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The Asphalt Conservationist, or, Perpetual Bruce

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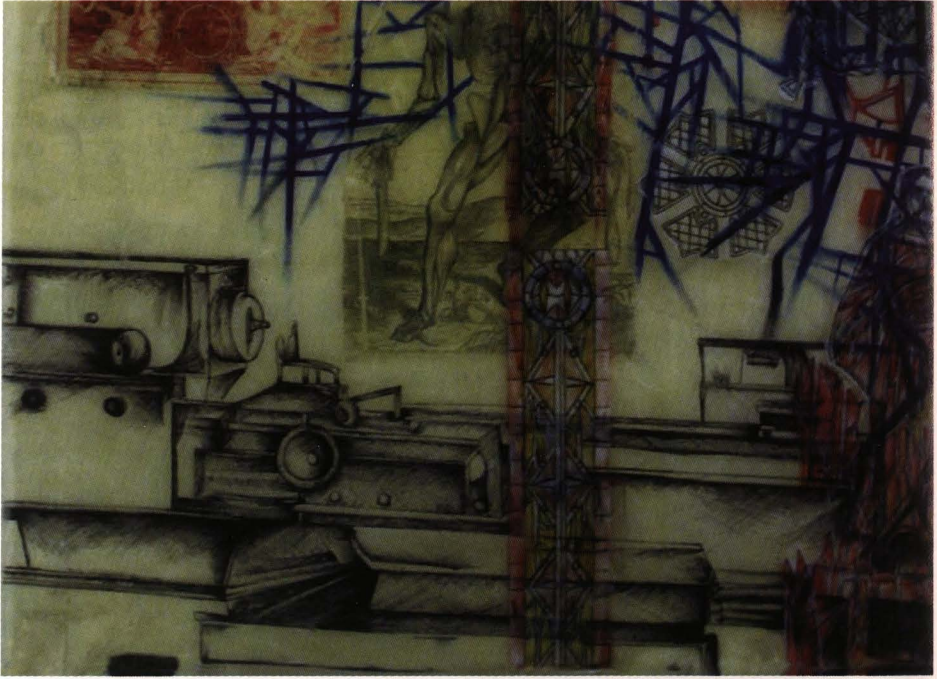


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*The Asphalt Conservationist;
or, Perpetual Bruce*

The Asphalt Conservationist

When people call me on the telephone to ask what I am doing I usually say, 'Dealing drugs to minors in order to finance the development of my hovercraft, Bruce McCandless II.' Sometimes, I say, 'Working on Bruce McCandless II, my hovercraft.' But there are also times when my response is, 'Speaking in front of the city council, so that once I get Bruce McCandless II, my hovercraft, up and running, it will be legal to hover above the roads of Tucson, Arizona.'

Usually they laugh, because they don't believe that I am completely serious when I make statements such as those listed above. I have a passion for the conservation of our asphalt environments, and I think the development of legal alternatives to automobiles and other friction-based modes of locomotion, such as biking and walking, is the best way that I can contribute to preserving our asphalt, cement, and concrete for future generations.

Alexei

Two months ago, I sold some drugs to a minor named Alexei Leonov. He had a leather jacket, tight jeans, bad hair, and worse acne. His mother and father are former Soviet Republicans and civil engineers. They began to regret the utilitarian spaces they'd built in the former Soviet Republic, mono-

liths of usefulness and success, giant compressed piles of the dirt people used to push around alleys. They defected in the 1980s, and applied their experience to press semi-urban municipal governments to replace abandoned parking lots with public parks.

We met again at the chapter meeting in the church basement. We ate pizza and chips and drank soda from plastic cups. We discussed the future of the movement. The four of us were curled up in chairs meant for pre-first communioners, watching the steamroller episode of *Modern Marvels*. The lights were off and Alexei slipped me blueprints of his parents' projects, along with a communiqué proclaiming his revolt against their reactionary stand.

Perpetual Bruce

Sparrows chirp outside Bruce McCandless II's window. He lives on a golf course. He rises from bed, and slides open his screen door. 'Shut the hell up, I'm trying to sleep!' Sparrows listen when Bruce McCandless II gives them advice. His fearless astronautical deeds are beyond respectable and command a peculiar deference from the Animal Kingdom.

The Incident

We attended the demolition of a foreclosed-upon strip mall. Its former owner had gone bankrupt and the land was transferred back to the city. A park, billed as 'semi-urban renewal,' was destined to inhabit the cleared lot. Renewal? Another bourgeois half-truth. We thought it might be nice to preserve the structure and its accoutrements as a museum of human possibility. Or maybe a mausoleum. Our plans were not discussed. The establishment thinks that they know what they want in their backyards.

The bulldozers started bulldozing, the workers started working, Alexei and I started picketing. The police started policing. Things got ugly.

The Aftermath

Now Bruce McCandless II, my hovercraft, rots in the garage. Alexei Leonov foments revolution with a girl in the back of a 1989 Ford Taurus. His parents have migrated to British Columbia to begin efforts at reforestation of stripped logging areas. I sit in county jail, bloody and bruised, charged with civil disorder, trespassing, and contributing to the delinquency of a minor. I am helpless to protect the semi-urban vistas I so love.

I am in the holding cell, dreaming of Thoreau, when I receive the news. Bail! Thanks, Bruce.

Perpetual Bruce

Bruce McCandless II normally picks me up at the door of the county jail in an F-16 which he negotiated as part of his pension from NASA. The offi-

cers and others on the sprawling steps stare vacantly, because that is the only manner in which they have learned to stare. Does it seem odd at all to them that the venerable Bruce McCandless II has graced them with his presence? Of course it does not. Bruce is only the first man to ever walk in space untethered to any orbiting entity other than his own body. And they stand—jaws agape, gawking, bovine—forgetting each subsequent moment like the sheep that they are. Although, if they were, in actuality, sheep, they would be more peculiarly deferential towards Bruce McCandless II.

‘These professed aestheticians want to remove all possible venues for human ingenuity and progress from our habitat. We are ceding centuries of evolution to the bleak uncertainties of nature. It’s sheer horror. It’s the apocalypse of human evolution, we’re eating ourselves alive. What will our grandchildren think?’

‘Gee, Bruce, I couldn’t begin to guess.’

Today must be somehow special, though, because Bruce arrives in his gold 1987 5.7L V8 Camaro I-ROC Z with Tuned Port injection, leather interior, tape deck, chrome-rimmed side-view mirrors, and terrible smell like asphalt being mixed during low tide, probably with the intent of replacing a certain number of square meters of endangered sand dunes with a parking lot of a certain capacity. Many people hold their noses and/or vomit as we drive past them back to Bruce’s air traffic control tower overlooking the links. I wonder what the occasion is.

Alexei

We pick up Alexei, loitering on a street corner. He would be lost if we did not buy him fourteen-dollar lunches and spruce up his jacket with Liquid Leather, as seen on TV. Though his technical ability is quite fair, his artistry is not altogether unprecedented. Recently, he has abandoned the *joie de vivre* of his earlier work in favor of an unswerving commitment to the movement. The critics, however, have not been impressed.

The Occasion

‘Say it ain’t so, Bruce. Don’t let me down.’

‘After all, I am approaching that time in my life when my invincibility boosters will begin to wear off. I have experienced a security breach. The tissues encapsulating my ego, susceptible to illness due to prolonged exposure to the human condition, have contracted a parasite capable of reproducing at exponential rates. And, of course, if this parasite is allowed to thrive, it may seek another host after consuming my own corporeal tissues entirely. Therefore, I must sacrifice my ego—as it is well-understood that without a functioning organic capsule, it shall simply cease to be in its present state—

for the good of mankind.'

'That makes perfect sense.'

'Russian for yes.'

Questions

Where would the movement be without the munificence of our benefactor, Bruce McCandless II? His fearlessness? His leadership? We would be unmoored without him as our guiding light, naked without his arms around us. It cannot be true. But, alas, the end-time is nigh.

The Anxiety of Not-Knowing

I have had difficulty working on Bruce McCandless II, my hovercraft, due to the persistent tears in my eyes, the anxiety of not-knowing that steals one's concentration. At the meeting, everyone agrees that the pizza and the chips simply do not taste as good as they did before we heard the news. The plastic cups seem to have all cracked and, out of my distraction, I unknowingly purchased only diet sodas. Lines of static destabilize the videos of Abrams tanks, serious machines extolled by a serious narrator. No one cares enough to hit the tracking button. The vehicles of war roll on, echoed, as always, by the scars they leave in the desert.

His Fearlessness and His Leadership

'Do you see that man down there?'

'No, which man?'

'No, over there.... He is not alone.'

'Ohhhh, yeah! The guy setting up in the 14th fairway?'

'Yes, him. I suspect him of replacing my Geritol with Alka-Seltzer.'

'What?'

'Yes, young one. It is true. I was in the clubhouse last weekend, sharing a virgin daiquiri and a vitamin at pill time with *that man*, a former companion, nay, *bosom buddy* of mine. You know, a trusted acquaintance with whom to pass time around the club.

'It is possible that, unwisely, I may have compromised myself to his guiles by leaving my pill cup on the bar-top while I relieved myself in the bathroom. I'm going more and more often, you know. It's strange, like, I don't recall intaking very copious quantities of liquid at all, yet I still get that feeling, you know, like, when you really have to go. And then I get there, and there's nothing. Nothing at all. Very, very odd; extremely strange sensation, situation, experience. Getting old, that is, of course.

'But that's not the point. The point is that I returned and finished my drink, enjoying a pleasant, albeit brief conversation about something inconse-

quential with this *supposed* friend of mine. Then, subsequent to my return to the tower, I took note of an immense pressure in the vicinity of my stomach cavity. I then proceeded to my own bathroom, leant over the pot, and effervesced profusely from the mouth. Also, I'm nearly positive that he is the one behind the altered jello schedule. Orange on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, lemon on Tuesdays and Thursdays. We get pudding on the weekends. Saturdays are my favorite—Hee-hee!—Vanilla! Yum!

'But honestly, the man claims never to have enjoyed red jello. In fact, he hates the stuff. Do you believe that? The man *hates* red jello! Come on, who really doesn't like red jello? Of course, he is well aware that red is my flavor of choice, and that any sane person would agree with me. And now, orange and lemon every day of the week? Tell me that this does not veritably ring, nay, peal with the tocsins of wrongdoing, conspiracy, shameful, deceitful, underhanded insanity. I say this with surety! I am certain of it! He is most definitely using unfair methods to influence the weekly jello schedule in his own favor, while at the same time tilting the balance of power away from me, who he has always viewed as an adversary, despite the lustrous, varnished surface of our supposed friendship! O, what cunning! What deceit! What lunacy!

'Rewrite the history books, my young comrade! Revise the happy ending! I have endured countless hours of pain, suffering, worry while I was pretending—Yes! All this time I have been pretending!—just like that smarmy, seemingly-insouciant-yet-power-tripping ego-maniac!—to enjoy a dessert which I find, quite frankly, detestable! Why? Because of one man's greed and his willingness to connive, conspire, sans any regard for human morality or decency! Frank Leibowitz, *j'accuse!*'

Bruce points to the man on the 14th fairway, now in mid-backswing. An armed phalanx of squirrels emerges, camouflaged, from a stand of trees. They march stolidly down the rolling, sun-drenched links.

Hope

'There is, my young friend, one possible solution to our problem... Are you familiar with a popular work by Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, known as *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus*? Well, this is not completely dissimilar to that.'

Wide-eyed and nervous I pace my living room in the shadowy folds of the gloaming. Strung out on caffeine and nearly paralyzed by long hours of deliberation, I lash out at my own indecision, scribbling profanities in canned cheese on my otherwise-blank walls, cursing myself for not owning more decorative, extraneous or shatterable objects. Sighing, I sprawl on the carpet,

spread-eagle, face up. In a blinding flash of insight, my values are prioritized.

Perpetuating Bruce

During his space-walk, Bruce had isolated a genetic marker signifying the chemical presence of an ego-forming catalyst, present in all odors of somatic origin. It is merely a matter of time and the performance of the right tests before the process of ego-production and transfer can be fully understood. The best estimates of those in the movement are that soon, soon, soon, the nouveau-riche will be cruising the vanishing dunes of the Arizona desert in tricked-out hovercrafts and custom-engineered selves. The world will be a different place.

A Critic

'Frankly,' remarked one local Arts section reviewer, 'the work [of Leonov] lacks any sense of consistency. A mish-mashed jumble [of] clashing... hackneyed ideas [and philosophical, psychological, existential, and holistic methods of rejuvenation] which do not contain [within themselves]... the possibility of deriving any recognizable or coherent system of understanding. [Unacceptable] as a gallery...exhibit. [I] demand that the [art director] of [{the particular gallery which displayed} this utterly common waste of space {It was not the _____ Gallery}] to [reimburse] me for [my suffering] ... with the sacrifice of a single [primary] limb and/or [an acceptable dry weight of] his/her... more [minor extremities].'

The Movement Thrusts Ever-Forward

The decision has been made. The plan has been discussed. A flurry of action—efficient, sequentially-thinking, each successive task at hand absorbs our attention. We move seamlessly from one accomplished objective to the next. The plan has been discussed. Tasks have been delegated in accordance with assessments of prior performance. We are the pistons of a well-designed engine. We have been properly aligned. We work in unison, pressed into service by a certain foot on a certain accelerator; we force a certain volatile substance into a chamber containing a certain degree of pressure. We cause combustion to occur in accordance with an observable pattern. We move forward. Our collective thrum will echo on through future emptinesses of space and time.

The movement is optimistic about our upcoming 'National *Pave Your Lawn*' campaign. We debate the appropriateness of bumper stickers as promotional material. Local chapters have seen a twelve percent increase in membership since the wire services reported on 'The Incident.'



I've sold seven packets of cocaine to junior high-schoolers this week. My contact smokes cigarettes in the diner by the highway. The curtains and walls and waitresses are dingy and faded and yellowed. The steel of the kitchen, revealed for a few seconds each time the waitress walks through the swinging doors, however, remains stainless, as always. I am obliged with 'good deals' on certain equipment vital to the movement—black nail polish, electrical tape, crochet hooks—distributed out of this dour, deep-wrinkled man's rusting Cadillac,

resting at the limits of the parking lot, on the edge of the encroaching desert.

Another Critic

Another critic, though this cannot be confirmed, alleges that he 'felt deeply moved, hurt, inspired' by 'the waste solids which [Leonov] has managed to solder together here.' The reaction which the critic claims to have had was that, '[T]he American arts scene [will continue] to drift into [unmoored oblivion] until... [the thinkers and artists of our time band together behind a single unifying idea or theory and replace the world in which we find ourselves with an altogether new, different, custom-fitted world originating from the wellsprings of our own repression and angst and creative, new-thinking young minds]... The work of Levi-Strauss is brought to mind. Or maybe Lacan. I'm not really sure which, I've never read either.'

A Promise Not to Terrorize the Countryside

Bruce McCandless II, my hovercraft, has been disemboweled like a can-

taloupe, and sits in my garage. Alexei Leonov's immobile body has been placed, supine, inside of its corpse, which has been reanimated as an ego-transfer mechanism. One red and one black end of a jumper cable have been connected to his bare posterior, the other ends fixed to a contact point on the former Bruce McCandless II, hovercraft. A similar jumper cable is attached to the underarms of Bruce McCandless II, my hoverlord.

I throw a large red switch. Sparks illuminate pale flesh. The scent of smoldering hair is oppressive, invasive, all-encompassing. Can its presence be evaded? I repair through the breezeway, exiting into a field of stars.

An Excerpt from a Letter Never Received

'...[W]e face a considerable challenge from the beaver community, however. They refuse to return to the wilds which we have built for them. Their natural habitat has been reproduced *in toto*, yet they entrench themselves in the shoddy Government Housing Community for those Temporarily Displaced by Reconstructive Actions, or the 'GHCTDRA,' as we've playfully nicknamed it. The pavement of their driveways and walks is cheap amalgam and comes up at the edge, where it meets the sand and sparse grass of their postage stamp yards. The foundations are little more than carefully stacked cinder blocks. Albeit the washing machines are much nicer than they are probably used to, and the basketball hoops are regulation height... Needless to say, we are feeling quite a lack of agency in this situation... [I]f only there were some way to make everything the way that we want it...'

Perpetual Bruce; or, the Asphalt Conservationist

Bruce and I. I and Bruce. We romp through industrial complexes and strip mall parking lots, gleefully basking in existence. We skip down sand-rimmed roads, collecting broken chunks of tarmac as samples to be preserved. We wear suits and meet with reps from satellite chapters, city councillors, sometimes prominent business interests. We discuss the direction of the movement. We make plans. We change into T-shirts displaying the new logo. I tinker about the garage as Bruce hurls bucketfuls of differently colored gravel at a canvas covered in plaster-of-Paris.

— Ben Brezner