

ASPECT

January 1972

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COVER PHOTO: "Rocker, Abandoned Hotel" Roger Camp

VOLUME VI

NUMBER 35

January, 1972: ASPECT, issued monthly by an editorial board whose members are: Edward J. Hogan, Frances Tsu-Huai Yuan, and Deborah Becker. General Editor & Publisher: Edward J. Hogan/66 Rogers Avenue, Somerville, Mass. 02144...SUBSCRIPTION RATES: \$5 Yr./ \$3 ½ Yr./50 cents copy (foreign rates: \$8, \$4.50)...ADVERTISING RATES: 2 cents/word. Readers' ARTICLES, POETRY, SHORT STORIES, REVIEWS, INTERVIEWS, ARTWORK, DRAMA, CARTOONS, HUMOR, PHOTOGRAPHS, ILLUSTRATIONS, and LETTERS are WELCOME. Submissions for publication may be sent to the above address or to 509 Park Drive (Apt. 6), Boston, Mass. 02215. If you have done it, and you like it, send it to ASPECT. ASPECT does NOT have an editorial policy for content. An exchange of views is encouraged.

ASPECT is listed in the 1971-72 DIRECTORY OF LITTLE MAGAZINES, SMALL PRESSES & UNDERGROUND NEWSPAPERS, and is a member of The Committee of Small Magazine Editors & Publishers (COSMEP).

CONFRONTATION BY TELEPHONE: A DIARY

Ellen Link

May 16, 1968

A wildly passionate and self-revealing day. I am glad that it all happened, but quite exhausted.

Mr. Green has been having his problems with the Welfare Department. They send his check late and even then it's less than it's supposed to be. He is an intelligent and thoughtful man, and has been through a lot. He knows they are wrong and he is right, but it's hard nevertheless and very frustrating. Today Green hit a brick wall when he asked the caseworker to explain why he didn't get more money. He came to me for help and I sensed that I would soon be involved in a struggle.

First I checked over the calculations I had done in figuring out how much he ought to get. Two checks per month: multiply the weekly expense times 2 1/6 weeks. Twenty dollars rent per week comes to \$43.33 semi-monthly. Girding myself to fight pettiness on its own terms, I called and asked to speak to the unit supervisor. A young male voice called out "Mrs. Lepo --- ". She was on another line, would I please wait. The male voice said, "I'm going to switch you onto 'hold' - don't panic". I relaxed a little. At least this guy was human. Ten minutes later - while Green and I sat looking at each other nervously - the male voice clicked on again. He checked to see if I had stuck it out, then he called Mrs. Lepo once again. A few seconds a whiny hellooooo signaled the appearance of Mrs. Lepo, archetypal Welfare Department bitch. I think I may have known right from the start how things would wind up.

I tried to begin calmly, stating the problem clearly. Mr. Green was my client, he had received his check, it was considerably less than he deserved. Then the individual items. She countered my first two points with true usurer's finesse - not directly but just relevant enough to leave me defenseless. The next point was clearer in my mind: Green had not received any allowance for rent. It seems

he pays for food and rent \$35 per week to his mother with whom he lives along with his two daughters and one granddaughter (at 37 he is a grandfather). The Welfare Department considers the daughter with a child as a separate case. The supervisor launched into an incredible barrage of doubletalk about expenses - the pre-added family allowance divided in half, rent included, mainly food - and on and on and on. I called the bluff and said \$20 per week for rent. She capitulated grumpily. Next I stated \$2.50 semi-monthly for a telephone. The supervisor now openly attacked: "Why does he need it?" "For his job." "Why can't he pay for it on his own? We've only budgeted \$17 as his income and he has all that exempt income (because he is in an OEO training program, part of his income is exempted from Welfare calculations) ---". At this point my façade collapsed. "That's not the point," I shouted, "the point is that the law states that the Welfare Department pays \$2.50 semi-monthly for a phone for clients who need it. This is his legal right." "But I can't just give him a telephone" "It's not yours to give!!" Silence. I am shaking by now. The battle lines are drawn. After a few seconds I begin again. "Shall we go on to the next item? \$1.08 for daughter's transportation to school; \$8.71 for daughter's lunches." I ask when will he get his emergency check? She refuses to be defeated. "He just got a check today," she rages, "can't he wait?" "He doesn't want to wait - that money is rightfully his!" I am beginning to lose control altogether. She takes advantage of my weakness: "It will take days to process this, can't he live on the other check?" I cannot continue because of emotion and anger; I say "O.K., a couple of days," and try to sound ominous. The conversation is over. She has silently assented to about \$30 or so. Green really deserves even more, probably, but my emotion and lack of expertise gave the stupid bitch Mrs. Lepo an advantage. She is no doubt used to this kind of confrontation, and has probably forgotten about it minutes after she hung up the phone.

After I hung up, I was still shaking and very agitated. Green and I looked at each other and he said, "I didn't know you had it in you." That made me feel good; I almost cried for a second. I had never really known I had it in me either. Green laughed and said I should take a

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shot of Scotch. I stood up and began pacing around the room. Floria Jones, who was in the room at the time, smiled incredulously at me and shook her head. "I've never seen you like that before - you were so angry - you don't usually get mad."

Although I remained shaken for the rest of the day, I felt strangely liberated and open. I could have made magnificent speeches against injustice without thinking twice. Suddenly I had new insights and felt emotions clearly that had been basically intellectual convictions before. I felt almost high, and went around talking and listening to people with a new sincerity. Later I went over to Green and talked it over with him again. I asked him if he went through these feelings all the time. He nodded resolutely, but with a shade of protest and defiance. "I don't know if I could take it", I told him, "and I have an incredible amount of respect for anyone who can go through that and still get himself together." It was a compliment to Green who is quietly and effectively pulling together the pieces of his life right now. We talked more - about the complex evils of the system - about what the caseworker had to take from above - about why the supervisor got satisfaction out of being a bitch - about the difficulties in knowing where to place the blame. Finally someone interrupted our conversation and Green again told me to have some Scotch as he left the room.

I left for home still feeling intensely emotional and open. I stopped at the fish market and went in to buy supper. A couple of penny-pinching, nagging, middle-class women were giving the guy in the market a hard time just when a crowd of people were standing in the store. I watched him get angry and try to control himself. When he came over to wait on me, I told him my order, then suddenly leaned over to him and said, "Why don't you just tell them to go fuck themselves." He looked surprised, then laughed and said, "Sometimes it helps to do just that."

May 23

A week has passed and Green hasn't gotten a check. We filed a request for a Fair Hearing, but it will be at least weeks before anything happens on that. What is to be done?

IN BETH ISRAEL MENTAL HOSPITAL

Freddy
Should be loving his wife and
Playing with his 2 small children
But Freddy
Thought of Nam again and
The women and children he was ordered to
Shoot down in a ditch
Yes
Freddy is back in the mental ward
The chattering of little yellow people
Knotting
Up his mind

--Fritz Hamilton

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EULOGY

Funny
Jack's Funeral Parlour is jumpin'
More damn corpses than people in
This here small town, Maine
And
I didn't think nobody ever died in Maine
I
Just thought they calcified from
All that low-powered speedin' around
And then
Got put on cement horses in the square
Well
The funeral parlour belies all that
Who said
What never lived can
Never die
?

--Fritz Hamilton

JAZZ NOTES

Hot

The trumpet takes off like a skyrocket,
Trailing explosive rhythms.

Blue

Woodwinds wail
Their eloquence of grief.

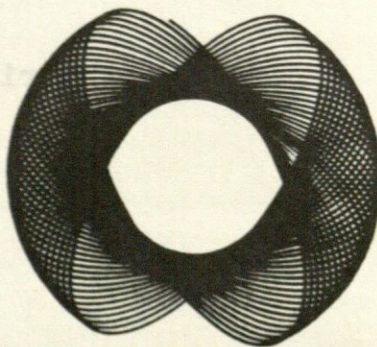
Boogie

The lilt, not in the tune,
Is in the beat.

Cool

Music goes easy but crisp.
It doesn't tell. It suggests.

--James Hagood



LATA

A PUBLIC DUNKING
OF DONUTS

Pardon me,
would it make you
insecure if I
dunked my donut?

would you mind if
I take that pin
from your dress?
for
I am a mad poet
who picks
his teeth
for words
like crows
peck at
old carcasses.

'beg your pardon,
may I have
a sleeve of your blouse
to wipe my beard?

--Kendall Wilt



• R i c h

a r d L a t t a •

my words like grassy
fields to rest your
weary feet on,
to lay your tired body
on,
to live your seconds
of resting with me on
the fields of my thoughts
grown for you to chew
on and hold in your mouth
for awhile

and then for
you to go on.

ON VIEWING BUDDHA IN THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM

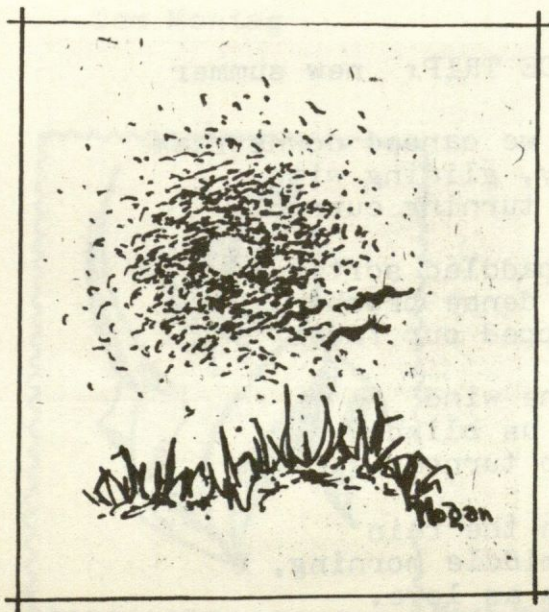
Ommmm, cool Buddha,
how relaxing you are!
Your legs in lotus position
as you sit upon the jewel of flower.
Your right hand telling me
"Be not afraid."
Your left hand giving me the universe,
sly fox!
I will spend this short hour with you.
Ah, you seem to wink at me.
I will then tickle your cozy toes,
tease you out of Nirvana.
Ommmm, holy, wise one.

GHAMDARVA!

--Joan McNerney

What is the answer? What is the question? How do we commit ourselves to a cause which is not ourselves, but others, rather, in the Yoga of existence. How do we move forward--selfless--make a red rose on a green, green stem, into the blue sky? I suppose it takes nerve, that jump from one to two, from foundation to stepping stone, which is the only source of progress. Footless, feet held high, we move, vicariously, into existence which is anything but vicarious. Because it is in the mirror that we see our face. It is in the eye of another that we see our eye. And it is only by learning that, by learning that others feel, and live, and breathe, can we come to life, know the animal that is home.

- Eric Cashen



WINTER WIND

what song so sad
as winter wind
wheeling the corner
of this old house,

full on the horn.
what song we had
in summer, breezes
light as rain

brushing up against us
& begging our pardon.
but winter wind
calls arthritic men

to delicate dancing
in snow to their knees.

--Tom Montag

CANOE TRIP: new summer

1. we canoed downstream
only, gliding with
the turning current.

we paddled softly.
the dense brush
slapped our faces

& the wind
led us blindly
into turns.

then the rain
in middle morning,
warm as love.

we took cover
& time to rest.
we could hear

warm rain
sounding
on the river.

2. beneath leaning trees
we waited. rain came
slow as freight trains
grumbling lowly. soft
rain came & we waited.

3. a fresh sun. this is
summer. clouds swept
away like dirt. birds
singing dry themselves.
we push off, to head
downstream. we discover
a new summer: secret
perhaps to the river.

--Tom Montag



Meredy Mullen

He should have set the table.
He should have closed the door.
He should have been as able
as he was before
she died
to cope by keeping busy
with the mechanics of life.
Why be defeated by the death of a wife?

The water, as her hair did,
flowed along the ground,
and the falling pail made no sound;
nor did she when she hit the ground.

His noise was irrational.
His cries omnipotent,
engaging God, it seemed to them,
in errant argument.

The water made her dress wet.
The sun continued on.
A butterfly landed
where she would have gone
had she lived to water flowers
that bloom still
above where she is buried on a distant hill
he can look at
and does in moon-lit rage,
the neighbors indulge,
on account of his age.

--John D. Dolan

THE VANQUISHED

The vanquished sit
Too proud to be ashamed, too ashamed to be proud,
Too broken to be anything
Their eyes plead for a sign of mercy
But find only scorn

Once their enthusiasm was a fever
And they struggled with joy
They were right - how could they lose?

Poor, stupid people!
They knew not the brutal power of their enemy

Now they sit
Crushed, tired, hopeless
With nothing to do but wait

--Anthony P. Nasta

I.F. STONE SLOWS DOWN

Edward J. Hogan

After nearly two decades, I.F. STONE'S WEEKLY (recently BI-WEEKLY) has stopped publishing. I was a regular reader of this 4-page political tour de force for only a little more than a year, but I quickly came to look forward to each issue, knowing I could always finish it, no matter how occupied I was.

What Stone covered in those few pages was remarkable, as was the huge variety and depth of reading that contributed to each edition. The BOSTON GLOBE said of him (Dec. 7, 1971), "I.F. STONE'S BI-WEEKLY has been packing more hard and important news into its four pages than many a newspaper carries on 20 times that many pages every day in the week."

Stone summarized his political beliefs in the final issue as follows: "Politically I believe there cannot be a good society without freedom of criticism; the greatest task of our time is to find a synthesis of socialism and freedom." He was a radical-liberal decades before the term came into usage. His profound humanism is reflected in everything he writes. Out of the abundant documentation which was the framework of each issue emerged a nearly unflagging idealism that challenged the nation's leaders to do better for their own people than leave 25 million below the poverty line, and better for the people of the world than to attempt to make them mere vehicles for the insurance of exaggerated U.S. security.

We can be thankful that although I.F. Stone is (probably) wisely slowing down at the age of 64, we will still be able to read him in the NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS, where he has become a contributing editor.

I have seen no better words to close with than those of U Thant, outgoing U.N. Secretary General: "During 19 years of independent reporting and publishing, you have

set a pattern of objectivity and courage, and have shown great steadfastness in the cause of peace and justice."

SMALL PRESSES/Received * * * * *

SHIP BOUND FOR WHERE, by Kent Chamberlain. Thom Henricks Associates, P.O. Box 1024, Birmingham, AL 35201. 24 pages. Price: inquire.

A book of poems, many with imagery of the sea and of voyages. Following is the title poem.

Ship Bound for Where,
Bright is your
Going Over the Mast-
-Scooping
Horizons of our
Sight.

One Day I shall Board
that
Same
Vessel, Proceed Beyond the
Pillars of Hercules
or
Science, in
Search of Pearly Gates,
and
Not
Have to Bear the Woes of
Departing,
Tolerate
Any Longer, the In-
- Firmities of our
Savage,
Fragile Clime!

Ship Bound for that Where
Without
Trace,

When is your
Coming, that
Fitful Twilight of our
Daring
Poems?