

Gustatory in Nature



“Vertumnus” Giuseppe Arcimboldo, 1590

***Ah!
Breezy days
to braise
a chewy maze
eschewing mayonnaise,
si vous plais.***

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Notes from the Lake #16

Rolling in with the tide were eggs: a holiday on the waves—not large, not gathered in a wooden box—ducking under potato leaves.

In our shadows washes up a chicken, salt-wet, in rural sand, in two mile coast, as everybody gets ready to eat beneath the thatched roof where cats and dogs sleep.

On the beach, huddled over the eggs—the gift—the sun branded above us, while all eat as one fluttering tongue:

food going down, going down; food rolling, in, going down.

Brandon Shimoda

Friday Evening Commute

*It's his skin; a blaze of wildfire
melting out of each pore; paprika,
poinsettia leaves, blush of a white zinfandel,
all changing like a sunset sky.
Eyelashes flutter, and one can miss
a moment of grace.*

My ride from Forty-Ninth Street took an hour
and in that time I saw a thousand shades of him
argue in each cheek. If my fingers touched his face,
would they be warmed, would they create a new tint
for me? I held my hands between my thighs
to keep them still.

lush carnations plum tomatoes afterglow

I held my hands between my thighs again
that night. I know his skin, but not his name.
His eyes are blue, his stop one before mine. I'll wear
more rouge next week. Sexy pink. Sit next to him.
Tell him he has subway soot on his face,
brush it off.

Lori Williams

peeling the egg
the skin comes away
with the shell

Harold Bowes

Like Peaches

Five people sit
there should have been six --
south, southwest,
there is a soaring,
a beat. A space.

Crunched sugarcubes assuage a moment
when he says he only
likes redheads;
and she is beside him.
Did he forget

her glorious sunny bloneness?
or are they in the
count down to breakup?
We swap a look, hoping
it isn't catching.

Avoid the feet underneath
avoid the arms above,
avoid the waitress's underwear.
Move, you say, move quick.
Me: Talk, we never could talk.

Lines that you, and only
you, of all of them,
recognized, and shared
the wince. We were not
classicists, we were hardly

literate.

Was there ever a moment
when you thought,
"like peaches, like apples"?
Foot placed on the ground --
Was there ever? Was there?

Gavin J. Grant

Still Only This

rice
in an open hand.

a young girl
(you cannot see her)
short skirt
hair fringed raspberry
(we never know if she ripens
into family expectations)
asks

why grains of rice
always seem to touch.
We have no answer
outside of what we see
the right hand holding.

Kit Kennedy

Our Time in the Grove

Wild were our nights and nourishing
were our meals when we lived among trees
in the green hills. I have been so long without you,
now I must relearn the instructions for cooking rice,
substituting frozen vegetables for the fresh
we used to wash and chop, renaissance onions
in that beckoning shade of reddish purple,
mushrooms like streaked brown planets, sweet peppers
pregnant with seed. And now I live without
a stainless steel paring knife, and pots with lids.
Our blended household was so much better equipped.
At the table again, and weren't we all in the stewpot together,
our lives threaded with intricate knots. Last to finish my plate,
I liked to watch other people eat. While your upstairs fiancé
drizzled soy sauce onto his plate, you ate a bowl of plain rice,
in the African fashion, your fingers molding it
into clumps. My hands forget old habits, and I go
through motions I don't remember—two cups of water?
one cup of rice? When I slide my pan across the stove

and spill oil, when the burner flares in surprise,
I look down and see a ring of orange blossoms,
a grove of smoldering trees.

William Woolfitt

just to know
that it is orange
inside this cantaloupe
is enough
for now

Harold Bowes

The Tavel Rosé

Wine, a woman's breasts, & the sight into, through glass, its reflection back, holding all the activity of family members as they moved about the room & furniture, certainly the windows at the opposite end of the house. The wine, Tavel, I rarely drink a rosé. But something happens when I do, & a sudden understanding occurred the other day when I poured it into the glass. The color charged a memory I've had a few times before, but never recognized the missing piece in what one might call the shattered glass of unity. The woman's breasts, she showed me, moments ago, so that I might start to write from where I am.

The first time I can recall experiencing the memory *because* of the wine was on a cross-country trip '74. We packed a ten-bottle case of wine before we left. One, the Tavel, I longed to try for the first time. By Knoxville at the foot of the Blue Ridge Mountains it was the rosé's turn. But at the campground we had no ice, & weren't about to drive somewhere to get it. It wasn't even room temperature, hell, it was warm! But we had decent glasses & poured the ruby, the resinous liquid in glinting against the sun. I'm telling you, a glass of Tavel poured at the base of the Blue Ridge, in the middle of the afternoon, was as close to heaven as I'd been. We toasted, sipped. Suddenly, I was five years old, the year before my brother was born, & was staring, I stared at a pane of glass protecting the china & crystal in the hutch of my grandmother's dining room.

I am five. I climb onto the chair at the head of the table where grandfather will soon sit down for Thanksgiving dinner. I turn away from the other members of the family socializing in the same room around TV. Stare into the hutch. There is so much light. The glass lets light in to illuminate china & crystal, at the same time reflects the light & the characters moving, gesticulating, noisily, talking, celebrating, behind me. The hutch is at the threshold between the dining room & pantry & kitchen where incredible scents emanate from. The stuffing my French grandmother makes with ground pork, ground beef, onions, potatoes, sage, thyme, salt & pepper, wafts through the door adding to the intensity of the moment.

In Tennessee heat the Granache & Cinsault grapes of the Tavel rosé combined, visually, & on my palate, to place me firmly there, & elsewhere, at the same time. *Remembering through the senses*, Kristeva says, *is the same as being in love*, & referring to Proust, *these two processes constitute the narrator's essence*. Perhaps the talk among my uncles at that moment indicates what a great cook my grandmother is. I am alone amid the family. I think, & wonder, if my grandmother is French, then she must be from Paris. This is the little deduction I have at five. I am very proud she is from Paris. More proud of that than of her cooking, evidence of which is coming through the pantry door, & whetting everyone's appetite. I can hear women's voices in the kitchen.

I am alone. Must be Oedipal. I sit at the head of the dinner table. No one else is at the table. No one else notices the intensity of light in hutch glass. The drama playing itself out in the reflection of the glass makes me fall even more deeply in love with the people whose actions I watch, & those women whose voices in the kitchen mean nourishment, sustenance. The sharp angles of light. I'm in love with the sharp angles of light. Soon I'll not be alone. I'll merge with the rest, & forget the rest of the day. But I think of Paris one more time, how brave my grandmother must have been to come all the way from Paris, & marry my grandfather, & have my mother, & aunts, & uncle. There is not one speck of red light glinting in the memory of that long moment.

So why then, is it, that every time I pour the Tavel rosé, which gathers so much light unto itself, do I return in time to that space? Why? I hadn't known until two days ago. Some of the calculations of that five-year-old were off the mark. Including the major deduction concerning Paris. It's true, grandmother was French, so much so that her own mother spoke *only* French, but she was from Quebec. Paris is only an imaginary jewel imbedded in the mind of an Oedipally driven kid who'll know in two years from that experience that he wants to write. After Knoxville we made it to California & Mexico, where I bought a ring for my mother, & a bracelet for my aunt both containing the pink/red stone, *Rose de France*, in honor of their mother, Roseanna, Roseanna Ruane, who'd died the year after I knew I wanted to write. When I pour the Tavel rosé, there is not just the visual, or olfactory memory, but an even subtler one of language, a sign, a name.

Robert Gibbons

when I put
the tanka zine on the ledge
next to the tomato
my wife takes it and slices it
into many pieces

Harold Bowes

Not A Wrong Glass

To indulge in one potation or another, and there should always be another, is an indulgence, so please do not drink it from a wrong glass. A martini for example, a martini served in a glass not meant for martinis, in a glass not shaped like a V, this is a wrong glass, as wrong as can be, likewise daiquiris and margaritas and piña coladas, which require special glasses of their own.

One has several choices for on the rocks though the best is in truth a rocks glass, or a tumbler which is neither too tall nor too narrow, though if it is too tall or narrow then it is a collins glass and should contain a vodka or gin collins or a fizz or highball of some other sort.

Now the question arises of what is the glass made of? The answer is crystal, especially in regard to champagne, there is nothing more perfect than a crystal flute of champagne or a delicate tulip and while we're at it let's come right out and say good champagne, nothing is worse than bad champagne, one celebrates with champagne and one should never celebrate badly, a libation is a libation is a ritual that you offer, that you don't offend the gods with, Dionysus in particular.

This brings us to red wine, the goblet, make it a generous goblet even a balloon, or else consider white wine, white wine one sips from a claret glass rather than a snifter, a snifter is for cognac or brandy or single malt scotch, unless one prefers single barrel bourbon whiskey, then that must go in a snifter too.

To partake of a cordial in anything besides a cordial glass, also known as a pony, is unacceptable, however in a pinch a sherry glass, which is only slightly larger, may be resorted to. This does not work in reverse of course, a cordial glass cannot be used for sherry as sherry has a precise history, a history of precision.

A sour calls for a delmonico, a pousse-café a pousse-café glass, a mug holds a hot mug drink as well as beer, a mug of beer is often quite pleasant in the summer and during Oktoberfest when the proper vessel is a stein.

Marc Kipniss

Crepuscular

To the hungry Samoan fruit bat
the night is just a familiar pantry
where coy mangoes blush in thin coats,
an ancient wall with holes in it, a cache
of over-ripe breadfruit and sticky sweet
banana waiting on the other side,
if you would just go up to it,
if you would only look in
and feed.

James R. Whitley

Green

It is isn't green
it's bells
or yellow.

An edge is also
of an orange
or beak.

To open,
first remove your shoes,
your woolly trees.

Your hat is fine.
And no joy taller than
asparagus

Kathryn Rantala

background: Chopin

(September 11, 2001)

Maybe it's the hint
of grapefruit--the wine,
at any rate, as each
successive entering
patron orders the porta-
bella, I stare about
and smile, my fingers
pressed together,
like a mohatma.

Somehow I mumble
benediction--am I
thinking of the cat,
the grandparents now
long dead? Loving
these strangers instead?
Not in stead, exactly.
But also. Somehow.

Meat of walnut,
mushroom,
meat of asparagus
and do the green
cornices of cauliflower
shriek? A silence
too shrill for bone
and meat, these
scuffed ears?

As if someone
eating said
when I thanked her,
You deserve it.

Not to mention
mute soy, the
coy, garlic kissed
noodles. What
shall we say?

Shilly-Shally Chez

Who ordered the movie
where Donald Duck
teaches cooking school
as a front for the CIA?

The survivors
liberated from liberators
wave upon wave

arranging long stemmed roses

Shall we say?

Maybe not

Jim McCurry

Two Stories of Starting Over in the Tabloid City

People were starting over. That was the big thing. A man had discovered it while walking in the park. It was a nice day after a lot of days that weren't so nice. Some mothers stood around flipping their hair while their kids kicked a ball. A dog barked. Another dog answered. Very elliptical. Then he went to a coffee shop and had some coffee and a stale cookie and a woman smiled. She was thinking of someone else but how was he to know. Besides, it was a beginning. And it was a nice day. Soon everyone was doing it. Misreading signals. It felt good. And as long as the news came on every day at the same time, nobody was going to say a word.

At another point of contact in the Tabloid City, Miriam said to Paul she was going out for milk. Did Paul believe her? Could he afford to believe her? Could he afford not to believe her? Maybe she needed the milk. He could look in the fridge. But what would that say about trust? And if she never came back, he could start over. Was milk really at issue? It left a stain if you spilled it. Water is better that way. But she never spilled anything. All these years and not a single spill. He'd never realized that before. She should be in charge of an oil tanker. And those dogs. They never stop barking. ~

Two Stories of Being There in the Tabloid City

A woman called and asked to speak to him. He said he wasn't there. He always said he wasn't there because of telemarketers. Maybe he should have said he was there. It could have been important. It had never been important before and history is considered a guide in such matters. But maybe history was wrong in this instance. He might start saying he is there when he is there. When he's not there he will simply remain silent. And the woman had a nice voice. Being there might not be so bad. It could be something he would learn to enjoy.

At the same time this was happening in the Tabloid City, something very unlike it was happening elsewhere. Paul was always interested in what was happening elsewhere because what was happening where he was often didn't interest him. An example: Miriam was crying. She was clearly upset. But she would not say why she was upset. This was

a pattern. It presented an occasion when Paul would like to have been elsewhere. But he knew what he had to say, so he said it. He said he was there for her. Then he watched a fruit fly land on a banana. He watched some dust float across a column of sunlight. Soon he would have to consider what to fix for supper. It was all falling into place. But no one need know. ~

Thomas Wooten

Butter Feast

Red Sea 31 on the orange Chevrolet sledding (taxiing) through the snow of the night before. Percussive cold entering the bones of the homeless without sound, or tears drawn up to the eye. Sun is sound torn open: Brass cymbals (asunder in Corinth?) in the hands of Joseph Beuys aimed at the audience, lines from *Iphigenia*, butter drips from the side of his mouth as an agent of heat, surviving insular tissue? White horse is tundra in memory. Sacrifice returned to the stage.

Robert Gibbons

Late September, Sunnyside

The first cold wind
blew the dog's fur backward,
snapped at the edges of our clothing,
and rattled the wooden shed.

Inside the Cold Room were
baskets of Gypsy peppers—chartreuse and
elegant, their skins more thin than the skins of poets.
Yellow Bells lolled over each other like
pushed-in bean bags.
the Banana peppers made exclamations marks at
the deeply green, mysterious-in-their-darkness, Poblanos
and the hot peppers were small red
sparks against the wood walls.

As we filled brown bags the
wind thumped and worried the door.

Driving west through pine forests,
our car warm with the scent of ripening fruit,
we could see needles blowing into nests on
the ground where small things sniffed and
gathered and moved quickly in the early dark.

Christiel Cottrell

Country Home

Soon after we caught the rain
scent on the wind, thunder
rattled the floorboards under the bed
where the dog groveled and whined.
My sister bleated when lightning struck
the barn, and the herd in their stanchions
were all electrocuted.

The crows never came back after
that night. Grandmother strung the barbed
fence with cow flesh and fat
and spent the rest of her days watching
telephone lines for sign of the black
scavengers. But the crows never returned.

Grandmother says that the berries should be picked
later in the season, after the August
swelter when the streams shrink
and reveal the willow roots.
But the storm knocked the berries from the branches.
So we ate them off the ground, the sour
juice running, staining our lips.

Tobias Seamon

Which Part Of Oregano Means Joy

I remain at the desk for another hour trying to heal
the leg of a stick figure with an eraser, making a choice
whether he will spend his slim existence outside a house
with squiggly circles of smoke twirling from the chimney
or if he will stand near a rock at the low end of a pond
with a bubble over his head - then I would need to decide
whether he dreams of being served a full course meal,
pulling garnish of a plate of lamb, trying to distinguish
which parts of oregano mean joy, or if he devotes his thought
to grilling one of his own, flipping it from side to side
every few minutes, making plans to divvy out the rib
in able portions.

And because I have seen nothing but field
between each tree outside Columbus, Ohio, I arrange
a roof in case of rain. There is no sense in leaving what I love
exposed. If this stick figure should resemble my father,
I will spare him from arthritis in both knees. And if it should
have something in common with grandma, there will be no
wind and burn ratios to speculate from the atrium
window of the hospital where all cancer patients are sent
to die. I draw a rock at the low end of a pond. Give it a bridge
and I will move there. Give it twelve and I will become
its mayor. My first speech will have everything to do
with giddiness, my sleeves will be rolled up.

Frank Matagrano

The next morning
Master gets
Breakfast in bed
Confesses
He doesn't recall
What he did
Last night
Although domination
Lingers like new leather
Between the sheets.

John Burgess

Ginkgoes

It was a weird weekend weatherwise.
Stuff touched down, from funnels to hail kernels,
all along the sickle-like coast of Vladivostok,
where we were renting a room full of beds
and windows -- awful little windows with
white wire security screens stapled to them,
keeping out everything but the june bugs and flies.

Vladivostok *et ses environs*, which included
the Gulf of Love, as it was known in those days,
had suffered the severest famine in seventy years
under the untrained oversight of Lustful Lionid,
a social smoker with a few extra pounds,
a controversial appointment of the former Tsarina.
Well, at least our *hostellerie* was secluded.

I thought of you when I explored the creek banks,
a place overgrown with crabapples and ginkgoes,
enclosed by largish iron gratings -- frilly,
to say the least. From there one can spot
crumbling gargoyles that line the main building's
facade, and the arched terraces that stratify its flank.
I remembered you posing by Felisburto's "Phalanx"

at Little Five Points, that fantastic statue
of creatures eating other creatures, so modern,
and we remarked we'd never seen *decoupage*
so daring, in concrete, and on such a scale as that.
I fumbled through my pack to find the camera,
picked it out and began snapping shot upon shot.
In that hat, Mathilde, few women could match you.

In that skirt you looked like some spurned heiress
heading out into the night to prove she's still got it.
In pale lipstick you smacked of Greta Garbo
or Lily Dean, or a Mackelwayne sister. I waited
for you for seven years -- I can barely believe it -- and
you never came. And I retired to Russia, and the rest
(as they say) is hail blown across a hotel terrace.

Aaron Belz

Time To Move Again

"Maybe we should go on a hunger strike to protest our inability to choose among places to eat," said Rebecca.

She had just returned from an exhausting afternoon confounding her unruly footsteps in the outlying gravel fields where she daily appeared in support of local stone pickers, and was now in cold resumption of her duty to pry up the floorboards: an additional bewilderment to untamed stepping.

Below, in their open apartment, her sunfazed neighbors sat frayed upon glass chairs, dining once again on parsnip and broiled cashew. This evening would surely be the last Rebecca could attempt to fix their attention with the quivering head of a damselfish. There was nothing she liked more than to pound them through the gap. The extended breath of morning Pine-Sol had not done much to prevent it: a total disavowal of pabulum. Nor had her morose efforts in the Italian restaurant been forgotten. And yet, who's to say that those rainy weeks were not in fact made more bearable by her uninspired attempt to reach into an oil painting? Her sullen effort to push a painted canoe still further down its rain-glossed river?

To be quite unsure, time was in a state of crisscross, chirping through the crimson drywall and out into the throw of night. It would not be long before Nelson would arrive with the fish pole, reeling in shocked dishabille toward the multiple trajectory of darker, more indolent plans of abode.

"There are always new challenges in terms of perplexed footfall and prandial constraint," thought Rebecca, thinking ahead to their inevitable nightward journey south.

She snipped a bit of sleeve from her dolman and arranged it along the shadowy edge of a crumbling strip of lath. It was apparent the reason for such a break with the present could only be counted with all cards laid out neatly along the table, secured by fishhooks. Surely that would serve well enough for the memory of her father.

Bryson Newhart

ultimate diet

why don't we do it in the code first you brawl then you pay then
then you blow your bard away more they tried to deaden origins
more they missed them used to didn't like that dish but do
anymore reticent partner odds and lust

Joel Chace

Perfection Ideal

The wall bends with an influx of time that zeros me here.
There is an orange on my mantle. I can see it doing some
sort of deathly biological interaction. There's an apple
next to it that doesn't seem to be moving as much. Seems to
have contemplated suicide and decided to stay in case I
chomp its skin a bit.

Either that, or it's the amount of chemicals doing
preservation on my head. How many glass pesticides have I
drunk just in my Orange period alone?

That question was more rhetorical than anything.

I wouldn't want you to have to play catch with a set of
dominos. The chance involved in that are daunting.

The trees in my neighborhood don't grow as large as they
could because of me. I touch them and tell them it'll be all
right. I had one laugh at me and ask my age.

It was more rhetorical than anything

Ballpark estimations were all we were concerned with. Not
percentage of potential

We're still in the elementary estimates -forever or never.

And we still have one example of an outlier. Not to mention
the fact that I'm sitting here, typing in some sort of
median on an entire different scale.

The water in my cup yields to me, but only for an instant.
For the rest of its life it goes on mocking me.

It was hard convincing my friend that all you need for life
is water, but I finally did it with an example of a twisted
movement ball.

What about the fact that they call bacteria growths
"cultures."

If you asked me what I'd rather be a part of, I'd ask you if
it was rhetorical.

Joel Van Noord

Notes from the Lake #1

The food that inspires the widest smiles is in the dirt: still developing, still.

Brandon Shimoda

Chianti

I couldn't tell
if they were two people standing
on a hill above furrows,
or two shaped trees.
The designer of this wine label
wasn't concerned
with nearer views.

The furrows were fresh and long;
nothing in them yet
though if it should be people
from the round mound,
there would have to be more than two of them,
and to make sense
the trenches would be
deeper.

It wouldn't matter to me
if they were trees instead,
ready to lean down and pocket
in a growing place;
or stay within their fix
nearer to heaven
than plow.

And I didn't know their names,
those people/trees,
or if they were facing
or turned
or approaching the verge of receding
into a red bottle
like me.

But the idea of seed rows
as next step—
down being so much easier—
as simple as they were
and lined neatly toward me,
made me want to jump right in.

In case something inside
was formula

for what things are,
who they were,
and what might
or might not
be about to happen.

Kathryn Rantala

"A sick thirst / Darkens my veins."—Rimbaud

The Flavor Of Absinthe

*The flavor of absinthe is bitter, like licking failure
It hates your mouth and requires
A cup of sugar to soak up your dreams*

At age fourteen, I first remember reading about absinthe in Hemingway. In "Hills Like White Elephants," during an icy disagreement, the girl says sarcastically to the man: "Everything tastes of licorice. Especially all the things you've waited so long for, like absinthe." "Oh, cut it out," he says. Absinthe entered my vocabulary and became something controversial and unattainable, although it was merely one exotic liqueur among many: pernod, Cinzano, grappa, Campari, Anis del Toro, kirsch, etc. They all appeared in Hemingway's writing and were all mysterious and tempting, resonating with Europe, wealth, and higher culture. In retrospect, I think Hemingway's characters all drank like girls or dandies, but then I had no idea. To me, absinthe became the crown jewel of alcoholic self-destruction, as intriguing and unrepentantly cool as smoking opium or eating lotuses.

*The lure of absinthe is decadence
Paris at midnight, strange poetry,
The virgin, empty glass implores you*

The fact was that absinthe was already illegal in most of Europe by the time Hemingway was writing about it. Enough cases of absinthism, a form of epilepsy resulting from chronic abuse, had been documented to prove the danger of the drink, and an international campaign of prohibition followed the hysteria that resulted after an absinthe-soaked peasant brutally murdered his Swiss family in 1905.

*The feeling of absinthe is a sizzling brain
A drunken descent into history; You are Van Gogh
Or a careless smear from his brush.*

By eighteen, I was reading writers like Alfred Jarry and Arthur Rimbaud. I was drawn to authors who had a complete disregard for authority and whose search for artistic sincerity caused them to risk themselves and even their very sanity. Literature seemed best when it hurled itself violently into evil and perdition. Jarry, that absurd, bicycle-riding, pistol-packing, ether-sniffing midget, thrived on absinthe, so much so that he disdained other liquids: "Antialcoholics are unfortunates in the grip of water, that terrible poison, so solvent and corrosive that out of all substances it has been chosen for washings and scourings, and a drop of water,

added to a clear liquid like absinthe, muddies it.” Rimbaud’s own passion for drunkenness was a major theme of his work, and it is surely no coincidence that the color green also appears most prominently. Rimbaud echoed Blake’s “The Road of Excess leads to the Palace of Wisdom” when he wrote: “Knowing pilgrims, seek repose / By the emerald pillars of Absinthe...” He and Verlaine virtually drowned themselves in the stuff. They even jokingly coined their own pet term for the liqueur: *l’absomphe*. In a letter of 1872, in which he proclaimed his fondness for a drinking-hole dubbed “The Absinthe Academy,” Rimbaud trumpeted: “The most delicate, the most precarious adornment, to be drunk on the magic of that herb from the glaciers, *l’absomphe*! But only to lie down afterward in shit!”

*The impact of absinthe is the annihilation of mind
A blackness unparalleled, a true void sans metaphor
Your seizure takes you out of the world*

There were many other writers and artists who favored absinthe: Baudelaire, Wilde, Huysmans, Poe, Strindberg, Manet, Degas, Picasso, Gauguin, and, of course, Van Gogh. Not surprisingly, Van Gogh’s decline into madness was precipitated by his thirst for absinthe; he even drank his own turpentine when the liqueur wasn’t available. Van Gogh’s willing aggravation of his epilepsy no doubt helped produce a highly original artistic vision, until the damage from the chemicals (and resultant seizures) destroyed his mind entirely. He died at thirty-seven, that fatal age for geniuses, on a manure pile with a bullet in his guts. Many of the other *absinthistes* suffered similar fates: Rimbaud, legless and dead at thirty-seven; Jarry, requesting his final toothpick at thirty-four; Wilde, dead in Paris at forty-six; Baudelaire, paralyzed, also gone at forty-six; Poe, interred in the gutter at forty. Even though absinthe seems to be surrounded by a history of tragedy and premature deaths, some found solace in its milky oblivion. Strindberg, during his tumultuous heart-broken days in Paris, wrote: “Absinthe...is now my only vice and my last remaining pleasure. When the day’s work is done, and body and soul are worn out, I restore myself with a glass of the green liquor . . . How sweet life can be when the misery of one’s existence is blurred by sweet intoxication.” Hemingway put this in the mouth of his semi-autobiographical Jake Barnes: “The absinthe made everything seem better. I drank it without sugar in the dripping glass, and it was pleasantly bitter. . . . I poured the water directly into it and stirred it instead of letting it drip. Bill put in a lump of ice. I stirred the ice around with a spoon in the brownish, cloudy mixture. . . . I was very drunk. I was drunker than I ever remembered having been.”

The flavor of absinthe is a mouthful of blood

*Caressing a shredded tongue
The floor cools your cheek*

I made my first batch of absinthe from an anonymous recipe. It was essentially Baudelaire's "wormwood tea" made from ingredients steeped in vodka. I obtained the wormwood from a holistic pharmacy, adding hyssop, angelica root, anise, coriander, cardamom, and lemon. I soaked these and strained the mixture a week later, adding copious amounts of corn syrup to make the drink tolerable. Nothing, however, could kill the staggering bitterness of the wormwood; it was like chewing tea leaves and drinking cheap vodka at the same time. There were some aspects of the homemade steeped version that differed significantly from the distilled absinthe of legend. I couldn't get the absinthe to *louche* (i.e., to turn milky white by adding drops of sugar water), nor did the drink ever acquire a greenish tint. It looked instead like muddy whiskey. I made two bottles of the stuff, aptly decorating one with a label of Goya's etching "The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters." The first tasting was among friends and it proved to be very popular. I didn't care for it at first: the freshness and potency of the wormwood made my brain feel as if it were crackling unpleasantly. I sipped only a single, tiny sugar-soaked drink that first night, but within a month I was drinking it neat from a shotglass. The next four months were drunken times. The absinthe amplified every other alcohol you drank until you were reeling in a kind of hallucinatory anger. I remember violent nights of ranting about the literature of Sade and Bataille, spinning rooms, falling down. Blackouts.

*The sight of absinthe is a blinding emergency room
A tube fucking your forearm
And the crimson drool on your shirt.*

I added too much wormwood without fully understanding the neurotoxicity of thujone, the psychoactive ingredient. The result was that every drink I took was damaging the brain, disposing it toward seizures and even death. There are two inevitable ways to poison oneself with absinthe: slowly or quickly. Mine was a somewhat slow degradation rather than a quick overdose, although I suppose that, in the history of absinthe, I did suffer a rather rapid deterioration of the senses. One evening, I awoke to someone slapping me and asking simple questions I could not answer. I was on the floor, delirious, bleeding. I had suffered a *grand mal* seizure, a disruption of consciousness so severe that waking from it was like trying to climb back from death. There were grim doctors, a battery of tests, and they all came to the same conclusion: epilepsy. They should have called it absinthism, but they weren't the literary sort. Two meager bottles of absinthe had damaged the temporal lobe of my brain, perhaps permanently. In

denial, I refrained from medication for several months until my second seizure. Now I take four pills a day and have luckily maintained my health. Still, I am a victim of self-poisoning “in the name of art,” like Jarry and Van Gogh. There is no joy in this ridiculous bond I share with the dead, but there is a certain understanding I’ve gained of the nature of risk and its effect on literature. Sometimes in the evening when I write, Paris and the Left Bank, the fields of Arles, and the gutters of Baltimore seem very, very near.

*The wake of absinthe is a lifelong melancholy
Worry over relapse, fear is your new drunkenness
Carbamazepine day and night, forever.*

Jason DeBoer
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