

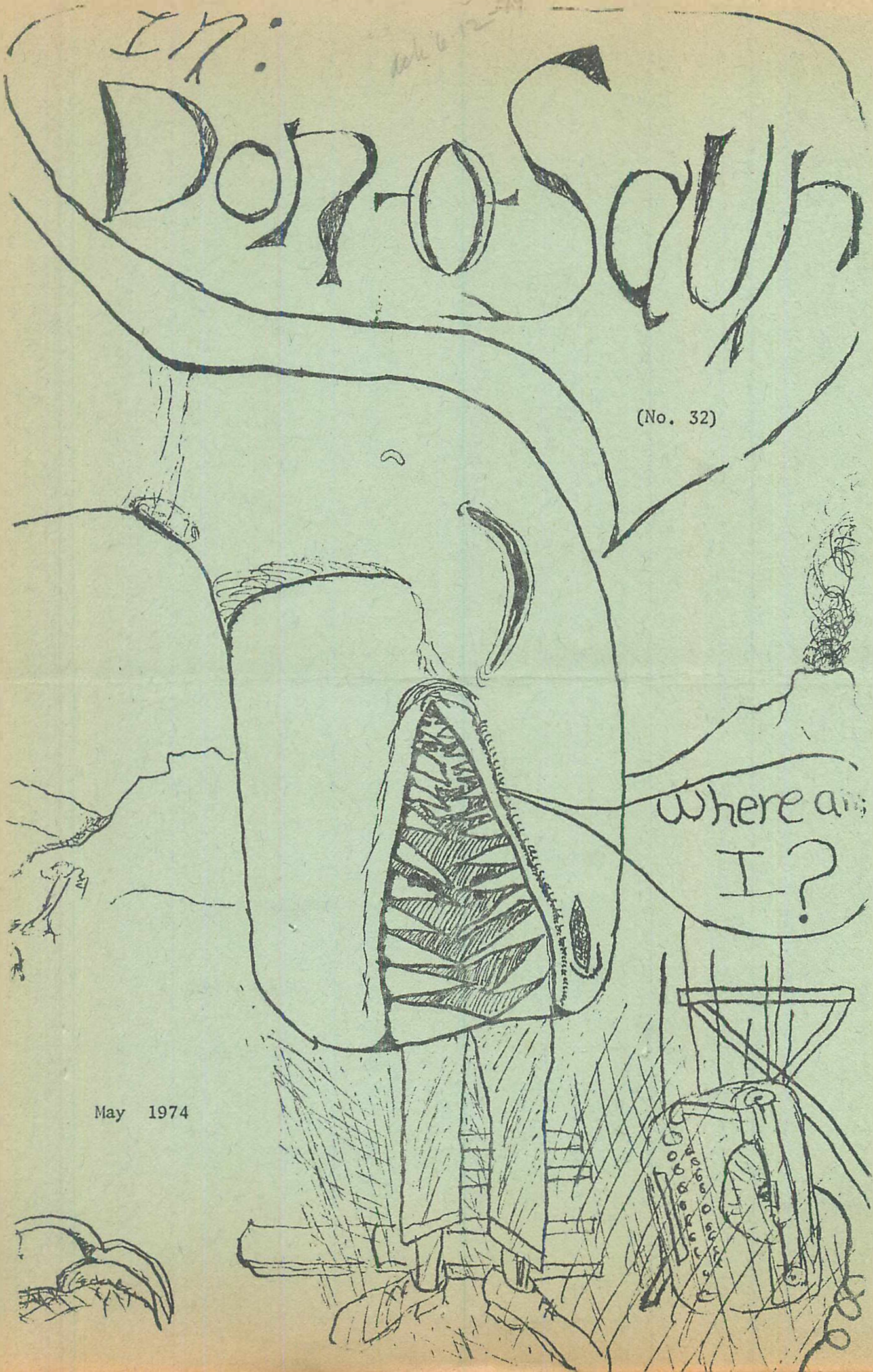
IN:

Don-Salk

(No. 32)

Where am
I?

May 1974



May 1974

Vol. III No. 8

Published monthly by Don Thompson, 7498 Canosa Ct., Westminster, CO 80030. Available for 25¢ per issue or 12 for \$2.50, or in exchange for other fanzines, letters of comment or artwork. I also send unsolicited copies to people whose names I come across in the letter cols of other zines. If I don't get some kind of response, your name will eventually be dropped. Maybe.

Our topic this issue, at least until we get to the locs and the fanzine reviews, is DEATH. The reason I'm coming right out and telling you at the outset is that if I didn't, you might read the whole thing and not realize until right at the end (and maybe not even then) that Death is what I've been talking about. It's going to be that kind of discussion.

Actually I'm not well qualified to talk about Death, being almost totally without first hand knowledge of it, and it isn't even something I've spent a lot of time thinking about.

This makes me nervous even to say it, as though fate were looking over my shoulder, but in my entire lifetime (46½ years) no one really close to me has died. Both my parents are in relatively good health as they enter their mid 70s. Both of Carolyn's parents, a few years younger than mine, are also thriving. Both my sisters, their husbands and all their offspring are doing equally well. An occasional aunt or uncle or cousin of mine has died, but none that I've known well or was close to.

The situation reminds me a little of a story in F&SF a few years ago (it was "How We Pass the Time in Hell" by Gary Jennings; I just looked it up). The point of the story is that from his own point of view, no one ever dies. If a person has a potentially fatal heart attack, for instance, the universe simply undergoes one of its infinitude of divisions, and in one world he is dead, but in the other (the one he knows about) he recovers. It's a true horror story, because aging continues into senility and beyond. The story is in the November 1971 issue, if you want to check it.

I'm mentioning my lack of experience with death so you won't think I'm talking as any kind of expert. Don't expect me to come up with any profound observations or insights into the meaning of death (or life).

All I'm going to do is tell, in more-or-less narrative form, a very minor story (true, at least to the extent that any actual experience when condensed to words can be said to be true) in which a death occurs. It's not a suspense story, so I don't think I'm spoiling it if I tell you that the death does not come to the person you might expect. That may even make it easier for you.

The story begins last summer . . . (but you see, fiction is creeping into this already. Of course the real chain of events had no beginning that I would be able to pinpoint; they will have no end that I can ever know; but for purposes of this narrative I must carve out an arbitrary section of time and call one end of it the beginning and the other the end.

The story began last summer. A group of neighborhood boys, about the same age as our son, Doug (14) asked Carolyn if they could build a club house behind our garage. The garage was new. It had been started the previous summer but for various reasons had not been completed until just recently. The kids quickly noticed that there was a space of about 10 feet between the rear of the garage and the neighboring fence. They could build a really neat club house there. And they did.

Carolyn put up token resistance, but not nearly as much as I would have expected. In a way I'm surprised that the boys didn't bypass Carolyn and deal with me, knowing that I'd be a softer mark than she. But they might have been aware that even if they got my permission, Carolyn could still exercise a veto. So I guess they knew what they were doing in going directly to her.

I don't know what means of persuasion they used to overcome her reluctance, but it was effective, although Carolyn did not capitulate totally. She insisted on some clear and rather stringent rules and provisions, and she made the boys put them in writing, in the form of a contract, which was then signed by the boys and by her.

I didn't see the written document until long afterward, and I don't remember all the terms of the agreement, though I think Carolyn still has it; I could track it down and copy it verbatim if I thought it was important, but I don't believe it is. The major proviso was that in exchange for the right to build the clubhouse and furnish it any way they wanted, the boys agreed to such conditions as:

- No matches, no smoking, no fires in the clubhouse
- Little kids would be kept out (this was aimed particularly at the pre-school age youngsters)
- Carolyn was to have right of inspection at any time, and she retained the right to order the clubhouse's dismantling if any of the rules were violated.

The contract went into considerable detail, but the most important ones for purposes of this story are those above. Note particularly the first one on my list, which was also No. 1 in the formal contract --that one about no matches . . . no fires.

I didn't know anything about any of this until it was a fait accompli. I was working full time during the summer at the Rocky Mountain News, which kept me away from home most days from about 2:30 p.m. until about 12:30 a.m., and I tend to sleep late in the mornings when I'm on those hours--all of which is another reason why the kids dealt with Carolyn instead of with me.

One morning after I got up, Carolyn said, "Have you noticed the clubhouse?" and I said, "What clubhouse?" and she said, "Go out and take a look."

So I did. I was impressed. It was one hell of a clubhouse.

I estimated that just about every chunk of scrap lumber in the neighborhood went into the structure, and I wouldn't have supposed there was that much scrap lumber. The walls and roof and floor were plyboard sheets of widely assorted shapes and sizes, no two the same. Two by fours and two by twos of various lengths served as the skeleton for the plyboard.

The clubhouse was about five feet high, with a roof slanting from the garage downward slightly toward the wire mesh fence in the back yard. The structure occupied the entire space behind the garage--an area of about 10 feet by 12 feet.

From the outside, actually, it didn't look like so much -- just a low, flat-roofed, unpainted, haphazardly carpentered shed.

The impressive aspect of it was inside, but it wasn't easy to get inside--not for me, anyway. A lilac bush grows at the corner of the garage, and not far away from it, close against that wire mesh fence, is a cherry tree with low hanging branches. The easiest way to get between the tree and the bush is to crawl, which was fine because to get into the clubhouse that was the required position anyway. The door was more like a hatchway. Someone had donated a cupboard door, apparently, and so the boys had decided to adjust the entranceway to fit the door instead of making a larger entrance and then trying to find or make a door to fit it.

Anyway, the only way into the clubhouse was to crawl, first through that very small door, then through a short passageway, like the tunnel entrance to an igloo. Then it was possible to see the interior.

The floor was carpeted. In one corner was an enormous overstuffed chair without legs. It dominated the room like a throne. There were a number of cushions lying around, too. The place was wired for electricity, even. An extension cord from the garage brought juice in for a couple of table lamps (which sat on the floor), and for a stereo and a portable tv. Records were stacked neatly beside the stereo.

I didn't turn anything on. I merely gave the place a quick inspection and then crawled out, almost awed -- almost envious.

I don't honestly remember whether the following conversation really took place or not. Maybe not. My point in reporting it here is simply to indicate that the major thought expressed therein did, at some time or another, enter my mind.

"That's a nice clubhouse, all right. The only thing is . . ."

"Well, what?"

"I was just wondering . . ."

"What?"

"I suppose it's all right, but I wonder if it might be in technical violation of the building code."

"How?"

"Wasn't there some reason why we had to stay ten feet away from the back fence? To let the fire engines through or something?"

"That's the ten feet between the house and the garage. We could have built right up against the fence if we'd wanted to."

"Are you sure?"

"No."

"Do you suppose the clubhouse constitutes a fire hazard?"

"Not as long as they don't build fires in it."

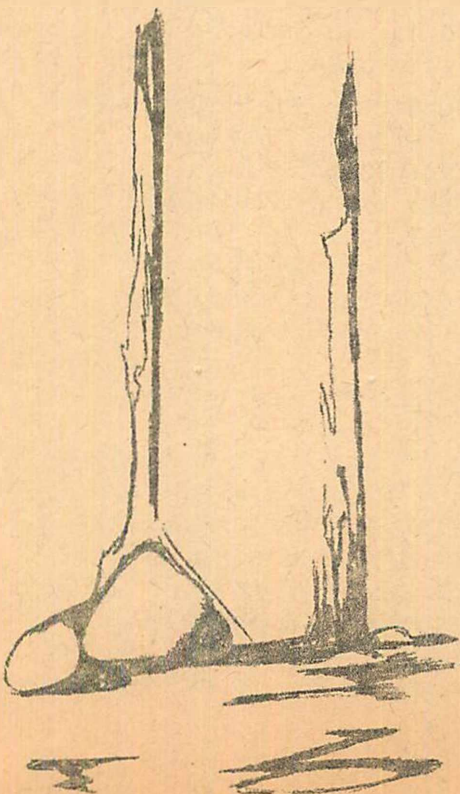
"Well, okay. I've got no objections."

The summer passed with no melodramatic developments (it'll be a little while yet before I get to them). The clubhouse got lots of use, but Carolyn commented several times on how cooperative the boys were, how conscientious in keeping the place clean and neat and in abiding by the rules.

Slight trouble began to develop toward fall, especially after school started again, and especially when the weather started turning a bit nippy. I got in some trouble myself when I gave the kids permission to take a heater into the clubhouse, and Carolyn pointed out that that did constitute a fire hazard. In addition, once or twice, lights were left on far into the night, or maybe it was all day, when nobody was in the clubhouse.

That resulted in loss of electricity privileges for a specified period--24 or 48 hours.

Before I advance the plot of this story much further, it might be appropriate to stop about here and do a bit of characterization. There's only one main character in the story. I'll use his real name: Nicky Scheidt.



But before I can tell about Nicky Scheidt, I'll have to tell a little about his parents, Paul and Mary, and about their other children, Lynn and Lana, and I guess even about Nicky's younger brother, Dean.

The Scheidts moved into the house next door to us about 15 years ago, after we'd been settled in the neighborhood a couple of years ourselves. Their son, Lynn, and daughter Lana were just the same ages as Bruce and Claudia, our son and daughter. The kids played together a lot, quite amicably. (Lynn Scheidt was a very large child, and extraordinarily good natured; everybody liked him, and in fact, of all the kids I've ever known, Lynn remains one of my favorites).

Douglas and Nicky were born within a few months of each other (Doug was first by about six months, I guess) and both were five years behind their sister and seven years younger than their brother. That length of time between children constitutes a generation gap. Doug and Nicky, therefore, growing up together from infancy, became even closer companions.

Carolyn and I were seriously worried about Doug in the first few years of his life. He was slow learning to walk and even slower in talking. (Both Bruce and Claudia has started walking and talking at about 10 months; Doug didn't walk till he was about 18 months and was well past 2 years before he began to talk--and even then he didn't talk words but numbers; it can honestly be said of him that he was counting before he was talking, and the primary passion of his life is still the realm of numbers; weird kid).

Nicky, particularly compared with Doug in those early years, seemed to me like an extremely bright child. Even though he was about six months younger than Doug he seemed older.

I liked Nicky. I was grateful to him in a way, just for being there for Doug to play with. And I was greatly impressed, when Nicky acquired his younger brother, Dean, at how willingly Nicky took on the job of looking after him. From the time Dean could toddle, Nicky took him everywhere he went, completely betraying the stereotype of the older brother trying to ditch the pesky brat of a younger sibling. And Dean was sort of a pesky little brat, but Nicky's patience was endless.

Carolyn and I never became at all closely acquainted with Paul and Mary Scheidt, in spite of the close association of the kids. There was never anything approaching animosity between us, just never any closeness. There were times when I would have liked to have thanked Paul and Mary for having such nice children for our children to play with, but I wouldn't have known how to say it-- I didn't know them well enough. So it never got said.

Paul and Mary were a few years younger than Carolyn and me (though that had nothing to do with anything). Paul, tall, lean, soft-spoken, sort of introspective, was a maintenance worker with one of the big trucking companies. His only hobby that I was ever aware of was keeping his own cars in good condition. I doubt that he ever took a car to a garage except maybe for an inspection sticker. He did all repairs himself, seeming to work on the cars every chance he got. Paul was a big-car man; I am a small car man--I've had a Lark, two Opels and now two Hondas, and if anybody ever markets an even smaller car I'll get it. Paul's other pastime was keeping his yard looking nice. The people who lived in that house before them were absolute yard and garden fanatics, so the Scheidts had one of the showplaces of the neighborhood when they took over the house, and they managed to keep it from deteriorating, a task requiring considerable application. I have always resented yard work because I can't read or write while I'm doing it, so I've never done more than the bare minimum required to avoid being tarred and feathered by the neighbors. (As a matter of fact, some of our neighbors have worse looking yards than ours is, but not many).

I'm about ready to resume the narrative, but a few things remain to be said about Nicky. In the year or so (maybe closer to two years) prior to last summer he had changed. Well, what had happened was simply that he had entered adolescence (well ahead of Doug, as in so many other things). He had become more competitive, more aggressive, sometimes downright belligerent. He would often pick fights. More disturbing, both to his parents, to his teachers (I suppose) and to the other kids, including Doug (I know for sure), he developed traits of slyness, sneakiness, cunning. He would tell Doug, for instance, that I had given him permission to take tools (or assorted other objects) from the basement. Doug, logically enough, grew to distrust him, as did some of the other boys his own age.

I can't pinpoint this next event in time. I have a feeling it was toward the end of last summer or perhaps later into the fall, but if I were handling this as fiction I would put it earlier, before the clubhouse was built.

Anyway, what happened is that Doug had a \$10 bill (and I don't remember why he had it; possibly his grandparents had given it to him for some work he'd done for them). One day, after some of the boys had been playing in Doug's room, the money was gone.

The mystery did not remain unsolved very long. Dean, Nicky's little brother, squealed on him when the word was going around that Doug's money was missing. Nicky tried a few lies but was unable to give any plausible explanation for his possession of a \$10 bill.

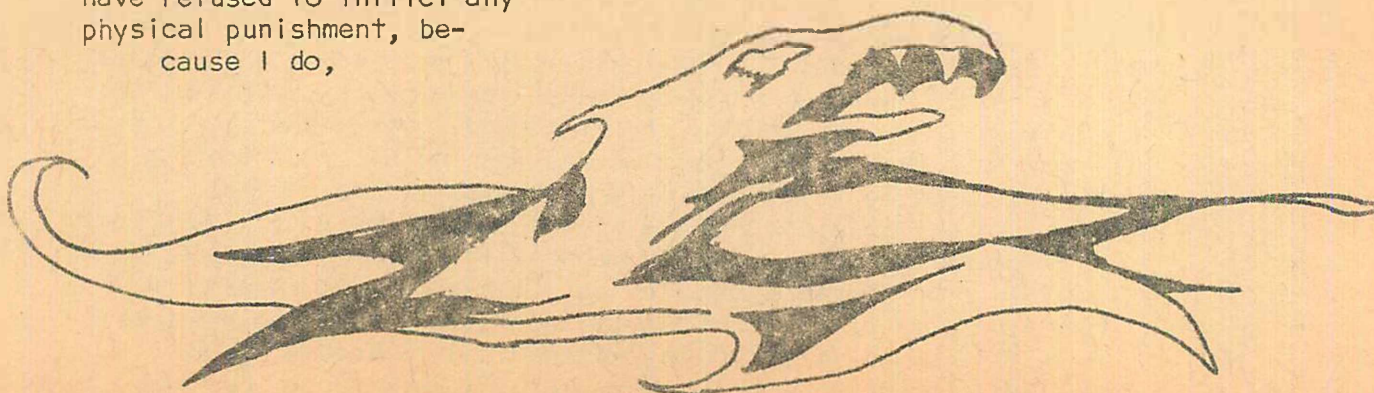
(It probably didn't happen, but again if I were fictionalizing this, I would have Doug make positive identification of the bill by its serial number, because he does memorize serial numbers of money).

Carolyn told me about this episode; it all happened while I was at work, and perhaps for that reason it doesn't seem quite real to me. It's something I would like very much to change, simply because it's so aesthetically unsatisfying.

Paul and Mary dragged Nicky, with the money, to our house and made him return the money and apologize. And here's the part that's wrong: They then insisted that Carolyn punish him--in any way that she saw fit.

"Just to get it over with," she told me, "I had him bend over with his hands against the wall of the house, and I whacked him a few times with a stick, enough so that I knew he felt it. . . ."

Naw! That's bad, that's terrible, that's NOT the way it should have been handled! And for weeks afterward I kept running alternate scenarios through my head--working out the punishments that I would have meted out. What I would have done (I told myself, though I have not the slightest notion of what I would actually have done in the same situation) is that I would have refused to inflict any physical punishment, because I do,



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honestly and deeply, believe that physical punishment of teenagers is simply wasted effort. So I would have said (I tell myself) that any direct punishment would have to be done by his parents, but that if anything like this happened again I would report it to the police.

That wasn't very satisfying either. Nothing about it was. All I could do was wish that the whole thing hadn't happened. I was really bothered by it. I took it almost personally. I had liked Nicky so much for so long, and he and Doug had been such good friends. . . This was sort of a betrayal--of Doug and of me too. I punished him in my own way for weeks or months thereafter by simply ignoring him. When I saw him outside, when always before I would wave to him and speak, now I said nothing. He was in the house a few times (always with other kids; his close friendship with Doug was at a definite end), and when I encountered him I treated him like a stranger.

You must try to understand -- I felt really bitter. The money was nothing (hell it wasn't even my money). The betrayal was everything. The perfidy.

All right. Now we come to the exciting climax. . .

Skip ahead to the middle of December and a little beyond--to just a few days before Christmas. The mood in the Thompson household is one of tranquility. We (Carolyn, Claudia, Doug and I) had finished lunch and were sitting around in the living room, engaged in desultory conversation, watching the cats, I distinctly recall, possibly making a comment or two about the weather.

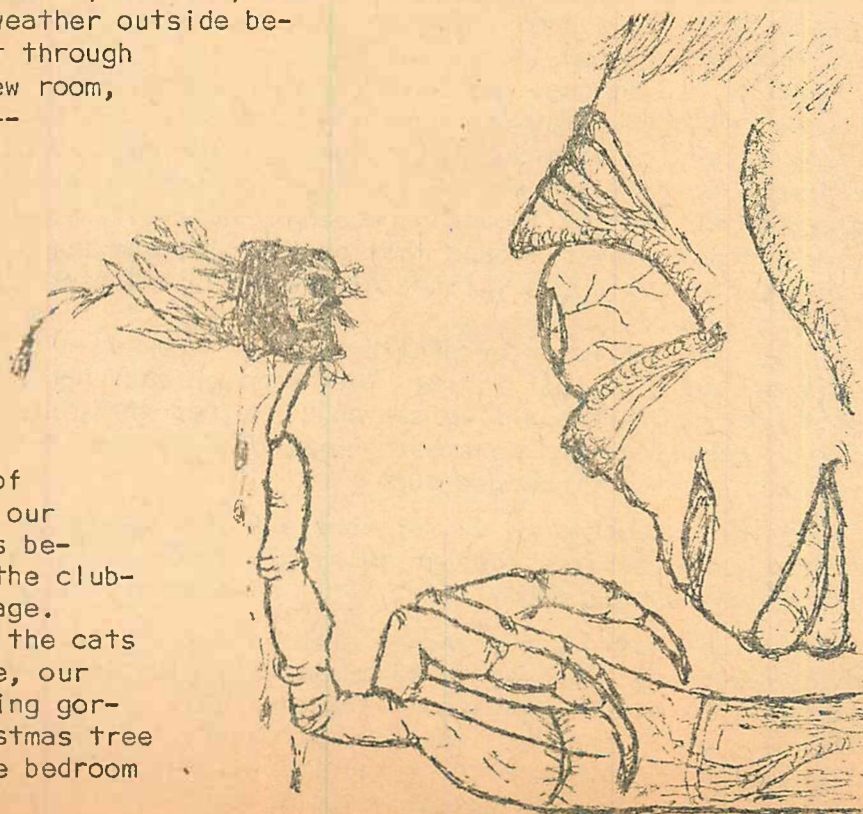
The weather is important to this story--that's why I mention it.

Winter had come early, had hit hard, and was hanging on. We were in for a White Christmas, for certain (actually a rare occurrence in Denver). We'd had snow and cold and dismal cloudy days all week, it seemed, but now, on this day the weather had broken. The day was bright and clear, with temperatures heading toward the 40s. The world felt friendly again.

So we were sitting around, doing nothing special, talking of nothing special, but very much aware of the bright weather outside because we could see it through the windows of our new room, the "fireplace room"--the addition to the house that had been built the same time as the garage but not really finished until recently.

I was dimly aware, though it didn't really register until later, of Nicky chasing across our back yard a few times between his house and the clubhouse behind the garage.

And I mentioned the cats because it was Silkie, our Burmese kitten, looking gorgeous under the Christmas tree that sent me into the bedroom to get a camera.



I was messing around with the camera, probably trying to get film into it, when Carolyn came back to the bedroom and said:

"Better drop that and come quick. We've got an emergency. The clubhouse is on fire."

She didn't sound terribly excited, not at all panicky, so I didn't move with any extraordinary haste. I put the camera down carefully and walked to the living room, thinking that I should be able to change shoes (get some shoes on, I mean, in place of the open sandals I wear in the house) and put an overcoat on; thinking too that a fire shouldn't be any real problem--that it would be a simple matter to toss a few shovels full of snow on it to put it out. Then I looked out the window and said, "Oh, hell."

What I saw were flames at the rear corner of the garage, leaping high into the air, almost to the top of the garage. I saw Nicky with a snow shovel, scooping up snow and hurling it onto the blaze, with no effect whatsoever. I remember thinking something like: well, that's a real fire; could be a problem. And I rushed on out without putting either shoes or an overcoat on.

There were quite a number of people around, both kids and adults. Our neighbors to the rear were out, also with snow shovels, scooping and tossing. There was somebody, one of the boys, I believe, at our outdoor water tap, trying to get the hose unfrozen. (Carolyn has often chastized me for leaving the hoses out all winter and letting the water freeze in them).

I may have just stood and watched for a while, though maybe it was no more than a few seconds. The roof of the clubhouse had already caved in and the fire was roaring beneath it, with tongues of flame licking up through it and around the sides. They seemed angry, or hungry, or both.

I stood beside Nicky. "How did this get started anyway?" I asked him.

"I did it," he said, and I noticed then that he was crying, his face twisted with tears and terror. "I was in there. I tried to start a fire in the can"-- he pointed to a deep metal waste basket that now rested against the fence. "The fire just jumped right out and up to the roof, and then the whole thing was on fire."

"Gee, that was a dumb thing to do," I told him.

"I know it, I know it, I know it!" he said.

Somebody had somehow gotten the water hose to working and now approached the flames with it. The pressure was extremely low (partly because our back yard water faucet never has opened all the way. That thin stream of water dribbling from the end of the hose (no nozzle, even) looked awfully pathetic in the face of those increasingly active flames, but I grabbed the hose away from whomever it was that brought it, and I put my thumb half over the opening to create a semblance of pressure, and played the stream uselessly onto the fire.

Either then or later or earlier, Nicky threw down the snow shovel and turned away and I yelled at him: "Hey come on back here and keep shoveling. It isn't much, but it's all we can do." He returned, still crying, terror-stricken, trembling; and we stood there, side by side for a while, helplessly watching the clubhouse burn.

Hold this scene for a while; freeze it, so to speak; stop the action. There's no need to hurry through this. The scene will be there, frozen in my mind, for the rest of my life. I'll have lots of time to contemplate it.

The bright white sun-drenched snow is wet and heavy (and is soaking through my socks). The sky is fantastically blue and clear. The flames seem unreal, pale and wavering in the sunlight. There seem to be people chasing back and forth (an impression created, I guess, by a number of people shoveling snow onto the fire) and several other people just standing around behind me, talking casually about the fire and the chances of its

spreading. A leisurely thought trickled through my mind to the effect that I might get more water pressure if I could bring the hose from the front yard around and hook this one onto it, or perhaps attach a hose onto the tap in the laundry room in the basement. But I had become aware from the snatches of conversation I was hearing that someone had called the fire department.

A few seconds that seemed much longer passed: time begins to move again.

Nicky is on my left, hurling snow onto the fire, gasping and sobbing. I am standing as close to the fire as I can get, holding the hose, with a thumb over the end, aiming the spray of water against the side of the garage. The news that the fire department is on the way has made me sad, and now, as the flames wilt the leafless lilac bush and lick against the garage, blistering the paint and buckling the steel siding, the sadness turns to anger.

Because, God damn it, this garage is new, and now it's getting all scorched and marred, and there's even a chance that unless the firemen get here soon the whole thing could burn down.

The garage has been opened and the Opel station wagon backed out, and now Carolyn informs me there's smoke inside where the fire is starting to eat through the wall, and she says I should bring the hose inside since it isn't doing any good where I'm using it.

Nicky is still dashing back and forth with the snow shovel, though he can hardly see where he's throwing the snow. He stands still as I move past him into the garage, and in passing him I make a comment.

This comment is the climax of the whole story, as far as I'm concerned. It's the crux of the story--the one thing that makes it of special significance to me. After this, all the rest of it is downhill, anticlimax.

The comment, spoken in sadness and anger, was this:

"God damn it, Nicky, this is all your fault, and you're going to pay for it -- one way or another!"

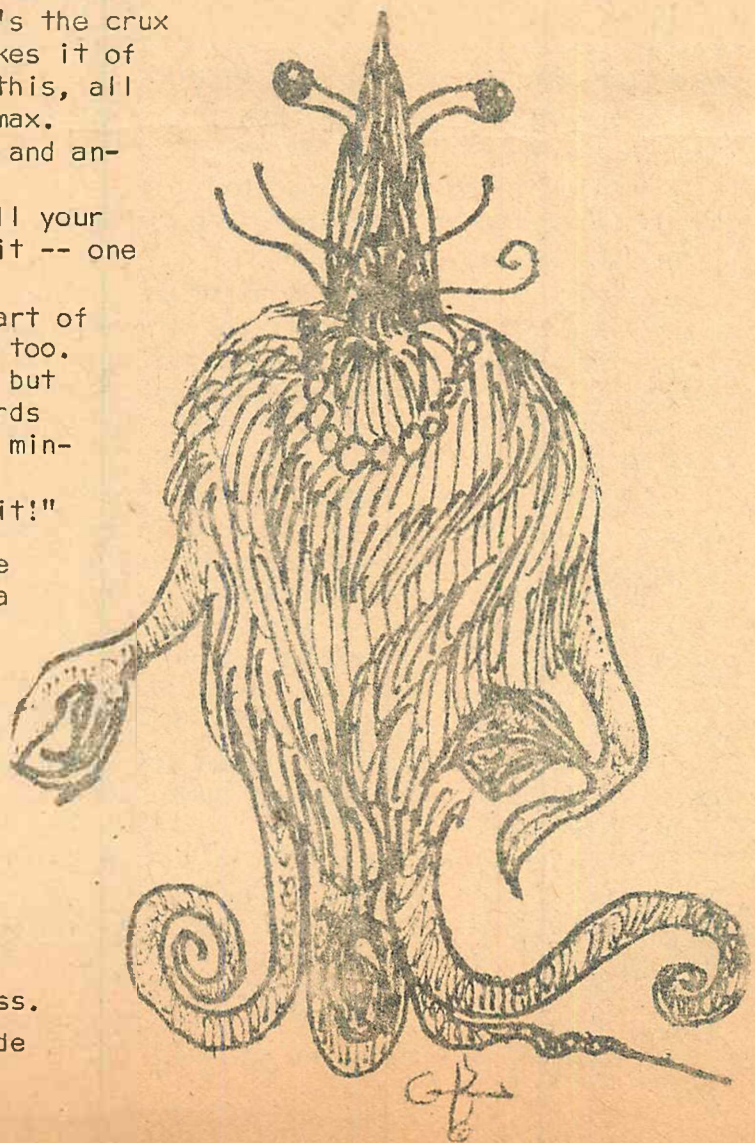
Nicky's reply is an integral part of this instant, so I have to give it, too. He was sobbing almost hysterically, but he managed to choke out the same words he had when I'd spoken to him a few minutes before:

"I know it, I know it, I know it!"

I'd like to be able to tell the rest of this very quickly, in just a few sentences--or better still, not tell it at all, but that wouldn't be fair. If you've come along with me this far, you deserve to have the rest of it, so here it is, as best I can squeeze it out.

The firemen came in time to prevent any serious damage to the garage, though all the siding on that end had to be replaced. The clubhouse, of course was a total loss.

Do you like irony? This episode has several, some of which you've





undoubtedly noticed already, but here's a wild one that you'd never know about if I didn't make a special point of telling you. Carolyn and I were worried, after it was all over, that it might not be all over--that there might still be legal problems. We were still not at all sure that the clubhouse hadn't been a violation of the building code or of the fire laws. It occurred to us that if anybody had been hurt in the fire, we could be sued for maintaining an attractive nuisance. At the very least, we fully expected some recalcitrance on the part of our insurance company when it came to paying for the necessary repairs to the garage.

All those fears were groundless--ALL of them.

Not only did the insurance company pay for the garage work with scarcely a quibble, the agent who settled the claim also insisted on making an estimate of the value of the clubhouse and of its contents. We had told the fire officials that the building itself had NO value, and that the contents couldn't have been valued at more than \$50 to \$75. The State Farm man would not accept that. He set an arbitrary value of \$100 or so on the lumber used in the building and made us itemize as completely as we could (with Doug's help) the contents, and he boosted all our estimates on those.

In short, we made several hundred dollars profit on that goddam fire!

All the lumber and all the furnishings of the house had been donated by families in the neighborhood. It was all stuff that would have been thrown away or maybe given to Goodwill or the Salvation Army if the kids hadn't wanted it. Carolyn couldn't find anyone in the neighborhood who was willing to accept any money for the things they had donated.

Maybe that gives the impression that the story had a happy ending? I hope not, for that would be an error.

I said at the beginning that this story has no end that I can ever know. It's still going on, but there are two more scenes that I must work in before I can even quit my narration.

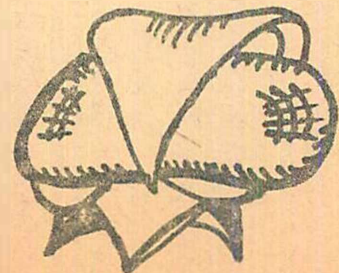
One is in the immediate aftermath of the fire. The blaze has been drowned and the clubhouse ashes scattered all over our back yard. (It'll take many weeks to get that mess entirely cleaned up, and most of the same boys who built the clubhouse will help with the cleanup). The firemen and policemen have asked all their questions (and given their lectures on fire safety to a chagrined and remorseful me). The crowd has dispersed. The excitement is over.

Nicky's sister, Lana, has comforted him and taken him home. (I have a vivid memory of her standing in the snow in our yard, holding Nicky in her arms, patting him on the back, swaying with him and murmuring words of reassurance while the firemen poke among the ruins. I have an impulse to respond to that scene somehow, to say something either to Lana or to Nicky, but nothing appropriate suggests itself. The moment passes).

Paul and Mary have come into our yard and they are standing in our driveway, near the garage, talking to me and Carolyn.

Paul said, "I guess I missed all the action. I was in the shower and I didn't come up until it was nearly all over."

The police and fire officials have talked to him, too. "Nicky told them he'd started the fire. They wanted to talk to his father; they somehow got the idea that we lived here, and they started giving me hell. But I didn't want 'em jumping on you, so I just let 'em talk until they figured it out. It was all Nicky's fault. Damn! You know, we've had more trouble with



that boy! He's the only one of all our kids that we've ever gotten calls about from school. Several times it's happened. And this isn't the first time he's gotten in trouble for starting fires. I'm beginning to wonder if maybe he's a pyromaniac. I'm really worried about him. I don't know what to do!"

Paul's concern was so genuine and showed so clearly on his face that I really felt sorry for him, and I tried to make reassuring noises with my end of the conversation, but there wasn't much I could say. The point I tried to make clear was that we should just be glad nobody had been hurt. (The fire chief's lecture to me had sunk in; less than a month later there was a story and picture in the papers about some kids in Denver who had started a fire in a club house--or maybe it was a garage; anyway, one of those boys was killed).

Mary didn't take much part in this conversation, but she was there while Paul was worrying aloud and I had a chance to observe her at close range. (And it occurs to me that I neglected to describe her when I was talking about the grown up Scheidts earlier, so I'll do it now).

Mary Scheidt is a strikingly beautiful woman, tall, slender but with a ripely developed figure, her complexion, eyes and hair very dark. I believe she is of French ancestry. (Paul of course is German, but aside from the name there'd be no way to tell--nothing in his manner or appearance would give any hint. But Mary somehow looks French. All of the kids--Lynn, Lana, Nicky, Dean--look more like Mary than like Paul; they all have her eyes and coloring).

I try to remember if there was anything special about Paul that I noticed, other than his worry about Nicky. Did he seem thinner than usual? Paler? Anything? If his face was drawn and more craggy than usual, I assumed that it was just because of the tension of the occasion. I don't know.

The final scene:

About a week later--Christmas is past; the New Year is still a few days in the future. Maybe it's only two days, because I'm quite sure, checking back, that it was a Sunday. The time must be about noon. We've all slept late, had breakfast, and we're all separately occupied with our own pursuits. I'm stretched out in my swivel rocker in my corner of the living room; Doug is downstairs in his room; Claudia is off in her room, playing the guitar; I'd lost track of where Carolyn was, but when the phone rings she's there to get it ahead of me, so I pick up my book again and start back to the chair but squat on the footstool instead of settling back because something in the fragments of conversation and the tone of Carolyn's voice keeps me from relaxing. There was something about "...noticed that there were a lot of cars around but I just thought...Sunday...Christmas...Yes, and if there's anything I can do, please call..."

She put down the receiver and turned to me. Her expression was peculiar, but I could tell nothing from it. It could almost be described as a perplexed smile.

I said, "What?"

She gave it to me almost in chronological order. "Paul's brother-- you know, the one who lives in Montana? Well, he was killed in a car crash a day or two ago..."

I made a sort of regretful noise, but that wasn't the message and Carolyn went right on. "Paul flew up there for the funeral. And while he was there. . . That was Stella on the phone [the Scheidts' next door neighbor on their other side]. Well, I don't know what happened. He was shoveling the sidewalk or something, and he had a heart attack and died."

It didn't register on me immediately. I was mentally criticising Carolyn's grammar and syntax. That "he" didn't seem to have an antecedent. She'd mentioned Stella's name, and then she'd said he had had a heart attack, and my first thought was that she meant Stella's husband, Harvey. But she had



been talking about Paul -- or Paul's brother?

I said, "You mean...?"

Carolyn said, "Paul. Paul Scheidt. He's dead. Of a heart attack. At his brother's funeral." There was still that perplexed smile on her face.

The story ends right there, actually.

It doesn't matter what I said after that, and if I've told the story right I won't have to say anything about what I was thinking, or how I felt.

The funeral was the following Friday. I hate funerals, but I attended Paul's. Mary looked like she was 60 years old.

I keep thinking, still, about that horror story by Gary Jennings, in which death comes to everyone else but never to you, not in the alternate universe that develops to contain the living you. For selfish reasons I hope there's no truth to that story, because I have known enough of pain to be able to conceive of death as a benefactor. To go on living through unbearable pain and misery is the most horrible thing I can imagine.

And yet . . . well, it might not be bad if there could be a little truth to Jennings' story.

There was no need for Paul Scheidt to have died just yet. If there's an alternate universe in which he recovers and comes back to his family, I would not object.

I could take some comfort if I could even believe in an alternate universe in which during that clubhouse fire, I had not said to Nicky Scheidt:

"This is all your fault and you're going to pay for it--one way or another!"

+++++

A P O L O G Y

I N T E R V A L

R E T R A C T I O N

This has nothing whatever to do with anything that's come before or anything to follow, but it is something I feel an obligation to do--to set the record straight.

It concerns my good friend, Bob Alvis of Boulder, proprietor of The Green Toad Bookstore, Ltd. (sort of an equivalent of my own SCORPION Books, except that Bob's sales stock consists entirely of duplicates of his personal collection of more than 10,000 volumes). I mentioned Bob some eight months ago. I said he was a book collector but not a completist. Bob cornered me at the Christmas party and said, "I am too a completist; I wish you would correct that statement you made about me."

I said, "Oh, you mean you do try to collect all the works of certain authors?"

Bob grinned and shrugged. "I mean I'm a completist. A real completist. I'm trying to collect everything ever written."

I visited Bob's house in Boulder again just recently, and I could almost believe him. It looked like he'd added at least another thousand books just since the last time I'd seen the collection, but he said it was partly because he'd found more shelf space and unpacked some of the stuff that was in boxes.

Bob and I get along well together. He loves to show his books to people who appreciate them, and I am an unabashed admirer of books, so we complement each other nicely. And he has the most complete collection of books of anybody I know, I hope this corrects a misconception.

MAILBAG

Matter of fact, I had just about decided not to have a lettercol at all this issue, especially as I began to realize that my narrative discourse was going to run about three times longer than I'd anticipated. Anyway I've got an enormous pile of books on my desk waiting to be reviewed somewhere-- and an even enourmouser stack of fanzines under my coffee table waiting for something or other. However . . . some awfully interesting letters did arrive, and at this stage of the production it is a great deal easier to type letters and intersperse a few comments than it would be to do the thinking involved in either book or fanzine reviews.

Therefore:

Sam Long . . . Monty Python's Flying Circus is a surrealistic BBC
Box 4946 comedy program that you Bloody Yanks wouldn't know about.
Patrick AFB Mike Sohn of Glick, in Canada, would -- he's the first person
FL 32925 on this side of the Atlantic that has mentioned the program.
It's screamingly funny and has a devoted following in Britain.
And it's extremely faanish, too.

Bruce Townlee . . . It's rather tough coming in on mid-conversation but
2323 Sibley St. I can inform you on one angle of the BizNiz. Monty Python's
Alexandria, VA Flying Circus. Or as Graham Chapman explains the group's
22311 name: "Really we wanted to call it 'Owl Stretching Time,'
((it being a TV show)) but 'circus' was already in the BBC
contract, so 'circus' it was. Then we got 'flying circus,' but that sounded a
bit twee, so we added 'Monty Python'... 'Monty' because it's a shady sort of
name like a gentleman in Charing Cross Road, and 'Python' because it's a nasty
sort of snake. ((and now you know why Glicksohn likes it))" As you might
have already guessed, it's the name of a British comedy group, like a Limey
Firesign Theatre (if that means anything to you) [as indeed it do]. The
thing Glicksohn quotes is called "Argument Clinic" and there you get to pay
to argue with somebody. They also do stuff like a debate between a Minister of
Housing and a "small patch of brownish liquid, possibly creosote," and then
the minister says, "I'd like to answer that question in two ways: first of
all in my normal voice, and second in a kind of silly, high-pitched whine"
and so on. They do records.

I'm grateful for the enlightenment on the Monty Python point, particularly
so since the mail to Canada, because of a rail strike or some such thing, was
delayed, as a result of which I have not yet heard from Glicksohn himself.
Shall we get on to more serious matters? Looks like it.

Gene Wolfe I don't know what prompted you to send Don-o-Saur 31;
Box 69 but I thank you for it. I am very much down on fandom at
Barrington, IL the moment, and it was a breath of fresh air.
60010 My political opinions are similar to yours, though I
feel that an honest to gosh revolution would be the most
serious error we could make, merely setting up yet another system which would
become corrupt in its turn: after all, the system we have now is the result of
just such a revolution, and while the present British government is far from
perfect, I don't think there can be the slightest doubt that Britain, today,
is better governed than the United States. I feel, in short, that we should
work within the law but with the realization that the present system is corrupt.

I don't believe in shadowy conspiracies; the people who have power are (I
think) by and large those who appear to have it. (In fact, to a large extent,

the appearance of power is power). You mention oil billionaires, for example. The present governor of New York is one, and so is one of the senators from that state--Buckley.

The thing that seems almost impossible for most of us to realize is the simple, awe-inspiring stupidity of the people who run our country. By and large they are lucky men with a talent for politics--which means no more than getting in with the right group and staying there. By the time they are sixty or so and have reached national prominence, we find it hard to comprehend that they hold the power they do, because they are so obviously incompetent to wield it.

To change the subject, the story idea you mention on page 16 has already been treated by R.A. Lafferty--I believe the title is "Interurban Queen." A good idea will, of course, stand any number of workings; but you may want to read his before you try your own.

Wish I could remember what that story idea was... something about cars being outlawed, like pot is today, yeah. At least I have the consolation of knowing that it was a good idea, if Lafferty already used it.

Paul Angel
3220 W. Mississippi
Denver, CO 80219

I, for one, would not object to universal service, especially if it was international, because I do think that we need internationalism more than we need nationalism at this point. I would like compulsory creative service better than compulsory military service. And I'm speaking from a certain 4-F, even if they do bring back the draft. So you see there is still idealism among youth, even if abstract. I have a poster on my wall with Linus on it which says "I love mankind. . . It's people I can't stand!!"

As to your question, "How far should the government go in protecting the individual from himself?" I say that it is not the government's business to protect you from yourself. I am in favor of seatbelts, and wear mine almost all the time, but I think if someone wants to kill themselves by not wearing one, that's their business. Therefore I am against mandatory seatbelt wearing laws and I think they are unconstitutional as well. I don't approve of the interlock systems, either because they make it almost compulsory anyway. I even go so far as to think there should be no requirements for purity or quality of food as long as there was a rigidly honest listing of ingredients on the package, and high quality products were available in all different categories of food. If somebody wants to buy a package of meat that says "This meat contains an average of 27 insect fragments, 14 rodent hairs, and has a 23% chance of infection with salmonella," and costs 10¢ a pound, let them buy it. Of course this stand means that I would legalize gambling, prostitution and all forms of sex between two consenting adults [why just two? that would do away with orgies! So I assume that's just a slip of the typewriter keys], and all drugs except physically addicting ones such as heroin. I would want to legalize those drugs too except that at this point I think practicality should win out over strict interpretation of the doctrine that individuals should not be protected from themselves. The physically addicting drugs have too much danger of creating individuals that are a liability to society.

Good to see Grant Canfield's art in your zine. I'm a cat lover who doesn't get upset when I encounter a cat-hater. I would also try to educate them. I spend much more time trying to educate spider and snake haters, though. Good point, Mike.

I agree with Jackie & Jodie; I don't think the energy crisis will hurt con attendance a bit.

I, too, have come over to the conspiracy theory as a result of reading The War Conspiracy: The Secret Road to The Second Indochina War, by Peter

Dale Scott, which I highly (and I am reasonably high right now) recommend. It has some fascinating information on the interrelationships between the Koumintang army that controls the flow of opium out of the golden triangle, the CIA, the American China Lobby, Chaing Kai-shek's government, Air America, Nixon, etc. It really corresponds with Don D'Amassa's views on different conspiracies overlapping and working at cross purposes.

I share Jefferson's horror of simple majority rule, and thus agree with your views on Constitutional democracy. I'm also a member of the ACLU, as well as ZPG and Common Cause. I intend to join N.O.W. and NORML as soon as I get some money.

It seems that we share many of the same political, social, and philosophical views, which I take to indicate that we are both reasonable, intelligent men. I'm glad that you are expanding your mailing list rather than contracting it, because I think the world should see more of Don C. Thompson. I enjoy your discourses (and yes, that is a good word for them) and I hope to never miss an issue of DON-o-SAUR or any other fanzine you produce.

Paul Angel, for the benefit of the uninformed, was the first OE and almost sole founder of D'APA; and it was Paul who first lured me into fan publishing (via D'APA). Therefore I feel a special sense of gratitude toward Paul, and I'm delighted to have received an actual loc from him.

This next one is the letter that proved crucial in my decision to run a letter col this issue. That plaintive last sentence is what did it.

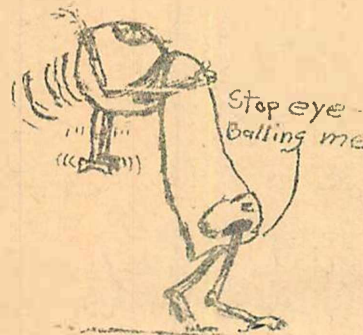
Warren Johnson
131 Harrison St.
Geneva, IL 60134

. . . a Universal Draft. . . sounds interesting on paper, but I agree with your objections: it would put an awful lot of government control over our private lives, and that's something

we hardly need more of in these days of ...no, I'd better not say it. Morally there is a grave fault with it (much more so than with the old military draft) in that people should be given the choice to determine their own lives and occupations as much as possible; government management of such things hasn't come off that well either, in many cases. What a universal draft would basically amount to is totalitarianism; sort of like what exists in the Communist countries, with the difference that this would only be temporary (officially, at least) while theirs is life-long.

[The objection that Warren cites was not mine; it was brought up by one of my students during a class discussion. Personally, I tend to favor the idea of universal service. I honestly believe that one of the things wrong with this country is that we have made too much of a virtue of individualism and selfishness. I would like to see a reversal of that trend--toward altruism and work for the benefit of the larger group (whether national or international)].

...Fine letter from Darrell Schweitzer. Medically, I'd have to agree that pot can be used properly, without ill effect, but I don't reasonably see that a common occurrence. A person who takes drugs does it for a reason, and that reason--to stave off boredom, to get along socially (which Darrell wisely observes is really a facade and a lie)--usually leads to the dosage over and above what is proper and safe. Pot hasn't been studied enough to be legalized. What the people who are against making it legal are trying to do is avoid it becoming entrenched in our culture, as two other dangerous drugs are--alcohol and nicotine. True, use of pot is a large part of some elements of the youth culture, and most teenagers have tried it. That does not mean they are habitual users, let alone addicts, and that's where we (I count myself among them, as if you hadn't guessed) are striving for.



...A certain amount of government protection from "ourselves" is necessary. Which things are justified and which are merely busy-bodiness would have to be determined by the individual cases. It's hard to generalize about anything except the most simple and I try to avoid it as much as possible. The world is filled with variety and contradictions; it would be better if people spent their time deciding the issues on their own merits, rather than thinking up definitions with which to pigeon-hole their problems.

I have a sickening feeling that you'll decide not to have any locs in the next issue...

I consider Warren's second to last paragraph a cop-out. He says that in some areas the government must protect us from ourselves, but then declines to identify any of those areas (except that of drugs). Says he doesn't want to generalize. Okay. I wouldn't ask for generalizations-- but I would like some specifics. Which things, specifically, should government regulate to protect me from myself. Why not cigarettes, for instance? (I suspect more people die of emphysema and lung cancer than of drug abuse).

But what I'd also like to know, from Warren or Darrell or anyone else who opposes the legalization of pot, is why they think such matters should not be left to individual judgment. I am an alcoholic. I do not drink. That is a matter of personal choice, and I am able to take some pride in having made that choice. If alcohol were illegal and I did not drink because of that governmental coercion, how could I have any feeling of virtue on the issue?

George Fergus ...I wouldn't really object to a Universal Service Draft, 3341 W. Cullom Ave. except that it would probably be all screwed up the way Chicago, IL 60618 the Military Draft was. You have aptitude in one area, but are trained in something else, and then your actual job is different from either. And people with clout would get the soft jobs while the rest of us would end up collecting garbage. Admittedly, someone has to collect the garbage, and it would be better to make everyone in the entire country spend a few months at garbage-collecting than have men spend all their lives doing nothing else. But look how difficult it is to promote such an egalitarian system even in China and Cuba. And you can bet that whatever jobs they would lack sufficient volunteers for would be the dirty ones, not the uplifting ones. Although nothing is dirtier than being given a gun and told to shoot at someone because he is shooting at you, under the impression that you are invading his country. Any government that would conscript people for such a purpose obviously shouldn't have the right to draft anybody for anything.

I believe in propagandizing against drugs and other mind-twisters and addictive substances, but not prohibiting their sale or possession. If your warnings and society's can keep a child away from drug experimentation until he sees what it does to his contemporaries, then he can make his own informed choice as to whether it is uplifting or debilitating. If he still turns into a hophead, even after legalization has eliminated the profits that keep pushers pushing, that's just too bad. There are plenty of other people in the world with more sense. Stupid kids will kill themselves by sniffing aerosol sprays or whatnot, even if drugs per se aren't available.. .

Bruce D. Arthurs ...Re the Universal Draft idea. . . You say your students 57th Trans. Co. turned your arguments against you by claiming that you Fort Lee, VA were lacking in idealism because you assumed that there 23801 wouldn't be enough volunteers for the creative service if such a plan were set up.

The thing is, there are such volunteer services set up. I wonder how many of your students ever donated blood? How many ever volunteer to help clean up the damage from a flood or earthquake? How many ever visited a senior citizen

in a nursing home? How many ever bothered stopping along a highway and picking up litter scattered along the route? How many ever bothered to do more than say, "Something should be done...by someone else?"

The programs exist. They may be undersized, underfunded, and overworked, but they exist. And they need people willing to devote some of their time and capabilities (such as money), they need them desperately. And...they don't get what they need.

There aren't enough volunteers. It's as simple as that.

Raymond J. Bowie Jr. ...I like Margaret Thompson's idea of a "universal"
31 Everett Avenue draft. This would (hopefully) enable handicapped
Somerville, MA 02145 people to serve their country, giving them a sense of
pride and accomplishment. I'll admit I'm critical of
the USA but I would never leave it. Any country that can openly be able to
discuss Watergate can't be all bad. Although if impeachment is imminent, then
let it be decided on the basis of legality, not on public opinion.

I'm very unsure about whether drugs are bad or not. Or whether outlawing them will really do all that good. I do think there are better things to do than to mess around with drugs, but as to banning them...It is hard to draw the line as to the government protecting us from ourselves. Protecting us from each other, most assuredly yes. But against ourselves . . .

And a word on the Bill of Rights and the Constitution: weren't they set up to protect and guarantee the rights of minorities? It seems to me that in any democracy, the majority rules, but what about minorities? I certainly don't want to see the majority have top say, not after a Massachusetts Paraplegics survey that came up with the disheartening fact that 65% of those interviewed felt that the handicapped and disabled should only be in institutions or closed workshops. If that percentage is true then I'm scared and we handicapped folks sure have a long way still to go.

Jodie Offutt . . . Darrell Schweitzer is a little off-base in refereneog to
Funny Farm grass as a drug. It isn't; nor is it addictive. That's a
Haldeman, KY pretty common misconception. The Belairs I smoke, I'm addicted
40329 to. There are a surprising number of people in this country
who are on heroin and leading normal, productive lives.

(Just as there are lots of people who drink regularly and do the same). Controlled habits. (I control my cigarette habit by limiting myself to so many cigarettes per day). Unfortunately, we don't know why some of us can reach certain tolerance levels and maintain them--with drugs, including alcohol. We haven't had time to test the long-term effects of pot, of course, but an article in NEWSWEEK a couple of weeks ago reported that steady use had caused temporary sterility and impotence in male users. Funny--there was no report of a similar nature regarding females. Sterility may not bother too many males, but I have an idea that the possibility of being impotent might bring most males up short -- as it were.

John Robinson Darrell Schweitzer's remarks about marijuana reminded
1-101st Street me of three things I'd heard on the subject recently:
Troy, NY 12180 1.) The medicinal efficacy of marijuana in the treatment
of cataracts. Yes, it sometimes works.

2.) Temporary sterility produced by marijuana. The group tested became sterile while on marijuana (how it was administered I do not know.) 90 days after going off marijuana their sterility disappeared. Contrary to scaring people over their lost fecundity, I think this sort of thing should be pursued. After all, modern sterilization techniques are seldom reversible. Wouldn't it be strange if marijuana replaced the other birth planning methods?

- 3.) Loss of short-term memory through continued use of marijuana. An acquaintance, call him a friend of a friend, lost his short-term for about 6 months while a regular user of marijuana. Did the marijuana cause the loss? I don't know. Users shouldn't panic, just keep abreast of the current literature. And take note of your ability to remember what just happened.

Don D'Amassa
19 Angell Dr.
E. Prov., RI
02914

. . . Roger [Sween] says that only individual rights can be "objectively determined." Oh? How can you objectively determine individual rights? If Roger could show me an incontrovertible, objective solution to such problems of individual rights as abortion, drug use, pornography, and homosexuality, I might be able to accept his statement. But the reason that these issues are so controversial is that they are totally subjective, because they depend on moral and ethical judgments based on philosophy, and the postulates in each case are unprovable.

...I share your horror of true majority rule. There was a study not too long ago (covered on 60 MINUTES, I think) in which it was demonstrated that people would obey authority figures and administer pain to others even when they believed they may have killed the other. There was an overwhelming majority of people who would not stand up to the authority figure. The conclusion of the researchers was that, if the U.S. set up concentration camps along Nazi lines, they wouldn't even have to strain themselves to find people willing to administer them.

I think the single largest flaw in this country, and the world, is that most people just don't have the courage to accept their own personal freedom. They don't want to make their own decisions. The entire basis of religion is a strong authoritarian figure to tell people what they should and should not do. When I see people saying they want pornography outlawed because it is bad for my moral fiber, I know damn well that's not what they really mean. They're afraid that they may have to decide these things for themselves some time, and they're terrified of that possibility. There's a basic immaturity about most people with regard to personal freedom that disturbs me. And their decision that no one else should have these freedoms either frightens me...

Darrell Schweitzer has a major flaw in his arguments against drugs. He points out that some people hide their problems with drugs, but eventually have to face them anyway. Perfectly true, but I don't see where that is an argument against drugs. Some people hide their problems in their hobbies for a time. By his reasoning, that would be an argument against hobbies...

C. William George
Editor/Publisher
AGAINST THE WALL
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...I must jump into the fray regarding Roger Sween's letter on politics in Donny No. 31.

Just so I don't offend anyone with what may be interpreted as a personal attack, let me just spell out my own philosophy and let the chips fall where they may.

All interpersonal relationships should be voluntary, i.e., freely-contracted, without initiation of force or threat of force (fraud being included here also as a form of force). The reason for this is that to coerce a person into doing what he or she doesn't want to is to go against his or her nature.

Any government formed to protect individual rights of life, liberty and property must also be freely-contracted (that leaves out taxes, unless they are voluntary). Such a government would be limited to the functions of protecting individual rights and providing a system of justice for when these rights are violated.

Now, here is where those who agree with the broad philosophy enunciated in the paragraphs above split into the anarchist (no government) and the

minarchist (limited government) camps. The former argue that protection and justice can be provided by competing firms in a free market while the latter say a government, financed voluntarily, must be formed to provide these services.

I haven't made up my own mind either way because the argument is irrelevant to existing reality. I say that government must be drastically shrunk first to a level where the argument becomes relevant...

Bob Vardeman
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Albuquerque, NM
87112

...Who runs the country? I'd be inclined to say neither the oil billionaires nor the politicians. The real culprits are the bureaucrats who stay in their little cubby holes year after year, regardless of who's in office.

The entire government is like a dinosaur. It takes years for things to filter down from the top elected officials...And where does it have to filter through and be interpreted? The little man, the bureaucrat who is out to build his own personal empire. That is where the government is run. Those are the people running the country. Assassination merely decapitates the dinosaur. It would take years for the body to die and with our system, a new head would grow before the body could die.

Tackett mentions the invasion of privacy campaign the ACLU is pushing here in NM. Right on! I say. I would also like to sue the ACLU for hypocrisy... They decry the invasion of personal privacy, the use of that awful nasty terrible computer, snooping by the government, etc. I get a letter from their other hand asking me to help impeach Nixon. I use different versions of my name in different places. They had to get my name from either the Motor Vehicle Dept or the University of NM. Which means they paid about 1¢ for my name and address which was then spit out on a computer printout. Seems like it is okay for them to use the very tactics they decry to impeach Nixon (a worthy cause, granted), but it is Evil and Threatening for the government to do the same. Such is the big lie technique, the ends justifies the means philosophy, and the "we're only doing it for your own good" school of thinking. I find it as offensive for the ACLU to do this as for the AAA or Brother Love's Church of the Wayward Shepherd or anyone else. . .

It had never occurred to me that the time-honored practice of buying, selling and trading mailing lists might somehow constitute invasion of privacy, and I'm damned if I can see yet how it does. Half of my mail on any given day consists of unsolicited appeals for funds (from a wide range of worthy and unworthy causes) and of invitations to subscribe to a wide variety of magazines. I throw a lot of such junk mail in the wastebasket without even opening it. As far as I can tell, none of those causes or magazines knows anything about me except my address and perhaps my general political persuasion. But none of them tries to blackmail me or coerce me.

To change the subject entirely -- I sent a copy of DOS 31 to Richard S. Shaver, having gotten his address from TITLE. Shaver, who used to be famous (or something) for his controversial "Shaver Mystery" stories in Ray Palmer's Amazing and Fantastic Adventures in the 1940s, and who now runs a rock shop in Summit, Ark., sent a loc, including with it some pictures of rocks. In some of the pictures I can make out a man's face (but it's like seeing a face in the clouds). I don't know if that's what I'm supposed to see or not. (I noticed that in TAC 9, Richard Geis gives a page or so to excerpts from letters Shaver has written him; is there a Shaver revival going on?) Here are some excerpts from the letter he sent me:

...I mainly write for these publications [fanzines, presumably] from a sense of duty...not because I love your quaint little personalities. The real

reason is I try to rescue the rock books of antiquity (which litter our landscape disguised as an excrescence called "mere cobbles", .nasty old stones, etc.

Trouble with that is, editors like unto your noble self... cannot get it thru them that I ..even tho well known as a spacer-opera creator once upon a time..consider reality a far more provocative and exciting place in which to live. Rock books are to me vastly more exciting and important than the ditherings and maunderings of other and younger authors now waving their puny newborn arms on the horizons of stf.

I despise them, mainly because I never got round to reading them and saying oh and ah. I despise them just because they can never get round to understanding that rock books are more important than mere fantastic prose cunningly contrived to waste the kids time and minds which is in fact just another form of LSD put out in paper back.

...Rock books . . . contain pictorials and meanings of symbolic posturing tiny figures like sign talk and like Mayan glyphs and like the glyphs on the Sun Gate in Tiahuanaco. . . look oncet

But they also contain quite readable script which with a little work can be deciphered even by you and yourn

So dont tell me you cant be bothered with rock books as you are the now generation and ancient things are not relevant..(relevant is an avant garde word used to repel all things not understood)

...Since it is really always NOW dont tell me whats relevant because there is no such thing as TIME is a fact of life

(Time is a dastardly invention designed to make young men old before and all that . . . it does not really exist tic toc is a tool like same as a rule..it is really always now)

=====
AHF: John Robinson, Dave Szurek, David Barnett, Ann Chamberlain, Sheryl Birkhead, Mike Bracken, and Gil Gaier

ART CREDITS: Cover by Jim Hyatt; also pages 7 and 15. David Barnett, 4,6,12.
Gail Barton, pages 9 and 10
=====

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