The flavour 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 feeling 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 colour 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 favoured absinthe: Baudelaire, Wilde, Huysmans, Poe, Strindberg, Manet, Degas, Picasso, Gaugin, 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 flavour 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 meagre 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 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 Aries, 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.

Works Cited

-----, The Sun Also Rises. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926.

* This essay first appeared in Linnaean Street, for which it was nominated for the Pushcart Prize, and The Clackamas Literary Review.