!

The lamplight was yellow and unsteady
   As an old man sat, head bent low with age
Counting his hoard of nickels and dimes,
   Adding them again, on a tattered page.

Though he added, yet again, not enough
   Did he have to buy a youngster’s toy.
How deeply he sighed! He wished, oh, so hard
   For money to have gifted the boy.

Ah! Well! He put pad, pencil, and coin away,
   Moved closer the fire, averting a chill;
Thinking how he’d like to, would if he just could,
   Never mind, he’d do it! There’s a way, a will.

A knock came quietly, a gentle rap. Ah!
   Could only be the boy, the light of this man’s life.
Through the open door, a small blond head showed
   Above eyes so blue, just like his long gone wife.

"Merry Christmas! Grandpa! Happy New Year, too!
   Has Santa been here to fill your stockin’ yet?
Mom says he only comes when you’re in bed.
   I’m gonna get a jillion things, I bet!"
"Come in, me boy! Tell me what you want the most.  
A flexible flyer, muffler, cowboy hat,  
A new black saddle, or a lariat to whirl  
So you can catch a filly? Whaddaya want, me lad?

"Why, nothing, Gramps, 'ceptin' from Santa, that is.  
I've already got Mom and Dad, and me an' you.  
There's enough love at our house for everyone  
From six months old to a hundred and two!

Mom says Santa's o.k., for gifts and such,  
But, she wouldn't like him here year 'round.  
That it's only in everyday folks like you  
That rock-solid love, like ours, is found."

The old head bent, his eyes filled with tears;  
Yet, on his face, a smile was set.  
Those honest words, straight from the heart,  
Had made this the best Christmas yet.
as has been said,  
the night weighs upon the city  
in tired, fat insolence.  

rats scurry.  
old papers flap down empty streets.  
it is an ugly season, full.  
day slouches in in shameless anonymity  
devoid of great chained excuses  
of being, a void has been of god,  
notion and country.  
unfocused without, we hunt worms  
within to bait further cold excretions  
of reason, rationale, refuse refusing  
our naked nothing, cautious  
strip steal by night.
Boys who play the games they’ve always played, at nine years old, at forty-nine years old: the snow, the lake, the moose, and the air so cold it hurt to breathe, as someone said, calling to his buddies up ahead. He slipped into an icy ditch, and spilled his guts caroming, but his rib-cage held. He laughed and laughed. His buddies called him mad.

The barbershop is buzzing up a storm of memories, this snow-sharp day, some boys as full of liquor as they are of noise, such is the fellowship that keeps them warm. Later, back home, their women will cut loose at them about that moose, that stupid, bloody moose.
Felix Stefanile

SOLDIERS AND THEIR GIRLS

First three-day pass.

Those years before Fast Food, a pizza meant a neighborhood, an accent maybe, or the way the customers looked. You had your limits. One train stop more it might be Fish and Chips or Blintzes. What a way to spend a date, skipping from joint to joint, and getting drunk on laughter, and strange sipping, stupid jokes about the squid, rose-water, or flat bread.

Whatever, down it went. You smiled and smiled because the girl was pretty, and was proud and scared. She wanted you to know Armenians were just like you, or Jews, and we were all Americans anyway.

You checked your watch, said “Hitler!” She teared up, pert Rosie Ohanessian, whose large eyes were darker than this last night on your mind.

She walked you to the depot. You held hands, but never made a move, the station crammed, young couples slouching, grinning, waiting for the speaker to announce the bus from camp.
Somewhere in the stillness
A bell sounds, shatters the silence.
An alarm sounds, indicating
A need of someone somewhere.
You pick up the receiver. "Hello?"
A voice at the other end asks, "Can you talk?"
"Sure," you reply. "What's wrong?"

The engine has left the station,
In search of the trouble it was summoned to.
On you go, picking your way around holes in the road,
Checking carefully each building you pass.
Talk of things that are happy little thoughts,
Not at all what the problem is about.
Long pauses, incomplete thoughts,
Finally you get to the problem.
The source, at last, is found.
Despite the heat of anger, and
The smoke of intense sorrow,
The problem is solved, the fire put out.
Good-bye. The engine heads home.
B.J. Warner

OUT OF THE HAUNT

The sun shines a peculiar lie:
against shadows, cold lines draw
and draft panels of severe distinction--
they cast among barely laced trees
a shiver--swallowed in sudden gusts
and gulps by cruel intention
throughout the days of this dark Spring,

and out of the haunt,
days race more like traffic--
only fluid colors, spilled
and streaked against concrete,
and high/low whines, moaned
and pained through what is passed,
remain.

Christ, where do my days go?
When I admitted myself -- my wife prefers to use the term committed -- to this place, they say I was out of it. I suppose they mean my mind.

They say I was swinging a quart bottle of beer, very theatrical -- I always have been -- chewing up Valium like TicTacs, threatening anyone who moved within three feet of me. That's a safe distance.

They say I was unconscious conscious. Like the walking, talking dead. A zombie.

I don't remember anything about that day, but I have no reason to doubt their testimony.

They say I rattled off my name, address, social security number. My vital statistics. They say they told me my pulse was 138 and I said, shouldn't I be dead? and then I passed out.

This place is a hospital. I woke up on the sixth floor. The locked-up tight, bars on the windows, floor. The breakdown ward.

I should be graduating in a couple of months. You see, I'm an almost lawyer. My father is a lawyer. And his father. So, I've got to be a lawyer, too. My wife was happy with a lawyer's future. Not me. I had -- have -- other ideas. And fourteen years of piano lessons. My mother said it would make me civilized and interesting. My father relented that even lawyers need hobbies.

But all I wanted was to play the honky-tonk, the boogie-woogie, the blues. Should have kept that to myself. Mother smiled indulgently. Father called me a twit. And my loving wife! My wife is much too fine for honky-tonk. Too rigid for boogie-woogie. God knows she hates the blues.

Still, I wanted to be a piano man. Had to be I said.

She said I was crazy, she couldn't love a piano man.

I believed her. That must be why I came here, to try to find my way to the law again. Then again, maybe this whole thing is about music.

I didn't talk for the first week. Was it a week? I don't know. A while. I didn't get out of bed.
Shock treatment. I heard the nurses say. I got up and shuffled out to the day room. TV, table tennis, crazy company. There’s a piano in the corner. It’s not so bad here.

I see my doctor every morning at eleven. Just before lunch. We talk about whatever I want. I talk about music or nothing at all. Our conversations give me a ravenous appetite. I’ve gained ten pounds since I’ve been here. Less than a month, I think.

Why do you think that is? he asks me in his nasal whine.

Maybe it’s the medication. Giving me the appetite. Not the conversations. Tofranil. Anti-depressant. It gives me hallucinations. Better than the acid I did in college. I run around here chasing visions with raw energy. I’m hungry now.

Well, which is it? It’s important to sort these things out.

Maybe it’s the piano. It’s a little out of tune . . . . I eat when I’m happy. My life depresses me thin. I ask. Do you think we could get it tuned?

Do you think you expect too much from people? Whine, whine.

That’s rich, Doc. Really rich.

My wife came to see me the second week. Her lovely red head flamed antagonism. Don’t you think you should grow up, she said. It wasn’t a question. I went over to the piano and started playing.

*Come on my baby, come on my honey* --

Blah blah blah you shit blah blah --

*If I were a carpenter, and you were a lady* --

Blah blah blah irresponsible blah blah childish blah blah blah --

*Let me, entertain you* --

Blah hate blah blah you!

No, I guess not.

You can’t play forever, I’ll leave you. Nag nag. Promise promise.

*I can’t hear you.*

She left. Finally.

correctly, you get the grand prize. You get to go back. Back to what
drove you here.

I'm not answering yet.

The girl's name is Brie. Like soft, ripe cheese. She smells like
cheese -- it's the baby fat -- but I like her. She wants to be a dancer.
All day long I play the piano and she dances. We're getting to be
a pretty good team.

It was really boring here before she came. Most of the inmates
sing the same song, over and over. I couldn't jazz it up by myself.
But, compared to the rest of the band around here, she and I are a
veritable fugue. I can see the interest -- or is it confusion -- on the
nurses' faces when we're together.

The doctor says I'm just avoiding my problems, reality. He says
the girl's got troubles of her own. I don't care. She likes the way
my fingers dance on the keyboard. I like her footwork.

Some of the people have been here a long time. Several claim to
be on a mission from God. One woman carries her Bible with her,
hurling scriptures. The book is getting smaller and smaller. Torn
out pages multiply like loaves of bread laid out on her heat register
every morning, to dry. The odor of urine reeks pungent from her
room. The nurses complain bitterly.

They are shocking God out of another woman twice a week. When
she comes back she can't remember her husband. He comes every
day and talks to her about their children. He shows her photographs.
She's in love with another patient here. They caught her in his bed
the other night.

My father had a client. God told this creep to kill his child. Like
Abraham. Father got him off by reason of insanity.

My doctor wants to know what set me off that day. The day I came
here. I see my apartment: pictures torn from frames, the protective
glass smashed; sheet music ripped into pieces no bigger than notes.
Did I do that? Did she? That's the last thing I remember. My wife
came again. Was it a week ago? She said she was seeing a lawyer.
I'll bet she is. It's just like her to play musical lawyers. Oh well,
better him than me. I told her not to come back.
Somebody sneaked a joint in to Brie during visiting hours. This is a private hospital. They don't check. I mean, nobody's getting jollies frisking the visitors. Maybe the patients once in a while. We smoked it in the john in her room after lights out. My head felt so light and fine and full of music. Her ass looked like twin loaves of french bread. The staff of life. I wanted to kiss her, to bend her baby fat over right there, to ceiling fan and flushing water, and thin her with the rhythms in my groin.

_Sing me a song, you’re the piano man._ Her voice was thin for a fat girl.

We sneaked out to the darkened day room. My fingers found the piano keys. I tried to play quietly but the music insisted. louder. LOUDER. Crescendo! She danced faster. FASTER. Allegro! Up on top of a chair, the table. I played to her. She danced like Salome.

The nurses came. Diminuendo. Real quick. What do you two think you’re doing? They had sleep in their hands and they pried our mouths open to make sure we swallowed it.

My doctor asked me, Why?
Nights are endless without music. I told him.

I used the phone to call my compadre, Eddie. Ready to start raking in the money? I asked him. Eddie is the public defender type.
You -- you OK? He sounded nervous.
Hey, Eddie, how else could I get out of finals, avoid responsibility?
It sounded like he chuckled. Still not sure of me. I hope he chuckled. But I know he didn’t get it. There wasn’t much more to say.

The Duke is playing the graduation formal. I wonder if they’ll let me in?
I want an out pass, I told my doctor. There’s a piano man I want to see.

He nodded. He didn’t mean, Yes, OK.
I signed myself in, right? I said.
Yes.
Then I can sign myself out, right? I said.
His smile was a rejection.
You can't keep me against my will.
We can keep you ninety days. That's the law. He told me.
The fucking law.
Somewhere out there a piano man is playing. Honky-tonk. Boogie-woogie. The blues. Somewhere out there.
But hell, it's not so bad in here. There's a piano in the corner. Only slightly out of tune.
Joan Houghton

A JOURNAL OF
A JOURNEY THROUGH . . .

Sunday night: Grammy knows she's dying. I want to say "It's OK honey," but it's not, and we both know it. I don't know how to love her through this confusion.

I was sitting on the bed when her eyes clouded. Her hand wrenched as she asked, "Did something get twisted God?" She wasn't expecting this! She had been so much better last month . . . birthday parties . . . one of them just a week before she came in here.

What can I do -- look her in the eye and say "Gee Gram, it occurred to me while you were in ICU that you've been taking care of unfinished business. Tying up lose ends is a natural process in preparing to die"? Oh how stupid! And pompous! I can't say that. I can't say anything. She has to take these last few steps alone -- not without us -- but alone.

I love her so much . . . and I'm so tired.

Monday night: "Hi Grammy." I kissed her. We toodled through the gossip -- school, Tom, the kids -- while I combed her hair. That edge in her voice . . . "What did the doctor say today?" I settled into my spot by her hip. Right there on the bed. TSK! TSK!

"It wasn't good!" She spit the words through tight lips. Her fingers clawed the air. "I wanted to snatch his hair out! Yes sir, I did. And I wouldn't even feel bad about it!" What a spitfire!

She rambled. She knows she's mixed up, but I'm not arguing with a dying lady about how many breakfast, lunches, baths she had. How about "No honey. This is what happens when your veins begin to close down and there's not enough oxygen to your brain"? Right!

I feel so damn helpless . . .

They should bring her two lunches. She doesn't eat, and she's so thin.

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**Tuesday morning:** The nurse said Gram was confused again, so they didn’t give her a bath. We can stop looking for a nursing home; she’s too bad to move. The doctor mentioned sending her back to Intensive Care. She doesn’t want to be resuscitated so that would be pointless. Up here she can look out the window and we can stay all day.

She greeted me with a kiss and winked, “I’ve decided the doctor can keep his hair. He must have some use for it!” That’s my Gram! I combed her hair and scrubbed her teeth. How many times have I done this over the years? But I’ve never gotten used to the way she looks without teeth. I hope they do a better job of making her look natural than they did Grandpa... oh yuk... I finished her teeth just as her lunch came. She hates those dietetic cookies. She waved them away, “ACH! Take those home to the dog. He likes ‘em!... and God love that Jennifer. She was here four or five times yesterday.” New day, same confusion. Everything else was double, why not your visitors?

She wished me a happy anniversary! Anniversary? I didn’t have time to go anywhere else. I need a card for Tom... maybe the gift shop downstairs... Her voice jarred me back, “... you’ll get your card and money just as soon as I get home.”

How did I smile through that? I pounded through some dark recess of emotion screaming “NOOOOOOOOO”... and I just kept smiling.

**Tuesday evening:** What a picture! This tiny mite of a woman, bound to that overgrown baby bed by a tangle of oxygen tubes, using her blankets for a keyboard. She’ll make heavenly music all too soon... I choked those tears. “What are you playing Gram?” “Would you like to hear some Shubert honey?” Grinning, she closed her eyes as her fingers danced. I think I heard my heart breaking.

**Wednesday afternoon:** OH SHIT! I knew when I saw everyone in the lounge, it wasn’t good. My heart pounded. My stomach knot-
ted. Dad caught my eye and nodded toward her room. "She's sleeping." I tiptoed in. No point combing her hair... her lips are so dry. I found the Chapstick. "Are you OK honey?" She barely nodded. I held her hand and tried to center myself. She's so peaceful.

Saturday morning: I don't want to get up! I don't want to go to this funeral! I want to SCREAM!

Monday morning: Antsy, antsy, antsy... I have to write. OK. School: English essay -- signals of transcendence. Where is that book? Here, chapter three: order, play, hope, damnation, humor. All present in Gram's last days... and she knew she was dying. This will work!

Hmm. Introduce and define the term. Keep it short. Peter Berger, in his sociological perspective on religion *Rumor of Angels*, examines five signals of transcendence, blah, blah, blah. He believes these are aspects of human living that assume a reality beyond this physical life. Berger asserts that the existence of these signals necessarily implies a belief in the supernatural that imposes itself on our logical, rational processes. There.

Let's see -- order. A contrast between the hospital's order from without (meal carts, shift changes, doctors' visits) and the order we created to make room for "us" (hair, teeth, hanging the day's new cards).

Play, hope, humor -- these will be easy. Play: there's the piano story. Hope: my anniversary. I wonder if she hoped she'd go home? Or if she said it for us? Or if she just hoped we'd know she loves us? Humor: there's the doctor's hair and the dog's cookies. Know what she thought was funny? When I'd come in and sit on the bed -- NEWS FLASH! Beep-a-dee-beep-beep... "This is Nurse Nancy, your on-the-floor reporter, here with a visitor. Excuse me ma'am, do you like to break rules?" "No, I LIKE to be close to my Gram. If I have to, I'll break the rules." "Well, there you have it folks. Tune in next week when we examine the alarming incidence of visitors using patient bathrooms." Joan -- you're avoiding this story. Yes I
know...if the bedrails weren't completely down, it would CLANK! She made jokes about it! "Want me to jump out of my skin?" "Want me to have another heart attack?" That's not funny.

Damnation...If I state she believed in hell, it's an oversimplification. I understand that when she was talking about Grandpa never "concerning himself with such matters" she meant that some deeds may require -- what's Berger say? -- "a retribution that's more than human" (Berger 68). Damnation, damnation. This will need work.

Monday night: We were sitting in Gram's kitchen this afternoon and Dad told me her last words. It's been five days and nobody told me! She relaxed into her pillow, and sighed, "Oh, I see. Now I understand." I knew she was serene. I just can't believe nobody told me....

Tuesday: This is exciting! I can bring in Joseph Campbell's video **look up the title** I love his line "the invisible plane that supports the visible one." I'll use it to explain Gram's out of the body experiences, even though they were gentler than the tribal rituals Campbell examined.

I can contrast her confusion with her "traveling" -- that's what I'll call it. The confusion was always about daily living. Her traveling was -- how will I ever say this? -- talking to God and dead people. There were physical differences between the two. When she was confused, her voice faltered, her eyes were clear and her facial muscles tensed. When she traveled her voice was clear, her eyes clouded, and her face relaxed.

I can show that her confusion on Sunday was not about this world. She didn't understand where this heart attack fit into a larger scheme. Then I can use her last words to show new insight...it sure can't be explained as an increase in cerebral activity.

This will be terrific!
Monday: Dr. Carson OK'd the idea for my paper. She asked if I was keeping a journal of this. Journal? For crying out loud! I've got a twelve page draft!

Thursday: I'm losing my focus. I spent all day writing about the invisible cues we use in daily living. I let Tom read it. He hated it. He asked "What's the point?" Good question . . .

We can't see sound. We don't touch rainbows. But we know they exist. Sure, and science can explain them. Yes, but people used to believe that the earth was flat and the sun revolved around it -- science explained that too. I think it's human arrogance to believe that "knowledge" at any given time is conclusive. So, what is the point? Lack of explanation does not mean lack of existence. But, why does the paper need this?

Because . . .

It's 2 A.M. I'm alone with Gram. A thought floated through me, "She can't leave with all of us here." I stretched out on the other bed and listened . . . whoosh . . . that occasional breath that meant she had moved further from us . . .

And I watched . . . I saw myself wrapped in the darkness, listening -- just listening -- alone with the sound. Down the hall, white lights, white uniforms, peering at those awful, silent green squiggles on a black screen . . .

Sunday: Look at this this -- Gram's traveling. My traveling. Camp­bell. Berger. Rainbows. This paper is a mess! Why? Because I'm a mess! I need focus!

Monday: I've got it! Driving home tonight I envisioned this paper when it's finished. It is a fine gold chain with a few pearls on it -- opaque little pearls with a translucent shine.

Friday afternoon: I'm spinning my wheels. I can't fashion thirty­two years of loving Gram, or even five days of watching her die,
into a gold chain and I can’t polish the memories.

Friday night: I showed the paper to a friend. She said, “You’re right, it’s crap. Write the paper related to Berger and Campbell and put the rest in a journal for someday.”
I don’t want to! Why not? Without the emotion, the paper is “My Grandmother’s Death and signals of Transcendence.” So? It obscures the experience.
What is so hard about this? Instead of relating this book to that video, I want to relate this essay to my experience. Berger says no matter how much people argue that religion is dying, we continue to do things that necessarily imply a belief in other worlds. Campbell believes that we are closely connected to those invisible planes and spent his life exploring how our myths express that connectedness. Gram’s last days dovetail these ideas and support them. I want to tell that story.
But the paper you’re writing doesn’t say that -- it’s vague, and remote and jumbled with pain.

Now what? I’m going to bed . . .

3 A.M.: I can’t write this essay . . . Why? Because essays are ordered: introductions, thesis statements, bodies, conclusions.
That’s it, isn’t it? Conclusions. A good essay is an O, finished and round. Like the gold chain maybe? You can’t write this essay because you can’t clasp it. You can’t inspect the pearls . . .
I dozed. Everyone else drifted in and out. Nurses kept a gentle vigil. As the black turned gray, Mom went for coffee. Judy went to change clothes. Tom and I went downstairs to eat, leaving Dad near the glassy shadows reading aloud from her Bible. Gram left us on the dawn’s light.
or choose which to polish . . .
I stood there staring. Scream/Yell/Run/ . . . Numb/Burning/Hollow/ I can’t stop staring. How can anyone doubt the existence of soul? It’s just a body now that she’s gone. A shell, empty. But I love that face. I can’t let go.
or admit they are all harvested . . .
So, you’re not a jeweler.

No, and maybe I’m not a writer either. Essays are tidy . . . my grief isn’t. But there must be a way . . .
The necklace . . . I’ve got a second grader’s paper chain and I want something from Tiffany’s. But paper chains are charming in their own right . . .
I don’t know. But when I figure it out I will end with Emily Dickinson’s poem. Why? Because I like it. Because it makes three outside sources. Because it ties into invisible cues to living. Because it was the most comforting thought I found the week after the funeral. Because I love mystics and poets. How’s that for a list?

Definitely. When I find a way to write this paper it will end:

This world is not conclusion.
A sequel stands beyond
Invisible as music
But positive as sound.

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