

Monkey on my back. . .

habitual offender

Jan 2003

ME AND MY MONKEY

Long and warped words, blahblahblah puked
on the paper and set the game in motion, read
on if you can. . .

Where is the cave where the wise woman went
And tell me where is all the money that I spent?
I propose a toast to my self-control
See it crawling helpless on the floor
Someday there'll be a cure for pain
And that's the day I throw my drugs away.

–Morphine, “Cure for Pain”, 1993

Sunday afternoon, June 6. I am going to kill myself. No kidding. This time I mean it. I'm sick. So sick. My last fix was 45 hours and, let's see, 20-odd minutes ago. Ancient history. Not a wink of sleep last night. Jumping out of my skin. No way to get comfortable. Every hour is a day. Every minute an hour. Marrow sucked from my bones. Ice water in there now. Aching legs flailing. Why do you think it's called kicking? Snot streams from my nose, tears from my eyes. Rancid sweat pours everywhere. Shivering. Shaking. Every hair standing on end. Goose bumps on my goose bumps. Why do you think it's called cold turkey?

Sick. So very sick. Something even sicker? One shot, one lousy shot of dope would set me straight. Okay, six hours later, I'd need another. Then another. Then another. So the dope-fiend day goes. In Junktime, though, six hours is a lifetime.

Stack of 20 twenties on the kitchen table. Too fucked up to go out and cop. Just crapped my pants. Third time since sunrise. An hour ago—five hours ago, I don't know—lurching into the john. Another bout of heaving. Didn't make it. Burning stomach acids spewed all over the hallway. Sick. So very, very sick. Sickest thing of all? This ain't no baby jones. This ain't no squirrel monkey on my back. King Kong is riding me to death. Even 400 bucks won't score three squares a day for this 800-pound gorilla. Hope against hope. Hope for dope. Dial the beeper number. Mac the Man. Old Reliable. The Albert Schweitzer of smack dealers. What a mensch. God bless him. Come on, Mac. Got me a Big Mac Attack. Lately, Mac's been dropping by a \$500 spoon of white junk every day. Home delivery. Beats carryout. Back to basics. Screw showering. Screw shaving. Screw eating. Feed that monkey. He's ravenous today. He's pissed. He's kicking my sorry ass. “Ain't nothing happening”, Mac's been saying since Friday. Panic in Needle Park, bro. Ring. Ri— Grab for that phone. “Ain't nothing happening.” For the twentieth fucking time. Fucking asshole. Raging at fucking Mac. What's a fucking dealer with no fucking dope? Just another fucking scumbag. Fucking asshole. Raging at my fucking self. Why didn't you fucking hit the fucking street to fucking score before you got so fucking sick?

Too fucking late now, you fucking fucker.

Free fall. Nine months on a major mission. Fifty thousand bucks worth of narcotics since Labor Day last. Heroin and cocaine. White powder for white people. Mighty white of you, Mr. Jones.

Hitting bottom. Pulling cash off credit cards. Ten grand of the most overpriced greenbacks this side of La Cosa Nostra. Most of the 50 Gs, savings from the Fuck You Fund. Souring beyond consolation on Washington journalism. Years of freelancing on the side like a lunatic. Stashing bucks away like an immigrant. Buy my way into a new way of life.

Wouldn't you know it? My brilliant career turns to shit. My mid-life crisis turns into the smack habit that ate the national debt. My Fuck You Fund is fucked. The Creator, that sarcastic shit, is sniggering up his long sleeves. The till is tapped. Owe Mac five C-notes for Thursday's spoon. Money, honey. What's left to cash in? Get that second mortgage when I get straight. Whoa. Long-term thinking, in Junktime. Slow weeks tearing off that big chunk of bread. Fast, fast weeks shooting it.

What then? Hock the tchotchkas. Stereo. TV. VCR. Computer. Typewriter. Microwave. Cuisinart. Sofa bed. Dining table. Bench press. Carpets. CDs. Books. Yuppie fire sale. Lost My Lifestyle, Everything Must Go! Priced to move. Pennies on the dollar.

And then what? Felonyville? Passing bad paper. Boosting department stores. Snatch and grab. Car breaking. House breaking. Violence = meth? Not worth it. Don't have it in me. Not a kid anymore. Too bourgie. Too lazy. Can't see playing bitter-end dope fiend. Can't see nodding on a park bench. Yeah? Can't see living without dope. Damn. Can't see living.

Great Puking Jesus! Gonna barf again. Dry heaves. Vile bile. Wham! Jolt of panic. Flop sweat flowing. Got a five-page story due in the A.M. Should have filed on Friday. Too loaded Thursday to tickle them ivories. Phoning my editors with lame excuses for a month now.

Down at the office on Friday. First time in ages. Cameo appearance, no Oscar: Hi. I'll be okay. Under the weather. That cold I've had the last three years? Rhinovirus from hell. Can't seem to kick it. Heh, heh. Pathetic bid to yank \$10,000 from my pension account. No can do, Mr. No Show. File that story—or else! Fuck you all very much. Reports and clips heaped on cigarette-scarred dining table. Got no interviews. Fake it. Fake it 'til you make it. Doing a lot of that lately. Can't write like this. Too sick to go out, get straight. Damned sure too sick to sit still, hack out 4,000 words.

What's the T-shirt say? I used up all my sick days, so I called in dead. Why do you think they're called deadlines? Pull the plug, you pussy. Sick and tired of feeling sick and tired. Can't carry King Kong another inch. Back is broken. Want him gone. Locked in a cage. Melt down the key. I keep trying. Really I do. Bastard keeps coming back. Climbing through that gaping hole in my head.

This is my seventh cold turkey since '91. Each one more nightmarish than the last. Can't do this no more. Can't hack the pain. Can't hack the desperation. Can't hack the despair. Okay? Okay. This is the last time. Yeah. Tendril of willpower. I won't fix. Uh, uh. No sir. Kick this fucker. Five, maybe six more days, no sleep. Not a nod. Anti-Junktime. Every hour a day. Every minute an hour. Another six, maybe seven days staggering around. Boneless, brainless zombie. Depressed beyond reason 'til those precious endorphins—endogenous morphines—kick in again. Two weeks, minimum. I'm straight again. Clean.

Piece o' cake.

Drop the jive, junkie. Don't dope-fiend a dope fiend. Who are you fooling? Not me, friend. Not any more. Kick for what? To get hooked again a week, two weeks, a month later? Run up another big, fat jones? Like every time before? I'm a loser, baby. So why don't you kill me? But how? Forget about an O.D. The drug cabinet is bare. Gargle drain cleaner? I'm barfing up spring water. Head in the oven? Too slow, too uncertain. Take an electro-bath with the radio? Probably only works in the movies. Jump in the river? District can't wipe its own ass, but it can put a suicide fence on the Ellington Bridge. No gun in the house, damn me for a bleeding-heart pablum-puker. Bleeding heart. Hey! Yeah, the six-inch Henckels. Super sharp cutlery. Reread that gut-churning cardiac chapter in *How We Die*. Shelve that best seller under *Self-Help*. Hmm. Between those ribs. My day of deliverance. Thanksgiving Day. Let's carve this turkey. In the tub. Less mess. Hari kari, very scary. Kneeling, knife to chest. Heart flutter, on the chopping block. Fear sweat. Oh, God, I can't do it. Oh, God, I'll screw it up. Like everything else. Self-cutters always flinch. Just another body fluid to splash around. Need Plan B. Need dope, damn it. Where's the nearest dope? Pharmacy around the corner. Drug store cowboy. You don't have a gun, idiot. Sunday, stupid, they're closed. So break in. Yeah, get caught. Get shot. Ow! Blood. Pain. Ambulance. Hospital. Morphine! Methadone. Methadone! Detox. Yes!

No! That means treatment. You'll bust yourself. No more job. No more secrets. This is a big one, bro. Excuse me, Mr. Editor, one of your staff correspondents is a stone dope fiend. Recovery? They'll make you change. Make you go to twelve-step meetings. Bummer. Can't do that. Can't do that? That's a bummer? What's this, a day in the country?

Like a dream, a movie. Jerky crane shot of Columbia Road, pan down to a rattle-trap Diamond Cab. George Washington University Hospital, please. Emergency Room. Slumped in back. Too trashed to know or care how bad I stink. How bad I look. It's got to be bad. Real bad. Cab heads down 23rd Street. Oh, man, Gay Pride Day. I forgot. Rolling past P Street Beach. Throngs of cheerful queers. Familiar faces. Funny, I don't feel proud today. Crouched down, snotty cheek to the seat. Can't let them see. I'm just a junkie. A kicking, puking, shitting, sweating, shaking, scamming junkie scumbag.

GWU Emergency Room. Sidle up to window. I'm a heroin addict. I'm in major withdrawal. I'm suicidal. I need methadone. Huh? Insurance card? Uh, yeah. Fumble with wallet. Clack of computer keys. Stagger outside for a smoke. Wobble back inside. Wait some more. Glaring at the other patients. What you looking at, butt wipe? My name is called. Ask not for whom the bell tolls, asshole. Through the swinging doors. Bare examining room in back. Stripped to my shitty shorts. No belt, Suicide Boy, no laces. No nothing.

Not even methadone, please? Pretty please? After admission? How long-? Click. Grab the knob. Locked in. Big mistake, coming here. Cold tile walls. Cold tile floor. So cold. So very cold. Oh, shit, I'm going to shit myself again. Cup of meth with a side of Depends, please. Hold it in. Hold it in. Think about something else. Think about that yummy methadone.

Shrinks. Shrinks, shrinks, and more shrinks. Where's my goddamn methadone? Questions. Questions, questions, and more questions. Can you name the last six presidents, in reverse order? I'm suicidal, and you want to drag me through the degraded cesspool of the American presidency? Let me out of here. This is

all a big misunderstanding. I don't belong here. Okay, okay, I'll be okay. There, see? So, where's my fucking methadone?

Another hour. What day of the week is this? Do you know where you are? I know where I am. Do you know where my goddamn fucking methadone is? Finally, elevator up to 6 North. Psych unit. More questions. I might scream. I might get rude. Getting closer: Your room. My bed in the rubber-room wing. More waiting. Every minute an hour. At long, long last: The tread of sensible shoes. A glimpse of white. It's Florence Nyquil, R.N. Angel of mercy, bless her keys. Hark in yon chalice: It's my goddamn fucking methadone!

Seventy mg. of long-lasting synthetic opiate dissolved in grape soda. Soma. Ambrosia. Nectar. Elixir of the Gods. Thank you. Happy hour. Bottoms up. Good to the last drop. Lick the cup. Thank you. Thank you. A small poppy of reprieve blossoms in my wretched gut. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Half an hour. Bingo! Right as rain. Not high. It takes a lot more than 70 mg. of stuff to set King Kong off to nodding these days. But, plop, plop, fizz, fizz, oh what a relief it is. Call the Vatican, call Mother Theresa, it's a miracle cure, Doc. Goose bumps? Gone. Sweats? Gone. Marrow? Warm as toast. Bowels? Steady, thank you for not asking. Snug as a rug in a bug house.

If I'm not sick, why am I lying in a hospital bed? Silly, silly, dope fiend. Why would you want to cut your black little heart out? Life ain't so bad. You'll sleep tonight, slumbering in Morpheus' sweet arms. And don't fret about no wake-up shot, you bad boy. There's dope to burn in this joint. Sit up. Check off the menu card for breakfast. Hmm. Let's see: toast, cereal, banana, coffee, and, oh yeah, for dessert, a nice big cup of methadone soda. Done. Let's cruise this pop stand. Make some calls. Excuse me, nurse, where's the phone? And how late can I have visitors this evening? What! You gotta be kidding. No visitors until next weekend? Locked ward? Non-smoking hospital? No coffee machine on the floor? Meetings and psych sessions 12 hours a day? These nightly "Big Book" readings listed here, they're not recitations from the Physicians Desk Reference? A twelve-step program text? Hell, no, I've never read it.

Flimsy gown flapping, dragging back to Rubber City. In bed, flipping through the drugalogues at the back of the recovery text. "I used anything and everything available every day. It didn't matter what I took so long as I got high." Hmmm, kind of diverting. Porno for pyros. What's this? "I'm a happy, grateful drug addict, clean by the grace of God and the Twelve Steps." Give my other leg a yank! Born-again dope fiends, sheesh! Flip, flip. Step Four. "Searching and fearless moral inventory?" No way, José?! I can't even meet my own eyes in a mirror.

But you're busted, bro. Like it or not, they're going to make you pick that fearful moral lint right out of your grotty little navel. Me, I don't really understand any of it. How did a reasonably intelligent, reasonably successful slice of middle-aged, middle-class Wonder Bread like me wind up totally toasted on 6 North, a hopeless slave to junk, anyway?

There's a party in my mind... and I hope it never stops
I'm stuck here in this seat... I might not stand up
Other people can go home... Everybody else will split
I'll be here all the time... I can never quit.

–Talking Heads, “Memories Can’t Wait”, 1979

Where, oh where, does this unseemly obsession come from? Is addiction really a disease, as treatment counselors now insist? Psychologist Stanton Peele skewers several vital organs of the disease model in his 1989 screed, *The Disingering of America: Addiction Treatment Out of Control*. Intent on assailing the practice of remanding to twelve-step programs and profit-driven treatment centers everyone who is nabbed Driving While Impaired or who has flunked a piss test, though, Peele fails to acknowledge adequately the flaming insanity of hard-core, terminal addiction. “Insane” may be the only diagnosis for those so obsessed with getting off they compulsively court death and disaster every day, in every way. In so far as it is chronic, progressive, and fatal, yeah, addiction sure looks, walks, quacks and squats like a morbid illness.

If so, what sparks addiction? A miserable childhood, certainly, is not a precondition. Sufficient numbers of crack freaks and smackheads admit to having enjoyed secure salad days in the bosoms of warm, loving families to rid anyone of that rationalization. That said, growing up in the House of Usher probably doesn't hurt anyone's chances of grabbing the brass ring of addiction, either. My own dependence on the kindness of chemicals can only have kindled in an intensely alcoholic, emotionally frigid household. Sorry, honey, I shrunk the kids!

So, blame nature. Blame nurture. Me, I blame no one and nothing but the perverse mysteries of my own willful self. All I really know is that I've always used something to kick start that party I've always wanted to have roaring in my mind. No way was I going to give up my comfort blanket when, according to Spock, the time had come for it to go. My mother resorted to slicing that tattered shmatta in half every time it came out of the dryer. It was an inch-square of raveled fabric before I finally surrendered to Spock. Even in the recovery mad '90s, there aren't yet 12-step programs for rug rats. But there's First Step food for thought here. Four years old, and there I am: bitter-ending it like a needle-scarred pro.

Likewise, in a later prolonged battle over my thumb sucking, my folks ended up painting them with a foul-tasting fluid. Suck-No-More or some such. Antabuse for infants. No less foreshadowing was my needle-sharp sweet tooth. Like so many budding addicts, I was a stone sugar freak—my “life and think-

ing...centered on [candy] in one form or another, the getting and using and finding ways and means to get more”, as the twelve-step text has it. Knee-high to a dachshund, I’m shoplifting chocolate, swiping change to buy it, hiding my stash away to savor in swooning secrecy. A dope fiend in training.

And, then, when the time came to move on to the real thing, I quite simply fell head over heels in love with getting high. I’ve loved drugs almost to death, you might say. Maybe I’m an extreme example, but it’s not like I’m the only one. “No civilization has found life tolerable without...the things that provide at least some brief escape from reality”, world historian Will Durant has observed. The Bethesda matron with her script for Xanax, the Munich burger with his stein of bier, the Pacific Islander with his bowl of kava-’tis all too human to get loaded. Only the Inuit, supposedly, eking out an existence in the snowy wastes of Alaska, boasted no artificial stimulants until obliging European interlopers introduced them to booze. Wandering an outback no less arid than the Eskimo’s arctic, even the aborigine chew pituri, a shrub ripe with nicotine and scopolamine.

Billions upon billions of human beings throughout history agree—getting high can be more fun than a barrel of monkeys. An unspoken, unspeakable truth, that, these days. To state out loud in the ’90s that drugs can be anything but the devil’s implacable dildo is as foolhardy as flashing a Comintern card in the ’50s. Until the powers that be acknowledge this inconvenient fact, though, American drug education will never be other than a laughable waste of poster board. What I remember of my own drug education in the late ’60s are grainy black and white films from the ’50s. You know, on a dare, Suzy Sorority takes a puff of “tea” offered by a duck-tailed greaser. Before you can say “assassin of youth”, a haggard Suzy is turning tricks for a trench-coated pusherman. Vastly more knowledgeable about the current-day reality of drugs than the gym and health teachers dragooned into educating us about them, we thought those films a scream. No less a joke were such spurious scare stories as the mythical college students who went blind staring down the sun tripping on acid.

Youth, in any event, believes itself invulnerable, indestructable, impregnable. Like sex and driving (or eating, for that matter) drugs of all description are an ever-available source of pleasure that can also yield a world of hurt. A sizeable percentage of kids will use, guaranteed, no matter how many pictures of fried eggs are thrust in their faces. So why not inform them accurately about the pleasure and pains, alike, lying out there on the neural frontier? “This is your brain; this is your brain on drugs”, says precisely nothing of meaning to kids having the hoot of their young lives on a first joint. Once they suss that many of the “facts” dished out with the slogans run rife with farcical misinformation and baseless scare stories, kids will tune out everything they might also hear about the very real dangers lurking down that long, winding stream of substances. I know I sure did.

Around the time I (belatedly) began yanking my young crank with all due adolescent diligence, I also found filler for that yawning cosmic void far more effective than Hershey’s kisses. I first got drunk at age 12, spritzing a belly full of bourbon and gin all over the house one winter night. A kid actor in community theater, I’d tag along on post-curtain pub hops. Despite a juvenile tendency to order scotch-and-tonic and other non-drinks, my elders in that more innocent, more dissolute era were more than happy to buy me drinks. I was more than happy to down them.

Around the time I began boozing, I also began blindly harvesting pills from any bathroom with a lock on the door. These first forays in what was to become a lifelong vocation as a drug cabinet cowboy usually yielded Miltown, phenobarbital and all those other mother's little helpers. The drowsy life in the Valley of the Dolls was never for me, downs and tranks being the only chemical genre for which I never really developed a hankering. Finally, at age 14, I tumbled to street drugs. Pot in its many guises, of course, and then acid and then speed and then cocaine and then heroin. The classic textbook progression, you might say.

Substances, it should surprise no one to hear, can be a terrific way to facilitate acceptance for the socially impaired. Candy is dandy, but liquor is quicker. I was the sort of irritatingly hyper-intellectual, pencil-necked geek whom toughs would travel from other school districts just to kick the shit out of. In time, having dived head first into the counterculture before most of my peers worked wonders for my social standing.

For one thing, genuine camaraderie still flourished among longhairs in 1968, at least in my fly-over land hometown. Spot a freak you didn't know and you'd cross the street to say "high" and compare notes on hassles from straights. "May I help you, Miss", at the McDonald's. "When did you last take a bath?" from the asshole in line behind. We were family. For another when the Great American Tune-In, Turn-On, and Drop-Out finally went mainstream around 1970, having gotten in on the ground floor catapulted me from the trollish bottom rank of that savage high school totem pole to the winged precincts at the top. One year, the hockey team is plotting to pound my faggot ass and shave my hippy head. (Take it from a pro, short of hiring a helicopter, there are only so many ways to sneak home from school.) The next, the same jocks are slapping me on the back, asking to cop a lid of grass. I never dealt to those jerks. Why should I? I had arrived. I had it all figured out, I figured.

The druggist—unconscious minister of celestial pleasures!—looked dull and stupid. . . Nevertheless, in spite of such indications of humanity, he has ever since existed in my mind as the beatific vision of an immortal druggist, sent down to earth on a special mission to myself.

—Thomas De Quincey, *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, 1822

A new friend of mine, a retired veteran of the drug wars, sorts users into two broad categories. “Sheeps to Slaughter” pop any old handful of pills, no questions asked. “Mad Scientists” research the hell out their chemicals—and pontificate ad nauseum on what they think they know. An anything-goes garbagehead who memorized the PDR, given as often as not to scooping all of the poop on his dope only after sampling it, I guess I’ve always been a sort of hybrid: “Mad Scientist to Slaughter.” Call me Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hydromorphone.

Early mornings last June, the detoxing dopers on 6 North would be herded into a room for one of the day’s many group gropes. This particular gripefest was launched by each patient listing every substance he/she had ever used/abused, from aspirin to acid, from Coke to coke. Of the hundreds of hard-core head cases who’ve passed through 6 North, a counselor told me, I took the toxic cake. As I monotonically reel through a three-column, three-minute litany of licit and illicit uppers, downers, inners, outers and sidewaysers I have crammed into my mouth, nose, bloodstream and rectum over the past 28 years, the already glassy eyes of my fellow addicts glaze over completely. Here’s the dishonor roll—classified, alphabetized, trademarked, and spell-checked for publication: Depressants: amitriptyline (Elavil); barbiturates [amobarbitol (Amytal), pentobarbital (Nembutal), phenobarbital (Luminal) and secobarbital (Seconal)]; benzodiazepines [alprazolam (Xanax), chlordiazepoxide (Librium), diazepam (Valium) and lorazepam (Ativan)]; chloral hydrate (Mickey Finn); dimenhydrinate (Dramamine); diphenhydramine (Benadryl); ethyl alcohol (booze); meprobamate (Miltown and Equanil); methaqualone (Quaalude and Sopor); phenothiazines [chlorpromazine (Thorazine), prochlorperazine (Compazine), trifluoperazine (Stelazine) and promethazine (Phenergan)]. Stimulants: adrenalin chloride (epinephrine injection); amphetamines [benzphetamine (white crosses), dextroamphetamine (brown-and-clears, black beauties) and methamphetamine (Desoxyn, crystal meth)]; cocaine (flake and crack); methylphenidate (Ritalin); phenylpropanolamine (over-the-counter diet pills). Inhalants: amyl, butyl and isobutyl nitrite (poppers); Carbona cleaning fluid; nitrous oxide (laughing gas); toluol (airplane glue). Psychedelics: DMT (dimethyltryptamine); Ecstasy (MDMA, 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine); Eve (MMDA, 3-methoxy-4,5-methylenedioxyamphetamine); LSD-25 (d-lysergic acid diethylamide); MDA (3,4-methylenedi-

oxyamphetamine); mescaline; ololiuqui (Hawaiian wood-rose and morning glory seeds); peyote; phencyclidine (PCP, a/ k/a Sernyl, angel dust or love boat); psilocybin; scopolamine (belladonna); STP (a/k/a DOM, 2,5-dimethoxy-4-methylamphetamine); tetrahydrocannabinoids (hashish, hash oil, marijuana and pharmaceutical Marinol). Opioids: codeine phosphate (Tylenol 3, etc.); dextromethorphan (cough syrups); diacetylmorphine (heroin); diphenoxylate (Lomotil); fentanyl; hydrocodone bitartrate (Hycodan, Hydromine and Vicodin); hydromorphone (Dilaudid); meperidine (Demerol); methadone (Dolophine); morphine sulfate; opium (smokable gum and pharmaceutical Pantopon); oxycodone (Percocet, Percodan, Roxicet and Tylox), pentazocine (Talwin); propoxyphene (Darvon).

Taking pedantically this exercise in pharmaceutical total recall, I've not bothered listing such lame kicks as eating heaps of nutmeg or smoking banana scrapings (though I am lame enough to have tried them). Nor have I included such mild legal stimulants as caffeine, ginseng root, or nicotine, nor the many kola and betel nuts chewed on trips through West Africa and South Asia. Also left off is the most definitely "mood-altering" drug, Paxil—the Prozac of the '90s for bummed out hipsters, so said the Sunday Times "Styles" section—which lifts the thunderheads of darkest depression but with none of the lightning bolts hurled by a drug worth abusing. Anyway, what dope worth the name takes two weeks to come on?

This is also something less than the Compleat Post-Modern Materia Medica because, not for dint of effort, there are actually drugs I've never tried and likely never will now that I'm clean (if not necessarily serene). Having tired quickly of disco in the '70s, I've never inhaled ethyl chloride, the lung-freezing vapo-coolant the gay Saturday night fervor gang was honking from hankies in the '80s. Having wearied of electro-dance thumpety-thump by the time raves came into fashion, I've never run into such neo-neuro-nukers as the just-outlawed phenethylamine, 2CB.

Nor, for whatever reason, did I ever get around to banging phenmetrazine, or Preludin, a sort of speed known on the streets as bam. Nor have I had my mad whirl with the many mind-bending tropical flora favored by the Carlos Castaneda crowd. Farewell asarone, cohoba, datura, fly agaric, kava-kava, khat, yage, and yohimbine, I'll never know ye. Likewise, ibogaine, squeezed from a psychedelic shrub in Africa and touted today as a cure for—goodness, gracious, shut my mouth—heroin addiction.

I've also confined the substances cited to those consumed with recreational intent, not those inflicted by surgeons. Ether (like being drowned in a washing machine), therefore, and pentothal (lights out, kids) does not make the dope list. Similarly, my sole run in with ketamine, a PCP-like anesthetic qua party drug called Special K, was decidedly non-recreational. After flipping a drive-away car ass-over-bumper in 1980, I was tended by a quack pursuing his quaint country malpractice in Van Horn, Texas. Before jamming into its socket a badly shattered shoulder he reckoned was merely dislocated, Dr. Feelbad shot me plumb full o' K. Already in shock, I hallucinated being methodically crushed by industrial machinery. I'm told I screamed in non-stop terror until the K wore off.

Even in my own field of specialization, opiates, several potentially worthy alkaloids escaped unsampled. Topping that list is oxymorphone, or Numorphan. Milligram for milligram, this semisynthetic opiate is 4-5 times more potent than

diacetylmorphine, or heroin. It even kicks biochemical butt a wee bit harder than hydromorphone, or Dilaudid. Here's one way to think about the opioid hierarchy: Following the trend toward groups named after opiates—Codeine, Laudanum, Morphine, Opium Den—let's say I put together an alternative rock band. Oxycodone and Hydrocodone are okay, I guess, but this band is loud and fast so we call it Dilaudid. If we really bit the big one, a likely outcome, I'd shift the name to Demerol, a synthetic opiate 60 times less potent than Dilaudid. If we rocked the rafters, though, I'd rename the group Oxymorphone. If Oxymorphone became an overnight, arena-filling sensation like Nirvana did, I guess we'd have to switch the name to Etorphine. Synthetic dope 10,000 times stronger than morphine, etorphine's only apparent use outside the laboratory is in darts to stun elephants and hippos for capture.

Finally, please, a moment of awed silence for that holiest of narcotic grails: the Brompton's Cocktail, a made-to-order elixir named for the fun-loving London hospice where it was first concocted. A typical cocktail decanted for the dying at a nursing home in England in the mid-'70s reportedly comprised "heroin, cocaine, gin and phenothiazine, a tranquilizer, all mixed in with a chloroform-water base." Death, where is thy sting?

When I put a spike into my vein, then things aren't quite the same
When I'm rushing on my run, I feel just like Jesus' son
I guess that I just don't know. I guess that I just don't know.

–Velvet Underground, “Heroin”, 1967

I have always considered my body a temple. Yeah, a Temple of Doom. In my misspent youth, I'd try almost anything—twice. Phencyclidine, alias PCP or angel dust, offers your basic brute-force chemical lobotomy. Age 16, dusted to the tits, I stand before an elm tree, completely clueless what this alien entity was much less what the English word for it might be. How can anyone smoke this poison for pleasure? Well, of course, I had to get dusted a second time just to see if anything could really be that nasty. It was, and I've not touched the stuff again.

So appalling were some mad experiments, even Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hydromorphone wouldn't run them twice. Belladonna, for instance. STP. DMT. Injectable adrenaline. Bad trips and bum rushes, one and all. On most of these chemical catastrophes, I was warned in advance. But I had to try them. It's like this: On my 11th birthday, I got one of those Mr. Wizard chemistry sets. It was trashed in no time. Who could resist mixing the chemicals together hoping for wild colors, a foul stink, an explosion, any unexpected outcome? The same spirit of adventurous inquiry—the very verve that made America great—also informed my later chemistry experiments. A not-atypical July day, 1970: Morning, get out of bed, smoke a joint, eat breakfast. Meet Jeff down at the lake. Drop a tab of mescaline. Amble over to Rod's house. His anesthesiologist dad keeps a big jar of 5 mg. yellow dex in a high kitchen cabinet. Drop a couple hits of speed. Stroll back down to the lake. Smoke a bowl or three of kif. (A few years hence, we would also have downed a few beers. In those polarized days, booze was strictly for parents, jocks and war-lovers. You know, fools and beerheads.) The afternoon flits by on effortless wings of electric song.

Early evening, the mesc wearing off, I split. Hit Stevie's place. His mom is away. An activist with the underground railroad smuggling draft resisters into Canada, she's gone a lot. The Feds come around a lot. Ironically enough, Stevie's dooper friends come around a lot, too. This midsummer's night, a crowd of them are in the kitchen, shooting opium. Terra incognita. The needle is kind of scary. The opium is more than fine. Rounds off the jittery trailing edge of the speed. Amps up the fading eyelid movies of the mescaline. Goes real good with the hash we smoke.

Later that night, warmly wrapped in my private world of wonders, gliding home to the House of Usher. My folks are out, too. Drift up to my room. Put

on Ten Years After. Roll a joint. Lay back. Not high enough. Time to push the envelope. Time to shift to afterburners. Pull out a tube of Testors. Squeeze a glob of glue into a baggy. Toluol, plastic solvent, kiddy dope. It'll zap your brain cells, they said, eat your liver. Maybe. Also the most astonishing hallucinogen going. Later, Testors spikes its red-and-white tubes with mustard oil. Make you get sick before you get off. Pull the baggy's mouth to mine. Huffing. In, out. In, out. Toxic taste. In, out. In— Total ignition. I boldly go where no boy has gone before. Floating inside a polyhedron so hugely vast only a drugged mind could comprehend its vast hugeness. An immensity of electric space defined by vivid, swirling geometries. At once plasticene and fleshy, they pulse rhythmically with my every breath. Cosmos suffused in a sonorous magnetic hum. Music of the spheres. Every detail down to the most minute swirling curlicue unthinkably sharp, unbelievably real. Alternate reality as concrete as the keys under my fingers now. There, then, though, there is no body. All is mind. The mind is all. All is one. One and one and one is three. Come toge— Well, you get the idea.

Amazing stuff, pyschedelics. Mere hundreds of micrograms of cleverly structured molecules are the keys to a private Disney Land of the divine. Acid and its chemical cousins could be a gas, pure and simple. We called them laughing bummers. You know, trips where you get to guffawing. Rolling on the ground. Clutching your sides. Can't catch your breath. Might die of hilarity. Hurts. Just can't stop. All the terrible, absurd mystery of the universe roaring from your gut in an unstoppable gush of elation. Tripping was just as often a strange, solemn pilgrimage into the seeming center of universal mysteries. More than once, stretching on mental tippy-toes, I reached out and grazed the very ass of God. Yes, I did. Unlike such strenuous disciplines as Zen meditation, though, the chemical short cut to this glorious grasp of the oneness of the cosmos leaves one pretty much nowhere the next day. Nursing a hangover, maybe. I steeped myself in Zen writings striving to cobble a construct that could capture and hold these awe-inspiring sensations, perceptions and visions. An exercise in futility. Like everything else, the insights gained from a pill are ultimately worth about what you pay for them. In those days, acid ran a buck a tab. Dollar for your thoughts?

Tripping, of course, could also be a scarifying plummet into the self's bottomless abyss. Set (how you feel when you drop) and setting (where you do it) can be crucial. Setting: My first time tripping in New York City, big-time bummer. Salsa hell. That West 103rd Street barrio too unsettling, too alien for a mind-blown Middle American. You quickly learn to sit the bad trips out, though. This too—your face melting into your hands, say, or a shattering vision of human misery and vicious folly stretching into the far wastes of eternity—this too shall pass. Set: Never drop if you aren't reasonably happy with your life. As my teens wore on, this became a mission impossible. The mounting realization that my attraction to my own sex was more than a pubescent passage was devastating. Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Sex, the abominable Dr. David Rubin's late-'60s bestseller, seemed to tell me exactly what to expect: a career of furtive shame, compulsively cross-dressing, dildoeing myself with summer squash. How could I feel good about my deviant self? Faggot! Cocksucker! Buttfucker! Conservatively, I count more than 350 trips. Six times a month, let's say, over five years or so. Peyote cactus. Like eating God's feces. Psilocybin. Organic psychedelic orgasm. Acid. How shall I count the ways?

Blue Barrel. Orange Sunshine. Purple Dot. Pink Owsley. White Lightning. Black Death. Sugar cubes. Blotter. Windowpane. Microdots. Pharmaceutical LSD-25 from Czechoslovakia, even. The candy store is wide open, and I am shopping myself silly. Most of the first 300 or so trips were a joy. As my closet crisis deepened, at absolute loggerheads with my true self, my inner voyages evolved into grueling travails of introspective despair and self-hatred. Undaunted, I kept slamming myself over the head with that million-pound cosmic shithammer. Bitter-ending it like a dope fiend, until the psychic pain could no longer be unendured. Save for a half-dozen ecstatic mid-'80s interludes with Ecstasy—more an empathic mood-mellower than a wrenching mind-expander—I've not touched a psychedelic since I turned 20. That acid test fit what has been a lifelong pattern. Revving up my drug of choice, I'd drive it relentlessly until that toxic truck crashes. Clamber from the wreckage. Hike back to the neural highway. Flag down a more roadworthy chemical vehicle. Continue the trip.

With pot, this was really more a matter of simply shifting into a lower gear. In my teenage years, smoking weed was pretty much like breathing—everyone did it all the time without much thinking about it. As I advanced into my 20s, not only did social toking fall increasingly by the cultural wayside, but I found it harder and harder to maintain in public high on grass. Not until 1982, when I read "The Dog is Us", Marcelle Clements' insightful essay in *Rolling Stone*, did I realize that "attacks of ego-chewing paranoia" eventually afflict most potheads. Over the past two decades, I always kept a small stash of grass on hand, but for purely private consumption, the better to enjoy music, zone out in front of the tube, inhale pints of H²Oagen-Dazs.

On speed, no surprise, I ran the crash-and-burn cycle in record time. I never got into shooting crank, thankfully. And ice, smokable methadrine, came along after my time. I ran the route orally, gobbling white crosses, brown-and-clears, black beauties. The pills were bad enough. Three, four day runs. Up and running, running, running. Not sleeping. Not eating. Talking, though. Talking. Talking. Talking. Bouncing off the walls of rooms filled with speed freaks. All of us chattering like squirrels. Day Three of a run. Manic amphetamine psychosis. Voices in my ears. Gremlins in my eyes. Neural collapse. Twelve hours dreamless doze of the dead. Get up. Go for the gusto. Drop some more crosses. Run that sucker again. And again. And again. By the spring semester of 11th grade, Zippy the Speed Freak is an unwashed 120-pound hollow-eyed shadow of himself. A babbling brook ebbing down to boulder-bones. Teeth loosening in my head. The speed truck veered off into a ditch and blew into a million bits. I haven't even felt tempted to press the pedal to that particular metal in a quarter-century.

Not long after I heaved up on the shores of neighboring terrain, Coca Country, I'd also leaped the injection hurdle. Not that hard to do, once I discovered the payoff. Hitting coke, the reward is repeatedly sticking your greedy fingers into God's light socket. Yow! shouts Zippy the Coke Head. Are we having fun yet? Crack, readily smokable cocaine, has made this explosive pleasure accessible to one and all, absent the fuss and muss of tapping into the mainline. I've sucked on my share of crack stems. The thing is, you can only pull in so much smoke in one blow on the devil's johnson. The blizzards of flake you can tip into a spoon and draw up into a fit, though, are limited only by the fortitude of heart and wallet.

That first electric jolt of coke lasts mere minutes. Successive rushes are never quite so electrifying. So hit it again and again and again. Chasing my tail. Swooning with pleasure. Jack that fit. Pumping blood-coke in and out, in and out. Incandescent light. Head fixing to explode. Up the dose again and again and again. Heart fixing to explode. Pounding. Pounding. Cardiac arrest? Survived that hit. Close call. Can I live through this one? Hands palsied. Making mincemeat of my arms. Bent over. Gripping the rig in two trembling fists. Trying to hit veins in my feet. Stick a fork in it, this run is done. Roger, flight control, Flight Umpteenhundred is crashing. Auguring in. Bruised, bleeding limbs. Utter emptiness. Bottomless despair. A year's worth of brain dopamines squandered in a night.

I ran the coke truck only partway off the road. Too much craziness on coke alone. Fit-jacking craziness. Sex craziness. Money craziness. Street craziness. That yammering id: More, more, more. Never enough. And then, inevitable as death and taxes: crash craziness. Never again. Need to blunt that brute edge with a soothing balm in the Gilead of my grief. A monkey, a cute little squirrel monkey, scampers into the room. Perches on my shoulder. Hey, sucker! Enter heroin. Enter speedballs. On the street, coke is girl, heroin is boy. A hetero match made in heaven. Heroin. The blue-plate special in the chemical cafeteria. At age 7, I got a picture book for Christmas, *A Child's Glimpse of New York*. I knew even then that I wanted to worm my way into the Big Apple's hard core. In the fullness of time, I succeeded. In my mid-teens, reading William Burroughs and the other Beats, I knew I wanted to be a junkie. Terminally hip. Coolly self-contained. Beyond the law. Beyond caring. Stoned, listening repeatedly to Lou Reed's "Heroin", I wanted to be Jesus' son, rushing on my run. In the fullness of time, I succeeded. I guess that I just didn't know.

Opium is profane and quantitative like money. The more junk you use the less you have and the more you have the more you use. Junk is the ideal product. . . . No sales talk necessary. The client will crawl through a sewer and beg to buy. The junk merchant does not sell his product to the consumer, he sells the consumer to his product.

–William Burroughs, “a word to the wise guy”
intro to *Naked Lunch*, 1959

A new buddy—having lost his job, his condo, all his money and then some—was cooping for a bit at his mother’s house, as newly recovering addicts will do. When I’d call and leave messages last summer, his mom would tell him, “That heroin addict called.” With no less contempt she might have announced, “That baby-raper called.” Her son, I might add, is a stone crack freak. Crack, I might further add, is the wackest of wack.

As for smack, I won’t con you, we’re not talking about over-priced Anacin here, just another analgesic in life’s pharmacy. Pursued aggressively, junk will fuck up your life, you can count on it. It is rather remarkable, though, how heroin has come to be cloaked in such an outsized mystique. Heroin: the urdrug, the mere mention of which sends frissons of fear and titillation dancing down the spines of the uninitiated. Precisely this cachet lures the curious, the reckless, the rebellious into heroin’s dark flame. This ubiquitous alkaloid could do with a bit of demysticizing. If prostitution is the oldest profession, prehistoric hookers and hustlers may well have been working those caves to feed a jones for opium. Human consumption of the sap of the oriental poppy, *Papaver somniferum*, has been traced as far back as the 6th millennium B.C. Written references to what Homer called *nepenthe*, the “potent destroyer of grief”, date to the 3rd century B.C. Only in 1803, though, did a German pharmacist isolate from opium gum its most potent alkaloid. Morphine, he aptly named the stuff, after *Morpheus*, the Greek god of dreams. In dynamic duo with the hypodermic syringe, contrived in mid-century, morphine proved an infinitely more effective analgesic than laudanum, the 10% tincture of opium widely used until then. (Widely used is something of an understatement; in mid-19th century England, opium consumption averaged three pounds per person per annum.) Morphine was infinitely more addictive than laudanum, too, as America learned in the Civil War’s wake, its boarding houses jammed with jonesing vets suffering the “army disease” of addiction.

In 1898, yet another German pharmacologist repeated earlier experiments treating morphine with acetic acid. Willkommen, diacetylmorphine! Bayer & Co. marketed the novel semisynthetic opiate as a cough suppressant, dubbing it

heroin—from heroisch, “powerful” in German. Those Kraut chemists! Morphine. Heroin. Amphetamines. Methadone. Only when they dreamed up Zyklon B death gas, does the family of nations finally stage an intervention. From goose-stepping to twelve-stepping: “We admitted that we were powerless over Poland. . . .”

“Heroine”, the succoring cure for morphine addiction, is another seemingly deathless myth of drug history. But heroin is a remarkably efficacious cough remedy. No cure for the common cold, eh? Give smack a whirl and you can join millions of satisfied junkies who claim never to have suffered a cold, cough or flu. Per milligram, diacetylmorphine also boasts better than twice the potency of morphine sulfate, the PDR says, although its effects are of “slightly shorter” duration. Like a diligent Customs agent, interestingly, when presented with a dose of smack, the busy body promptly metabolizes the illegal stuff back into mere morphine. So why the black market in heroin? Why don’t the traffickers eliminate their bills for acetic anhydride and simply deal in morphine?

On the demand side, intravenous injection of morphine produces a nasty pins-and-needles sensation (to escape which, when fixing morphine, I’d always shoot in a leg muscle rather than an arm vein). Another reason nine out of ten dope fiends prefer heroin: “A mainer to my veins leads to a center in my head”, Lou Reed sings. But only a minute fraction of the morphine flowing in Lou’s bloodstream can cross the blood-brain barrier to mate with the opiate receptors so conveniently clustered in his head. Armed with a valid biochemical visa, heroin more easily passes the barrier in that instant before the metabolic Customs catalysts mobilize for action. Heroin thus hits faster than morphine. Ergo, more euphoric bang for Lou’s buck. Bonus offer, shoppers: no pins-and-needles. On the supply side, heroin is no more a concentrate of morphine than crack is a concentrate of cocaine. Au contraire, Pierre. A kilogram of morphine base yields better than 1.1 kilos of heroin. You don’t need a Friedman to figure the French connection’s upside in this business.

What is heroin like? If I had a quarter (bag) for every time a non-addict friend asked me that, I’d. . . well, I’d probably still be shooting dope. More than any other drug state, opiation may be the hardest to describe. Why do you think they’re called hard drugs? Watching practiced dope fiends fix up, expressionlessly wash out their works and calmly carry on their affairs, the innocent bystander might well think heroin has no effect at all. On maintenance doses of dope, the only sure external signs of intoxication are meiosis, or pinpointing of the pupils, and a Lauren Bacall-like roughening of voice. Watch, too, for persistent snuffling. High or kicking, it seems, junkie snot runs like a faucet. Oh, yeah, there’s that disconcerting tendency to pour sweat and an aptly apelike pawing at that subdermal opiate itch that somehow never quite gets scratched.

Pretty subtle stuff. Even the infamous nod, that chin-on-chest opiate stupor, comes and goes almost at will. A nod can seem a bottomless well of waking dreams. Drawn-out dialogues with angels. Lost to the world. My first time snorting smack: A camel slips from numb fingers, onto my lap. The lit tip burns through jeans, through shorts, searing into my 17-year-old short-and-curlies. An alert buddy nudges, Your dick’s on fire, asshole. On the other hand: Decades later, nodding in my cubicle, musing in smack’s sweet embrace. Hopelessly lost to the work-a-day world, right? Not entirely. An editor intrudes on my reverie. In a flash, I’m all business. Bright-eyed, bushy-tailed. Yes, sir. No, sir. Three bags full, sir. Heh, heh. Nor are narcotics—from narkosis,

Greek for “benumbed”—necessarily all about nodding. A shot of dope, not too little, not too much, et voila: the Mighty Morphine Power Ranger, imbued with the strength to do what needs to be done. Say what you will about dope fiends, don’t say we don’t work hard. Keeping that moody monkey in chow is fulltime work, ripping and running, whether you’re boosting hockables from department stores or writing feature stories. Before my monkey became King Kong, but well after weekend and then evening use had inexorably evolved into a relentless morning-noon-and-night routine, I stuck fast to a hard rule: no savings for smack. Over several years, I cranked out freelance like a fanatic to pay the dopeman. Covering the 1992 political conventions, I zestfully slaved 14 hours a day, zipped on junk. (We all know now what put the tiger in my tank that hot August in Houston. What in the name of his judgmental God most merciless was Pat Buchanan hitting? Adrenal glands harvested from Haitian immigrants?) Compared to coke’s solar, electric push, junk exerts a more lunar, near-tidal pull. Smack unstoppers a warm flood of euphoria, detonating a soft burst of ease radiating from tummy to finger tips. Also radiating from the tummy, often enough, is a spectacular Technicolor yawn. Many a novice drives the smack truck into the ditch on test drive, puking their guts out alongside the neural highway. Never again, they swear. And they don’t. So much for the it’s-so-good-don’t-even-try-it-once myth. Research by Vincent Dole, the father of methadone maintenance, suggests that only 1 in 50 of those who try heroin ever pursue the drug to dependence. Dyed-in-the-wool druggies sample smack and simply walk away. Not for them.

Not me. I had to shop hard to score my first fix. The older users and dealers I approached wanted no part of steering me down that particular pathway. So much for the myth of the pusher. When I finally did connect, my first encounter with the white horse was very much like catching up with a familiar-but-forgotten friend. Yes! This is what I’ve been looking for. Yes! This is exactly how I’ve always wanted to feel. Narcotic nausea? Oh, well. Fix up, throw up and carry on.

I know that some of you don't understand
Milk-blood to keep from running out
I've seen the needle and the damage done
A little part of it in everyone
But every junkie's like a setting sun.

–Neil Young, “The Needle and the Damage Done”, 1972

Carrying on with junk, of course, typically entails probing tender flesh with piercing needles. Gross! shudders the neophyte narcophile, I could never do that! Never say never. Needles are just another blood-brain barrier, easily passed over once you get the hang of banging. For me, watching others fix has always sparked a certain scrotum-tightening queasiness. Among his many other failings, a former using buddy was also something less than a born needleman. Beavis is in the living room punishing vein and gristle with clotted works. Butthead me, toe tapping, stomach churning, is in the kitchen waiting irritably for him to finish. Hitting yours truly, though, has never been a problem.

Blood-Sugar-Sex-Magik. Like dicking yourself. The cooking up and tying off–foreplay. Slipping it in. Shooting the wad. Ejaculatory release. Cause and effect so elemental, Pavlovian junk cells salivate before the bell's even rung. As a junior junkie, the needles, not the dope, sometimes seemed the issue. Drugless, I'd pass the hours drawing blood or running a point through my finger webs, thrilled to the quick to possess this new power over my own stubborn body. As a senior smackhead, needles have been less of a fetish and more simply a means to a desired end. Instant gratification, for one thing. Not a drop of precious poppy juice wasted, for another.

Besides bestowing the grisly stigmata of addiction–blue-green-yellow bruises and scabby track marks, not to mention the lumps and embolisms of missed hits–injection also vastly boosts the risks of accidental overdose. Early last year, despondent though I was, I stoutly resisted a shrink's urgings to go on anti-depressants. Listen to your own damned Prozac, Dr. Kramer, I wasn't going to trust the AMA to mess with my serotonin, thank you very much. Of course, thousands of times I've eagerly injected directly into my bloodstream powders of highly dubious purity and potency compounded by criminal cartels and street scum. Only once have I had the eerie experience of keeling over after jacking a hit, coming to consciousness 15 minutes later with the fit still dangling from my arm. Shooting at home alone, I just figured that was the monkey's rude way of saying he'd had his fill. Groggily, I cleaned my works and packed them away until morning. Twice, though, I've endured the terror of watching others slide into overdose. In the early '70s, a friend dropped by with a bottle of

apomorphine swiped from his physician-father's black bag. My girlfriend—this was years and years ago, remember—went first. Apomorphine is an emetic, it turns out, owing less to Morpheus, the god of dreams, than to Bacchus, the patron saint of puking. No sooner did Patti pull needle from vein than she fell over in a dead faint. Minutes of panic until she came around. Should we call an ambulance? She might be dying! Would the heat follow the medics? We might get busted!

And so that unpretty point of junkie etiquette—when a colleague croaks, dump the corpse at a discrete remove and carry on. Shooting smack with Beavis at his Dupont Circle pied-a-terre last year, a rerun of the Patti panic. Constitutionally incapable of comprehending when enough was enough, Beavis kept banging bags until he tipped over into comatose cyanosis. Hours of fear this time. Butthead slapping Beavis awake with wet towels. Struggling to decide: Call an ambulance and split? Or just split? You're a greedy asshole, I tell Beavis, when he again could breathe without being ordered to do so. The next time, I warn him, I leave you to die.

And I might have done just that. In Junktime, it's pretty hard to get too panicked about anything. Smack: an opaque plate of safety glass shielding against all of life's little drive-bys. Friend dying? Oh, well. Boss calling? Oh, well. Rent due? Oh, well. In Junktime, when Mr. Monkey is sated, every hour is a minute, every day an hour. And every day-hour passes pretty much like the one before. Most of you sorry wretches have no clue how you will feel as your day wears on. Get up on the bright right side of the bed, return to it a PMSing bitch on wheels. Ah, but well-medicated wiseguys always knows how they'll feel: comfortably numb.

“When the smack begins to flow, I really don't care anymore”, Lou sings. “And I'm better off than dead.” In the coils of Junktime, I might as well be dead. Smack: just another word for nothing left to lose. One by one, the mammalian pleasure-functions ebb away. Food? Why bother? Just as well, really. Peristalsis takes a holiday. Haven't taken a shit in weeks. Libido packs its bags, too. Haven't had a hard-on in months. Sex—a vaguely entertaining intellectual concept. Reading is fun-damental. Not in Junktime. Keep scanning the same page over and over again. Eyes can't focus, anyway. Music hath alarums to wild the civil breast, eh, Will? Not in Junktime. Who needs tunes? Harmony enough just noodling away on that internal endorphin piano. Hail the real opium of the masses: cable television. After so many hundreds of empty hours drooling witless before the chatter-box, I can't bear the sight of the damned thing. Who parked this overflowing tele-toilet in my livingroom, anyway?

As the monkey settles in, the kick inevitably collapses of its own weary weight. Simply stoking an unsteady state of opiation, junk becomes a monotonous means of knitting and reknitting the ever-raveling sleeve of care. Tolerance builds. Turbo-injecting more and more junk-fuel just to turn over that cellular engine. The early rush is gone (recapturing which, Speedballers of America, is where coke typically comes in). Only when circumstances drive the addict to the anxious edge of withdrawal will a shot of dope trigger the tummy orgasm of yore, thirsty junk cells gratefully gulping.

Circumstances often so conspire. “He's never early, he's always late”, Lou sings, another home truth in another smack song. “The first thing you learn is you've always got to wait. Waiting, waiting for my man.” If the man is way

late, well, have you ever seen documentary footage of a raging baboon? Brutal blur of snarl and incisors? Hungry monkey goes crazy. If sweet oblivion is the initial carrot, savage withdrawal is the enduring stick. In time, the dope fiend is not so much chasing a high as fleeing a debacle. The body leans full into the opiate onslaught. If that gale should suddenly fall still, the metabolism tumbles flat on its face. All symptoms of use take an abrupt U-turn in withdrawal: Constricted pupils dilate. Depressed blood pressure spikes through the roof. Where once there was constipation, now diarrhea for days. Where once there was constant nodding, now insomnia without end. Where once there was numbness beyond caring, now anguish beyond endurance. Heroin “withdrawal can mean life-threatening convulsions”, Newsweek informed us last August in a typically bollixed bit of drug reporting. Alcohol or barbiturate cold turkey can be terminal. Like rats on strychnine, those addicts can convulse into fatal exhaustion. Kicking junkies don’t die from withdrawal, though many of us have prayed to God that we would.

As violent as the abruptly junkless body’s revolt can be, the psychic pain vastly exceeds the physical. Think on it. Sick as you’ve ever been, and two hard truths remain front and center: 1) this infection is self-inflicted, and 2) it can be cured only by the medicine that caused it. Hair of a very savage dog, indeed. Every dope fiend suffers withdrawal symptoms guaranteed to drive him or her uniquely around the bend. Stone insomnia was my personally homesteaded circle of hell. Marinated in misery, I am blinklessly awake for every single second of the ordeal, hundreds of thousands of seconds over a half-dozen or so nightmarish days.

Junk sickness boasts a powerful psychosomatic component, which makes its ravages no less a horrifying reality. Aging metabolism may be partly to blame, but every time I have run up and then kicked a jones, the withdrawal worsens and the next habit comes on all the more quickly. These days, 48 hours of use, and I am helplessly hooked. Even clean, the dope fiend must sometimes endure the bizarre phenomenon of smack-agony flashback. Protracted conditioned abstinence syndrome, it’s called. Returned to the cages in which they had become addicted, lab rats are plunged into writhing withdrawal. Those junkie rodents been drug-free for months. Months! Once the junk cells have drunk deep of the poppy’s nectar, it seems, they develop a crafty monomaniacal mind of their own. I’ve suffered torturous twinges of this situational sickness myself in New York’s Penn Station, through which I passed again and again on copping missions to Manhattan’s ghettos, feeding a secret habit none of my colleagues could ever even have guessed at.

I don't need to fight to prove I'm right
I don't need to be forgiven
Don't cry, don't raise your eye
It's only a teenage wasteland

—The Who, “Baba O’Reilly”, 1971.

Appalled by the person they believe themselves truly to be, teenagers typically cultivate a romantic notion of the person they would like to be seen as being. I’m afraid I cast myself in the Jean Genet-William Burroughs role—you know, the queer-intellectual-outlaw type (garden-variety, bourgeois, bullshit-artist subtype). When not ratifying my adolescent angst reading Samuel Beckett’s grim novels, I’m peddling speed and acid on a street corner. When not striving for Zen satori gobbling psychedelics by the handful and poring over Alan Watts’ noodlings, I’m boosting clothes, books, steaks and cigarettes from department stores and supermarkets. When not eating macrobiotic and following the Grateful Dead all over the Woodstock Nation, I’m sitting around shooting narcotics.

In short, I was a hopelessly confused, foot-in-all-camps sort of kid. A shade too middle class just to drop out of high school like the other burn-outs I knew, I went to summer school (strung out on speed) so I could accelerate a semester so I could graduate early so I could move out of the House of Usher just after turning 17. The first few months on my own, I worked construction. Grubstake in hand, I then paid the rent for a time dealing ounces of grass and grams of hash.

In time, as hippie high times yielded to hard-core doping, more and more of those I ran with were packing heat. A candy-ass thug, I was too lacking in the courage of my questionable convictions to go strapped myself. One night, sitting with a half-dozen of the scumbags I called friends, surrounded by a vast stash of Schedule I drugs, we get into some not-so-idle speculation. What if the Man comes bursting through the triple-locked door? My vote, unvoiced, is we drop to our knees and beg for mercy. Wrong, you pussy! Shoot it out is the majority view. Everyone but me, it turned out, was armed. As nickel-plated pistols were pulled from waistbands and the host yanked his double-barrel shotgun out of the hall closet, I truly knew myself for a dickless wonder treading water way over his head.

Risking life, limb, and liberty with mindless abandon, I’ve always met with more luck than I’ve probably merited. In 1972, hair hanging almost to my waist, I hitchhike between cities with Stevie and two kilos of grass. Stopped by the Highway Patrol, my 17-year-old goose seems cooked for sure when a

trooper radios for back-up and sets to ripping up my cigarette pack looking for reefer. Knees-knocking, I all but hold my wrists out for the steel bracelets. But the troopers never even look for the four pounds of pungent Mexican weed so stupidly stashed in my backpack. Instead, they give us a lift to another freeway entrance and ten minutes to get out of Dodge. Down at Mardi Gras around that time, Stevie's luck runs out. Patted down on the street by the N.O.P.D., he is busted for the whale's tooth hash pipe in his pocket and sits in Parish Prison for three days while I line up bail money. Strolling through the French Quarter at Stevie's side, carrying the hash we'd been smoking in his pipe, I'd once again wriggled free of fate. Just after my 18th birthday, I do finally get popped—for misdemeanor theft after stuffing a 95¢ paperback under my shirt. (Thomas Berger's *Nights in Berlin*, as it happens, much to the misplaced, elbow-nudging delight of the cops in central booking.) After a day in county jail, I get a year's probation. Not until my early 20s, though, did it finally sink in that I could like myself a lot better and escape the gut-wrenching anxiety I suffered every time I went into a store if I would just pay for the things I wanted.

Overnight, inexorably, myth would have it, heroin sucks its acolytes downward into that spiraling sinkhole of insatiable need. Not necessarily. During most of my late teens, I shot smack only now and again, chipping away as many manage to do for years and years. Of course, chippers never know when their number might come up in life's lottery. For many, too, a weekend diversion becomes a daily compulsion.

My own number came up in 1973 after I had crushed a lumbar vertebra and a half-dozen other significant bones in a drunken, 300-foot tumble off the edge of Northern California. Getting jacked on medical morphine every day for months, doubtless, primed the pump for what was to come. So did coming under the care back in my hometown of the aptly named Dr. Jones. For a full year, Jones fed my jones with 'scripts for 50 Percodan, renewable twice monthly. Pharmacists would positively sneer as I filled and refilled the good doctor's permission slips to get loaded. What did I care? What could they do? This dope was legal.

The crowd I was then running—well, limping—with, was also shooting more and more illegal dope by now. Thanks, at first, to the tides of China white washing back from Southeast Asia, and then to the waves of Mexican brown flowing over the border as the Vietnam war wound down, the dope in those days was plentiful, low-priced and potent. Save possibly for a brief mid-70s nationwide panic, heroin has always been relatively plentiful in this country, if not always low-priced and potent. The smack-is-back stories now soaking up so much ink are one of those hardy perennials to which journalists, like dogs to their own vomit, fell compelled to return again and again. The field notes of this reporter, who has returned to the smack scene itself at irregular intervals over the past quarter-century, suggest that junk does not take a holiday.

Working as a mailroom clerk, trading Percs for bags, and middle-manning minor junk deals, shooting dope ever day was easy to do. I sold off a terrific record collection to feed the monkey, an act of idiocy I still bitterly rue. But I was not stealing, robbing or hustling to sustain my habit. On moving to New York in late 1974, walking away from my jones and Dr. Jones—away, in fact, from a whole way of life—also proved remarkably easy to do. Others were not so blessed: Lynn—lying overdosed for days before her bloated corpse was found. Danny—his head shot gunned off by dealers, his girlfriend nodding off oblivious upstairs. Cameron—his heart bursting from hitting too much coke. Chris—up

on trafficking charges, hanging himself in rehab. Conrad—serving a long bit in the state pen for blowing away a suburban kid in a stupid drug rip-off. John—doing his own bit after getting stung on a coke deal. A few in my crew just got permanently weird, rusting out along the neural highway.

Lucky me, I just belatedly went off to college. Armed with my last bottle of Percs, I tapered down the monkey's diet and booted him out the dormitory door. Aside from inflicting some insomnia and knee-jiggling nervousness, the ape left without raising too much hell. Diving into my studies, working 40 hours a week to pay for my credits, who had the time or the energy for doping? Anyway, the overwhelming urge to use simply dwindled away. Blowing the hinges off my closet door in my 21st year opened the way to new obsessions: love and sex. A huddled mess, I had yearned to breathe free. Coming out, I now could. I was dating, having lovers, getting laid—performing all the adolescent rites I'd so long sublimated with so many bags of sexless smack.

Before long, the drugging and thugging of my early years came to seem a closed chapter, just fodder for war stories to share with a select circle of friends. Which is not to say that mine was a life of Baptist abstinence. But days, even weeks would pass between drinks or tokes. Peeking into the occasional medicine cabinet, I'd come across the odd bottle of Percodan or Tylenol 3. Yeah, I'd pop a few. But during my eight years in New York City—Headquarters, Dope Central, the Junk Capital of the World—I never went prowling the streets for opiates.

By 1982, having earned a journalism degree and shifted to Washington, I had every reason to view my addiction in the past tense. Having shadowed me all that time, however, the monkey had another plan. Always patient, he bided his time and built his muscles. As HIV carved its awful mile-wide swathe through urban gay American life, my own life again began to wobble on its axis. As the Anxious Eighties wore on, that damned monkey took to rapping on my door with more and more insistence. When foolishly I answered his knock, that surly chimp charged back into my life transformed into a raging gorilla.

I'm ready
Ready for the laughing gas...
I'm ready
To take it to the street
Ready for the shuffle
Ready for the deal
Ready to let go
Of the steering wheel
I'm ready
Ready for the crush

–U2, “Zoo Station”, 1991

Taking leave in early 1983 to help nurse my dad through the final stages of cancer, I stumbled briefly back into the gorilla’s embrace. With all that free and legal dope lying around? Percodan. Tylox. Mepergan. Why not opiate that long month of horrors? Plenty to go around. One pill for you, daddy dearest, one for me. What a weird feeling walking out of a pharmacy with a bag of syringes and a 20 cc vial of morphine sulfate. But no weirder, really, than the parent-death looming ahead. Plenty of morphine to go around. One shot for you, father mine, and, well, two for me. Not long after his life ran out, Dad’s dope ran out, too. As had my earlier dance with the monkey, this brief turn on the floor simply receded into insignificance. In any event, I had plunged my ever-more-unhappy self into ceaseless work, that iron-fisted addiction that rules white-collar Washington. Only the neurotic depression of legions of workaholics, I’m convinced, keeps this town’s paper mills churning out those ceaseless reams of policy and prose. If all the worker bees humming away inside the Beltway woke up one morning, smelled the latté? and got themselves a real life, the U.S. government and the many cottage industries feeding off of it would go into receivership. Memo to Newt: If you’re really serious about cutting Uncle Sam down to size, dose the Washington water supply with Prozac.

For years and years, as the notices for Workaholics Anonymous meetings going up in recovery clubs around town put it, I was “a human doing instead of human being.” As with any other substitute for a balanced life, though, workaholism works only so long before the inevitable crash. By the late 1980s, the draw of working 14-hour days in pursuit of a career that seemed increasingly meaningless had waned. Depression, like nature, abhors a vacuum. Supplanting the drive for achievement, that old drug hunger reawakened. In 1985, I began sipping a cocktail every night after work. By 1988, I realized that I was nightly guzzling three or four bone-dry martinis—a nice way of describing a tumbler of

gin on the rocks. On a 1989 trip out of town, I ended up copping several bags of junk. My hands tremble as I cooked my first hit of street dope in 15 years. Shit! The shit is watered-down fentanyl. Not a nod or a scratch in ten bags. A synthetic opioid administered in microgram dosage as a surgical anesthetic, fentanyl is also cooked up in covert labs as a heroin substitute. The cause of many a fatal overdose, fentanyl can fool the monkey but has never rung my chimes. However frustrating, that suggestive taste of the poppy kick-started a powerful yen to dive once again into dope.

More years would pass, though, before I got truly back into ripping and running. Until then, the drug cabinet cowboy rode the range. I find myself accepting invitations just to gain entry to unexplored bathrooms. It's amazing the stuff non-addicts leave laying around. Codeine. Percodan. Percocet. Roxicet. Vicodin. Demerol. Dolophine. Obsession roaring back larger than life, I am shameless, pathetic, helpless, hopeless, ridiculous—ransacking bathrooms left and right, swiping entire bottles of pills, defying confrontation, damning any consequences. No gutter is too slimy to crawl through: Profiling a best-selling author for a local magazine, I'm so bold as to poke my nose into his medicine cabinet while touring his mansion. Damn! Nothing but over-the-counter garbage. I even lift a bottle of hydrocodone tablets prescribed by a vet for friends' basset hound. Someday, I'll have to make my amends to poor Max, who had to hack through that kennel cough on his own.

In 1991, after circling and picking off the outriders of my life, the virus gets personal. Again and again, it ruthlessly excises friends and former lovers. Impending middle age meets the Middle Ages: Bring out your dead! Life becomes a relentless round of deathbed farewells and memorial services. That year, too, a near-hire by a national newspaper comes a cropper. My career becomes merely a job. My craft, print journalism, is swirling down the toilet of mounting American aliteracy. Everything seems to be turning to shit.

After much dancing around the burning bush, I learn that a white-collar acquaintance has been snorting smack on frequent trips to Zurich (then still host to an infamous legal junk market). Recalling the relief heroin once gave a tortured teenage closet case, I'm ready to let go of the steering wheel. I'm ready for the crush. I mail order five grams of dope. Having walked away from a teenage habit, I think I know all there is to know about heroin. I was about to take the graduate course. The finals would be a bitch.

Early in a run, junk can be very much a working drug. Lord knows, I work hard my first few years back on the spike. I even win several of the prizes journalists are forever handing one another in that ceaseless Washington circle jerk of self-congratulation. The sizeable check attached to one of those engraved chunks of Lucite, of course, is immediately funneled into my thirsty arm.

What a bizarre double life I led: Scoring a bundle of junk—fifty \$10 bags—I'm up in Spanish Harlem, wading through the crack vials that litter 124th and Lex like pebbles on a beach in hell. Deal done, I fix in the john of a greasy spoon on Third Avenue. Heading back on Amtrak to D.C., I don a suit to interview a House committee chairman. One night, I'm compulsively mixing and fixing speedballs by candlelight in a roach-infested shooting gallery on Avenue C. The next afternoon, I'm gassing away on a panel discussion at one of Washington's more strait-laced think tanks.

This is skating on thin ice, indeed. And, on occasion, the brittle membrane dividing my double life threatens to shatter. Early one morning, I appear on

one of C-SPAN's viewer call-in programs, a forum for politically and emotionally unstable cranks. Let's just say I hadn't exactly gotten my beauty rest the night before. "What do you know about anything?" a crazed but perceptive viewer phones in from Atlanta. "Your hair's a mess. Your tie's undone. You look like you just came in from a party." I was up late working on a story, I respond lamely. Yeah, the story of my life. The program veers off into a nationwide discourse on how fucked up I look. As I contemplate sliding out of the hot seat and crawling off the set, a sweet Virginian calls in. "It's not what's on your head", she says, "it's what's in it." Lady, I think, if you knew what was really in my head, you wouldn't sound so sweet.

In 1993, I'm empanelled on a jury. Bad luck, I'm running a bad habit and the Superior Court building crawls with cops. No way am I carrying works into that place; the metal detectors at the gate almost pick up the Swedish steel holding my spine together. If the judge hadn't cleared the court every day at 5:00, I might have gone with any old verdict just to get out and get my fix. The jury haggles for three days before agreeing to nail the defendant—a gay drug addict, ironically—for theft. Having done his bit at Lorton, he turns up last summer waiting my table at a restaurant. I introduce myself and he proclaims his innocence anew. Be that as it may, I say, at least you were tried by a jury of your peers.

I'm settling in for an interview with an assistant secretary charged with prosecuting one front in George Bush's war on drugs. I start to shrug off my suit jacket. Idiot! My sleeves are rolled up. My arms, flecked with needle stigmata, look like week-old steak tartar. Jacket back on, I realize soon into the interview I could have cooked up and geezed a speedball into my jugular vein right there. I don't think that doughty drug warrior would have had the vaguest clue what was going on.

No aspect of American life is more hemmed in with sinister medieval taboos, more burdened with lurid, rancorous prejudices, and more encumbered with morbid, shrivelhearted self-interest than the law-enforcement end of the narcotics business.

—Alexander King, *May This House Be Safe From Tigers*, 1959

In early 1993, enslaved to junk and returning from just-liberated Central Europe, I make a shopping stop in Zurich. In a burg where a scotch can set you back \$12, brown Afghani smack can be had for a piddling \$70 per gram. Dazzled by this Blue Light Special, I score a half-ounce, walking it back through U.S. Customs in a shoulder bag alongside my notebooks and tape recorder. In rueful retrospect, a remarkably dumb move, carrying 15 grams of heroin into the Mother Country. Ma, you see, is on a real tear about drugs. That dope was solely for my own consumption. But had I been snagged at BWI, Ma would have grounded me in a Federal pen for not more than 27 months and not less than 21.

Future generations can only gaze back on the cruel and self-defeating punitive prohibition that has so long characterized American drug policy with the same appalled embarrassment with which we today view the days of Jim Crow apartheid. The absurd pettiness of the so-called war on drugs can be little short of astonishing. Amidst the supposed throes of a deadly crime wave, the New Jersey State Police felt compelled last August to dispatch undercover agents to a Grateful Dead concert, netting 17 busts for possession of—Katie, bar the gate!—nitrous oxide. While thousands of addicts yearning to live clean await beds at underfunded treatment centers, billions are invested in new prison cells. Better than a million Americans sit behind bars today, compared to only 330,000 in 1980. Forty-six per cent of that increase in convicts, the Sentencing Project calculates, are POWs in the drug war.

The first shot in this civil war was fired in 1914 with passage of the Harrison Act, which for the first time sought to regulate the import, marketing and sale of cocaine and opiates. Thanks to ever-more restrictive readings of that act, it “drastically reduc[ed] the flow of new addicts from medical practice or through the use of legal drugs”, Alfred Lindesmith notes in *The Addict and the Law*. “On the other hand, by shutting off the supply of legal drugs from countless users without criminal records it forced them to the illicit traffic and into the underworld.” When drugs are outlawed, only outlaws will use drugs. Driving narcotics underground, the government worked a neat trick: It leant narcotics the tempting allure of the forbidden while simultaneously creating a vast, violent and ruinously expensive black market far more socially corrosive

than anything pertaining pre-Harrison Act. Most strikingly, prohibition has utterly failed—in absolute, if not relative, terms—to reduce American addiction rates. Some 250,000 citizens—neurasthenic white southern ladies, mostly—were hooked on opiates in 1900, drug historian David Musto calculates. Today, the Drug Enforcement Administration figures 600,000 of the nation’s 2.7 million hard-core drug users to be heroin addicts. (The 2.1 million others are coke-heads.) All such statistics are endlessly debatable; no one really knows how many Americans are actually on dope. But a 140% increase in opiate addicts after 80 years of harassing and jailing junkies? The war on drugs is a protracted slow-motion Waterloo of epic proportions.

It is also far more than an abstract campaign against some inanimate substance called drugs. Make no mistake; this is a war on people. More specifically, it is a class war. This being America, that means it is also a race war. My most searing memories of Junktime are not of the cold turkeys, the street scrapes, the bruised and bleeding arms. Infinitely more bruising were the looks brown-skinned mothers would shoot my way as I carpet-bagged into their communities to cop my drugs.

A chill November night: I grab Amtrak up to New York on a mission—20 nickels of ‘caine and a brick of smack. I’m jonesing hard in the stairwell of a rundown project on Alphabet City’s Avenue D, waiting for some 14-year-old to bring me my brick. The elevator is busted; they always are in these high-rise slums. A steady stream of hustlers and players, yeah, but plenty of plain old all-American hardworking poor folks are shuffling up and down those squalid steps. No one seems surprised to see my quaking white ass there. The players eye me hard, looking maybe to take me off. White boys can carry big rolls and I’ve been ripped off before, losing \$700 on Avenue B just weeks earlier. But I hang tough, 200 pounds of drop-dead desperation. In the eyes of the workers, though, that unspoken anthracite contempt slices even through my abject self-absorption: You, you privileged asswipe, you are helping kill my kids! The same cold laser stare would greet me later in Northeast D.C. on my daily runs to a North Capitol tenement to fill my self-prescriptions. That look could lash my heart to ribbons. But what was I, hopeless junkie me, to do? Would I much rather ride out to Chevy Chase Circle to score my dope? Damn straight. You meet a less violent, more refined class of folks out that way, quite frankly. It’s not that there aren’t plenty of dopers living in crustless white bread America, it’s just that there’s just no open dope markets out there.

And that, precisely, seems to be the sole goal of drug enforcement policy: Let’s scare middle class folks like me away from hard drugs. The tale told here should make manifest what must already be crystal clear: it ain’t working, guys. The drug war is a rout, and the drugs have won. In a market so powerfully driven by demand, they always will. Reasonably well-raised white folks with everything to lose are still getting hooked on crack, smack, you name it. I’ve met scores of folks just like me. Journalists. Doctors. Lawyers. Designers. Consultants. Bureaucrats. Executives. Republicans. I have sat in my dealer’s kitchen and watched the evening rush hour of civil servants picking up their \$50 bags of junk or chunks of rock. In a 1991 survey of the Washington metropolitan area just published by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, 0.3% of lower-income households reported using heroin within the previous year. A larger percentage of members of higher income households, 0.4%, were riding with white horse.

Save for the occasional mugging and auto theft, however, the comfortable

are not much afflicted by the havoc that punitive prohibition has spawned. And those among the comfortable inclined to do so can readily negotiate their way around the drug ban. Treated as criminals, poor folks caught with dope are generally consigned to the prisons. Treated as sick individuals, by and large, middle-class dopers check into treatment centers. “By pretending that most addicts are dark-skinned and destitute”, Musto has observed, “middle-class Americans can avoid responsibility for confronting the reality of drug abuse among their own families and friends.” Meanwhile, punitive prohibition simply drives the market for illicit drugs into our most defenseless communities. Only ghetto-dwellers are desperate enough to run the risks involved in feeding the rest of America’s insatiable hunger for highs. A \$100 billion-plus market has thus been handed over to thugs of all description—international traffickers, ruthless street punks, viciously corrupt cops. Citizens already battling unbelievable social odds become dope fiends, to boot, simply because the forbidden traffic is so intricately woven into fabric of their everyday lives.

And so, each of our inner cities has become a bloody Bosnia. But who with the power to make a difference really gives a damn? Having decamped for the suburbs, the middle classes don’t have to see the dreadful damage done. Only the chippers and trippers among them do, parachuting into the ghettos for their prohibited drugs. A \$100 billion dope bazaar is not fueled by welfare checks and boosted radios. That takes the legitimately earned cash of hundreds of thousands of middle-class screw ups like me.

I’ve been doing a lot of soul searching lately. I can take no pride in how I have lived much of my life. Neither, though, can I view myself as a criminal. My adult sojourn in Junktime was as bourgeois as bourgeois could be. No stealing, no dealing. When my IRAs and Money Market accounts expired, I financed my habit the American way: I put it on plastic. I have since gone AWOL in the drug war, of course. I choose no longer to use. But how much longer can our society blindly persist in this fruitless, destructive drive to keep millions of Americans from self-medicating? Are we going to bitter-end this drug war, like dope fiends? How much worse do the drug warriors really think things could get under a new, less ruthless approach? Given the social distortions effected by decades of approaching drugs solely as a matter of law enforcement, decriminalization or legalization would be no instant panacea for the real dilemmas that narcotics pose, in and of themselves. Shelves of books have hashed out this debate, and I see no need here to rehearse all the arguments. I do think, though, that Americans get confused between what is legal and what is generally viewed as moral or personally desirable. (How, for instance, am I to view the laws outlawing my intoxicants of choice when laws throughout the land also outlaw my making love to my partners of choice?) Even if heroin and cocaine were legalized tomorrow, even if I could chase my kick as readily as alcoholics pursue theirs, I would still strive to shun dope like the plague. Opium, a scholar has written of Thomas De Quincey’s addiction two centuries ago, “fosters a seductive self-absorption that attacks the roots of human community.” Only six months ago, my days dribbled one into the next like the drool down my shirtfront. Today, I choose human community.

But not all Americans will always so choose. In an ideal world, we all would be brave, beautiful and brimming with joy. We don’t live in that world. Rather the yawning spiritual nada at the cold heart of materialist post-modern American society seems only to have whetted an historically lusty appetite for

intoxication. Boasting but 6% of the world's people, this nation makes up 60% of its market for illegal drugs.

No argument: drugs can foster a misery beyond belief, regardless of their status on the statute books. But don't we also have a constitutional right to the pursuit of unhappiness? If the consensus truly is that the strong right arm of the law serves to protect us from ourselves, why single out the junkies for jailing? Let's at least be consistent. To hell with lying in wait to nab the drunk behind the wheel. Bust those boozers at the liquor store door as they cop their filthy bottles of Montrachet. Force those workaholic wonks from their keyboards at gunpoint. Lock them in amusement parks and throw away the key. Ten years on the Ferris wheel, mandatory minimum! Drop the Twinkies and raise your pudgy hands, fatso, we've got this Safeway covered! Turn off that TV, you couch-potato dirtball, the fitness police are here to take you jogging! You have the right to an attorney. You have the right to remain silent. You have no right, apparently, to treat your mind and your body as your own.

It will occur to you often to ask, why did I not release myself from the horrors of opium, by leaving it off, or diminishing it? To this I must answer briefly: it might be supposed that I yielded to the fascination of opium too easily; it cannot be supposed that any man can be charmed by its terrors. The reader may be sure, therefore, that I made attempts innumerable to reduce the quantity.

—De Quincey

By late 1992, an increasingly well-fed monkey was gaining the upper hand over my own mind and body. No longer could I put off the day's first shot until cocktail hour. Fixing, rather, was the day's first task. As a kid, I was repelled by my father's morning ritual: a fistful of aspirin washed down with "orange juice"—a nice way of describing five fingers of gin, two fingers of o.j. and ice, always lots of ice. Tinkle, tinkle. Like a dog in a chain collar, we always knew where Dad was in the house. Who's repellent now? My morning ritual: stumbling out of bed sick as a spavined dog, mixing a shot and blindly stabbing my arms with a rig. Whatever his other failings, at least Dad didn't bleed all over the place.

How to describe the burden of carrying that monkey? Heart-stopping panic every morning. Eyes snap open to a stark reality: Whatever else is done this day, you must feed a \$100, \$200 or \$500 habit. No exceptions. No days off. The monkey is naggingly insistent—and damnably shortsighted. Because I'm waking up so dope-sick, I try cooking and prepping my wake-up shot the night before. Syringe cocked and loaded on the bedside table. That is the theory. The reality? I lie sleepless, obsessed with that cocked fit lying just feet away. As often as not, I shoot my wake-up by 1:00 A.M. As often as not, that loss of self-control also meant that chasing down more drugs is Job 1 the next morning.

A habit is a leash, sharply circumscribing the habitué's range of movement. Traveling out of town, I could never pack enough dope to cover even the most fleeting of visits. (And what would constitute "enough" dope for such as me, the Golden Triangle's annual output?) On a 1993 trip to see friends in Indianapolis, I bang my way through three bundles—30 bags—in less than three days. Sunday morning, I have but half a bag to carry my addicted ass back to Washington and my stash. Disaster strikes. US Air cancels its noon flight to National Airport. Shaking and sweating, I elbow aboard another flight to BWI. Once there, jonesing for real now, I learn that the next bus into D.C. doesn't leave for two hours. Desperate, I hire a limo, my first ever. Too sick to enjoy the novelty, I lie on the backseat shivering on the \$60 ride into town and the precious bags awaiting there.

Some compare heroin addiction to vampirism. That analogy works, but I'm more often reminded of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. The body's metabolism, its every cell, seemingly, subverted by an alien force that eventually usurps control over daily life's every detail. I strive desperately against becoming an (opium) pod person. From late 1991 to late 1993, I kick six habits—each more firmly entrenched than the last. Days and days of sickness. Once clean, in just a few more days, the temptation of that speedball rush strikes again. Just this once, okay? But no one can fix just once. In two days I'm hooked again and ripping off on another run. Thousands more dwindling dollars down the toilet. Never again, I swear, throwing my works down the garbage chute. Just once more, I swear, scrabbling through the trash to reclaim them.

In the spring of 1993 I stay clean for a few record-breaking months—but only because I'm traveling overseas. A glorious ten weeks of freedom from obsession and despair. But purely a geographical cure. My first night back in D.C., I shoot a bag. In a week, 100-pounds heavier, a thousand times more voracious, that fucking monkey is back sitting on my face. Later that summer I shove him away again, fending the bastard off for a miraculous month. I'm not working a formal recovery program. I attend a few twelve-step meetings. Not for me. Who wants to spend the rest of their life sitting around talking about not doing drugs? Not me. I just need to learn how to control my use of drugs. But I'm on anti-depressants. I'm seeing a shrink. I'm in group therapy. I'll make it this time. Life ain't really so bad, is it? Labor Day, 1993: a memorial service for an old family friend. Everyone else is in the living room, toasting her memory. I'm tossing the bedroom, looking for you-know-what. Bingo! I am stunned. In my trembling hands, a bottle holding 130 hits of Dilaudid. The good ones, No. 4s. The best. Four mgs. a pop. Street value: \$2,000-\$5,000. A hydromorphone motherlode. Enough dope to run up yet another giant jones. Underneath a surge of sick excitement, I am almost weeping. I am lost. Later that month, I train up to New York for a journalism convention. I never even leave a friend's borrowed apartment. A lost weekend crushing, cooking, and hitting teeny yellow tablets. I return to Washington hopeless, hating myself. The Dilaudid runs out. I make a feeble stab at kicking. You win, Mr. Monkey. I give up.

A word about Mr. Monkey's diet. Street heroin, we're told, is getting stronger and stronger. The average bag, 7% pure a decade ago, today runs 36%, White House drug policy director Lee Brown says. (Justice Department flaks, for their part, talk about 65% pure junk.) New York and Boston, supposedly, are awash with 95% bags. This is just more drug-war hype. I know no one actually copping on the streets of New York, Boston or Washington who believes it.

The dope business is just that, a business. Why supply 95% pure product when a captive clientele will settle for much less? In most Eastern cities, junk is marketed in \$10 glassine envelopes. Often double-bagged in polyvinyl to deter dipping by the street-level dealer, these dimes are stamped with a trademark. "DOA" is a brand I recall fondly. "Heartbeat" is another. Now and again, an unusually good bag hits the street. I've never run an assay, but I'd be astounded if the very best of these exceeds 36% purity—the supposed average today. Once demand for a brand is established, though, the suppliers repeatedly step on their product, stretching their supply and snowballing their profits. One week, "Playboy" contains a goodly jolt of diacetylmorphine. A few weeks later, it's mostly quinine, lactose, baby laxative, artificial creamer, God knows what. Consumers have no way of knowing which they're getting until they buy and hit

the product. I once dropped \$500 on plausible-appearing brick of double-bagged dimes. What I got was 10 cents worth of baking powder.

Along with the catch-as-catch-can nature of the street market, junkies are also plagued by ever-accelerating tolerance. More and more dope is needed to keep up with the jones. Periodically, I score a handful of methadone tablets on the street and try to taper down the monkey's insatiable appetite. Greedy and ill disciplined like all junkies, I'm always still on 50 milligrams or so a day when the meth runs out. Within 48 hours, I fall into vicious withdrawal and am back to banging junk.

By fall of 1993, I am burning my way madly through my savings. So what? My condition seems terminal. You can't take it with you, right? And I have few illusions about where I am going. But I give up caring. My horizons no longer extend much past the next shot. And those are coming ever closer together. A friend in New York now scores smack and coke for me, shipping it to Washington by Federal Express. Soon, I'm wiring him a thousand bucks a week. Packages come every three or four days. Spying one of those red-white-and-blue delivery trucks on the street can still set my stomach to flip-flopping.

Load on enough opiates long enough and something funny happens—euphoria turns to aggravation. When he was guzzling laudanum by the quart, De Quincey described “exalted states of irritability.” By this time last year, I'm pumping 20-30 bags a day into my arm. Any brush with the work-a-day world throws me into paroxysms of annoyance. I no longer give a damn what other people—clueless dimwits!—think of me or my behavior. Cry for help or terminal insanity, you be the judge: Flying home from Boston, I cook and shoot a speedball in Logan's departure lounge. Let some officious ass just try to stop me! Now I'm also geezing dope in the stairwell at work. Needlework is more safely done in the men's room, I know that. But I can't smoke in there. One afternoon, ripped and ragged, having filed what I imagine to be a deathless piece of prose, I storm into an editor's office: “Who do I have to fuck around here to get on the cover?” By last spring, I do my co-workers the favor of simply staying away from the office. “Working at home”, I file the occasional piece. The bare minimum daily adult requirement of work. Soon, I'm merely phoning in the odd excuse. By then I have a Washington connection. In time, I don't even have to cab across town to cop. I dial Mac's beeper and he comes to me bearing quarter spoons of reasonably potent white junk—then half spoons, then full spoons. About a gram of stuff. Five hundred bucks a day for Mr. Monkey.

But is he grateful? By now, he's a fat slob. Fat, dumb and unhappy. By now, he's got me flat on my back most days. I subsist on chocolate-covered donuts. I rise only to sneak out of my building and pull cash advances off the ATM—or to extinguish the brush fires sparked in my bedding by dropped cigarettes. This is no longer a habit really; it's a slow-motion bid at suicide. Half-crazed, I lie around my apartment, ignoring the phone, blowing off a shrinking circle of friends. In a reprise of the Mad Scientist to Slaughter chemistry experiments of yore, I spend evenings slugging gin, shooting junk, smoking crack, puffing pot. Every so often, I inhale a nitrous oxide whipette, just for a brief change of pharmaceutical pace. When I feel myself sliding into respiratory arrest. I struggle to my elbows and concentrate as best I can on drawing that next breath.

“I did absolutely nothing”, Burroughs wrote of his long, late-'50s slow-dance with the monkey in Tangiers. “I could look at the end of my shoe for eight

hours. I was roused only when the hourglass of junk ran out.” In my final weeks feeding the monkey, I seem to have stumbled into the terminal dope fiend’s nirvana—a work-free drug place. Imagine Ripped Van Winkle’s sickening shock upon reawakening to harsh reality early last June. My cash is long gone. I’m ten grand in credit-card debt. I’m on the verge of losing my job. Worse of all, fucking Mac is out of fucking dope.

So, tell me, Sister Morphine, how long have I been lying here? What am I doing in this place? Why does the doctor have no face?

‘My name is Ed, and I’m a stupid stinking drug addict and alcoholic. Including detox, this is day seven.’ Hey, they were cheering for me! It felt nice.

–Michael Guinzburg, *Beam Me Up, Scotty*, 1993

The face I confront upon checking into 6 North for detox is the implacable scowl of my health care provider, Aetna Life Insurance. Almost a decade working for the same company, tens of thousands of dollars paid out on my behalf, and every day that I’m in George Washington University Hospital Aetna is threatening to kick me back out onto the street. As I work the twelve steps of recovery, I’m supposed eventually to renounce all resentments. My grudge against Aetna is one I plan to hold onto. A heroin habit should be gradually tapered down with methadone over three weeks time, the PDR says. Staggering in under the dead weight of a monster monkey, I get a week before Aetna gives me the boot and I have to finish kicking on the bricks. Plummeting over seven days from 70 milligrams of methadone every 24 hours to none at all, I’m pouring sweat by mid-week and wracked with insomnia. Convinced that withdrawal would drive me back to shooting dope upon discharge, the shrinks urge me go on methadone maintenance. A tempting offer, guys. Thanks but no thanks.

Methadone may be as wrapped in misconception as heroin. A 1974 primer on neuropsychopharmacology even classifies the stuff as a “narcotic antagonist.” Antagonists abruptly unplug opiate “agonists” such as heroin from their receptors. A short-acting antagonist, naloxone (Narcan) is administered to reverse opiate overdose. Narcan will also catapult addicts into violent withdrawal. A longer-acting antagonist, naltrexone (Trexan), is prescribed to keep addicts clean. Antabuse makes the relapsing alcoholic violently ill. Trexan simply renders relapse an exercise in futility. Shoot what you will, you can’t get high.

Methadone, on the other hand, is just another word for dope. As the Thousand-Year Reich lost access to natural sources of God’s Own Medicine, Nazi pharmacologists set out in search of a synthetic opiate. Emerging from the lab in 1943 with methadone, they christened the new drug dolophine, after der Führer. Equipotent with morphine, dolophine had the attraction of lasting three times as long. Copping meth on the street to placate that angry ape, they were my “Hitler pills.” Others call it “deathadone.” Because it lasts much longer than any other opiate, methadone can be dispensed at convenient 24-hour intervals. Forget about travel, though. Maintained dope fiends are chained to their clinic by that 24-hour methadone umbilicus. Because it lasts so long, too, methadone can’t equal heroin’s euphoric peak—which doesn’t mean you can’t get plenty loaded on the stuff. The “blockade” methadone supposedly erects against

a junk high is another myth. Maintained addicts merely evolve a tolerance to their daily dose of meth. I've watched them pour sufficient smack into the spoon to breach that blockade. Because methadone lasts so long, finally, withdrawal from the drug also drags on and on for weeks and weeks of goose-fleshed agony.

I have enough problems, I figure, why add a methadone habit to them? Rejecting maintenance, only clonidine can help ease the weeks of withdrawal lying in wait. A blood-pressure depresser, clonidine soothes some—but not nearly enough—of the pain exacted by heroin detox. Creeping home in a daze upon discharge a week after admission, I can't imagine how even to begin sorting through my life's wreckage. After playing back the previous week's phone messages, I can't imagine even keeping clean through the day. Everyone who has ever peddled me junk, it seems, is checking in. I burn Mac's beeper number in the kitchen sink. Two hours later, I'm slumped in a frequent flier seat, seeking sanctuary in my home town. I languish there on my mother's sofa for a wretched week—sleepless, kicking, terrified.

Returning to D.C., having nowhere else to go but back to the monkey, I stumble into the twelve-step rooms. I'm skeptical. Are these people really completely clean? You say you've got four years? Take it a day at a time? Hah! I'm wrestling this monkey minute by minute. Sweating and shaking, pathetic and desperate, I swallow a lifetime's cynicism and ask for help. Total strangers give me phone numbers, press me to call if I think I might use, even in the middle of the night. I can't bring myself to do that, but knowing that I can help. My first weekend back, I find myself phoning around, trying to cop a quarter spoon. I slam the receiver down, lift it again and call one of these strangers. He invites me over. Like a dunce, I sit in a corner watching him clean his bedroom until it's time for a meeting.

Mac gives me a jingle. I still owe him five bills, but he offers some free advice: "I was getting worried about you", he says of my late-May Night of the Living Dead routine. "I think you need to get yourself some social activities." I think you need to go into a new line of work, I tell him. But, he's right, and I've followed his advice. These days, when I'm not working, I'm sitting in a meeting, hanging out after a meeting, or getting ready to go to a meeting. Doesn't sound like much of a life, does it? Well, it could be much worse. It has been much worse. If nothing else, the rooms are rife with smart, interesting, fucked up people, each tempered in the fires of unimaginable hells. Anyway, if not using meant crouching 24 hours a day in the corner of a locked closet, it would still beat picking up where I left off.

During the whole period of diminishing the opium, I had the torments of a man passing out of one mode of existence into another. . . . I triumphed: but think not, reader, that thereafter my sufferings were ended; nor think of me as one sitting in a dejected state.”

—De Quincey

Not long after my early June flameout, a credit card company checks in, too. Only a month before, I’d slammed into their \$7,500 limit, pulling out \$500 daily cash advances. Reviewing those transactions, any cretin could see I was either a dope fiend or deep into Guido the Shark. But MBNA America wants to extend more credit. “The words ‘summer vacation’ invite thoughts of carefree days in the sun”, they write. “And while we can’t promise a season of endless fun and adventure, MBNA’s special rate on cash advances should put more spring in your step.” Ah, yes, the endless fun and adventure of my last ride on your credit toboggan, I think. That bouncy spring it put in my step. I don’t know whether to laugh or cry. I often don’t these days.

When I finally emerge from the ordeal of withdrawal, like a prisoner on parole, I waft through a brief phase of euphoria. Surfing that pink cloud. Drugs are my problem. Ergo, no more drugs, no more problems. But drugs aren’t really my problem. Living is my problem. Even without drugs, life goes on. And so does death. In September, a college-era boyfriend falls to the virus. I have 68 days clean when I hit New York for the memorial service. That’s the most clean time I’ve put together since my 12th birthday. For once, I tell myself, you will bury a beloved friend without a needle burning a hole in your pocket. For once, you will sit through one of these damned services with a clear head and conscience.

I haven’t reckoned on the medicine cabinet lurking at the post-service reception. Drug cabinet cowboy saddles up again. On the left side is a Janitor-in-a-Drum-size bottle of generic oxycodone. Heart pounding, I slam that door. The angel on one shoulder grapples with the devil on the other. In the right-side cabinet, no fewer than three industrial-strength bottles of oral morphine. And a syringe. Why not roll out a damned welcome mat? The angel topples into the toilet. Hating myself, helpless, I load on 120 mgs. of morphine as talk, tears, and laughter filter through the door.

I leave the bathroom sweating and shaken. Are you all right? I shrug. For half an hour, I make talk. Then I make my excuses and make for home. Walking down Broadway, the ’phine’s coming on strong, but it doesn’t feel so good. I feel cut off from the world. I like this feeling? I throw away the rig. I pull out pills I’d stuffed into my pocket. Another 60 mgs. I eat them. I ponder stopping

at Houlihan's at Penn Station for a scotch on the rocks, like I'd do on my earlier one-day scoring hits on New York.

But what's the point? Yet another recovery cliché? pans out: The program will fuck up your use. Why get loaded once if you can't do it again and again? No more pretending that doping is just another way to live life. I know better now. If the eyes are the soul's windows, I look into the pinpointed eyes of using junkies these days and all I can see is soul-death. Lights are on, but nobody's home. All iris, no pupil, those glassy, doll-like eyes now give me the shudders. Anyway, if I go out, I'm soon back in that tub with that knife to my fluttering heart. Or lying dead of an O.D. in some greasy spoon toilet. Or nodding homeless on a park bench. Or rotting in jail. My luck can't last for ever. My next run promises to be positively Hobbesian: nasty, brutish and short. The whole damned chemical convoy, it seems, has run off the neural highway, crashed into an abutment and burst into flames. Nothing left there even for even the most desperate wrecking crew to salvage. I race back into the recovery rooms, tail between trembling legs. I surrender to a life of living with reality, that final frontier. A month and a half later, a birthday party for a friend's three-year-old son: A houseful of rug-rats and their late-breeding academic moms and dads. How wretchedly wholesome, I think, what a claustrophobically clean environment. Entering the bathroom, I don't even worry about the cabinet. These damned downstairs toilets, all you ever find are air fresheners and those irritating itsty-bitsy guest towels. I glance up and almost pee down my leg. The cabinet door is ajar. Staring me in the eye—more damned oxycodone. I open that familiar brown bottle. Twelve hits. Sixty mgs. Plenty to go around.

Again, though, why? Why reawaken the remorseless appetite of a beast that will only beat me to death? For the very first time in my life, I actually walk away from narcotics. Fabricating my excuses, I also walk away from the party before I can change my mind.

America, I am putting my queer shoulder to the wheel. I'm climbing them steps just as fast as I can. Periodic piss tests to keep me honest—and keep my job. Aftercare recovery group twice a week. At least a meeting every day. I can spout more slogans and clichés than a '70s Marxist. And, yes, I'm still sucker punched every so often by a consuming urge to shoot a speedball or even just drink a highball. Okay, let's split the difference: Make mine a Brompton's cocktail, James, shaken not stirred, thank you. Day by day, though, sitting through these urges becomes just a little bit easier. Some days, in fact, a kernel of hope blossoms in my bruised heart. Some days, I even feel so full of happy horseshit—you know, I'm good enough, I'm smart enough, and, doggone it, people like me—I fear I might bazooka barf a warm, fuzzy hairball right across the room.

And yet. And yet. And yet: King Kong is chinning on an oak in Kalorama Park. He's doing one-handed push-ups on Columbia Road. No one else knows he's there, but I sense his presence always. Day by day, he grows stronger. Powerful, cunning and baffling, this monkey is also relentless. King Kong is content to wait. Wait for me to get cocky. Wait for me to despair. Wait for me to tire of the hard work of growing up. Wait for me to bend my back. He would then hop right back on board. He would then wrap those tenacious paws of his around my neck. He would then take me down for one final, fatal minuet with the monkey.

blahblahblah~is alive

Info

Converted to L^AT_EX from <http://bluelight.ru/vb/showthread.php?t=71757> because the OP was formatted in a way so that it was no fun to read at all. This PDF and the L^AT_EX source to it are available at <http://apfelboymchen.net/zeux/>.