

Praise for *Placebo Junkies Conspiring with the Half-Asleep*

Cohen blesses us with celebrations of family, fatherhood, friends, teachers, lovers, the sudden lost and stolen. Complete with odes to a burger-wolfing Ghandi, Dave Dravecky and David Carradine, he also tackles gravity, oxygen, trees, the big “G,” coffee and wine.

In these pages Cohen, a deft (sometimes daft?) prestidigitator and linguistic escape artist who can transmute even dreck into dre, offers us a panacea of friendship and Negative Capability; it is a tree of life to those who take hold of it, and will definitely put some wing-wong in your zim-zam against the dying of the light.

Cohen’s tour de force

Is required reading

For the fully baked, all those

Who have ever been in half-

Way houses or had one foot

In the agave

In it you’ll find

The finest junkies and most upstanding

Sleep walkers you’ll ever meet

All working together

To make us meet

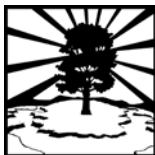
Them half way

I want to get in on the act

– Loren Goodman

Placebo Junkies Conspiring with the Half-Asleep

Bruce Cohen



Black Lawrence Press
New York

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For my sons—Jake, Sam & Ray

Section I

Winter Escape Artist

To dodge the winter ennui, because even the sun's quarantined
With a nasty flu & men are not permitted to paraphrase *Post Partum*
In arguments, I bundle the kids & drive towards artificial waves,
Cranked-up eye-burning chlorine-intoxicating heat, fake palm trees
Complete with plastic coconuts, trucked-in sand, a wave machine

Orchestrated by techy introverts. Our lives are not so very different
From the twisting enclosed water slide, that dark tunnel which must be
Like birth because the first time through we scream, then the shocking
Splash & absurdly bright lights & a population already in the shallow end
Joking with one another & we feel like aliens in this pleasantly-vindictive

World. The second time through we keep our eyes wide open. Wet kids tug
My baggy swim suit begging to do it again. *Let's do it again Daddy, pretty
Please.* Though these are the kind of citizens I should trust, each of us sports
An elastic bracelet with a rented key on our ankles because signs warn us,
In explicit terms, to lock our valuables, that no one is responsible for loss.

There seem to be contradictions everywhere. Sandra composed a story
Called "In Fiji" where a mother decorates her drab Salvation Army
Living room as a paradise for her sniffing kids, because she suspects
Her life, their sad lives, being as they are, might only witness a sun cut out
Of construction paper & clouds made of cotton boosted from a nurse's office,

& in her story, the mother surfs on her La-Z-Boy, a fan substituting for sea
Breeze, her sweatpants rolled up for the shark-or-piranha illusion, & her kids
Trampoline from the three-legged couch to the rickety coffee table. This is what
People do who are resigned to the limitations of their lives; they vacation in
Off-season seasons & never allow their feet to ever touch that blue carpet again.

Unofficial Life

With flea market antique tools
I constructed a bus stop shack
Along my rural route complete
With wooden benches so children would be
Weather-cozy waiting for their yellow dinosaur.
In my cupboard, flashlights pregnant
With fresh batteries, an emergency generator,
Candles as last resorts. Bad things *do*
Happen, happen to all of us, sometimes
Unforeseeably, by no fault of our own.
A young man whose car broke down
Knocked on my door. I offered him hot soup,
Use of my phone, wished him luck before
Ushering him on his complicated way.
Here, this jacket should fit. It was
My son's—but he's outgrown it.
You never know how long the tow truck
Will make you wait.
While I looked in the closet, he stole my father's
Pocket watch, a heartless little five-fingered
Discount. I wanted, really, to be responsible
For no one other than myself; often, even *that's*
Too much. Pacing the sidelines of a playing
Field, cheering the outcome of one of my sons'
Competitions, I held my palm to the sky
And queried myself, is that rain?
I turned to a stranger and asked if he too felt
A drop and looked to the sky for possible lightning.
I remember after one snowstorm another son

Said, *Hey Pops, I can't find my gloves*

But I don't think they're lost.

That spring, after the thaw, I discovered them:

Ten crippled fingers.

He must have taken them off for the intricate

Manipulations of his snow fort tunnel—

Some secret passageway known only to him.

Just yesterday I was mowing the autumn lawn,

Bagging the clippings, calm in a sort of meditative

State, a warmer than usual October afternoon,

The kind when you know you have hours

Of pleasant labor ahead, and even if you finish,

There's still more to do, so you are resigned

To the unfinishable, are in no particular hurry,

Acknowledging the futility of thinking your work

Will ever be done or your life will continue

Indefinitely. I was dumping the leaves

On my property's edge and saw a tall boy

Shooting hoops in our basket, and the basket,

Being adjustable, was lower than normal—

But I didn't know that then, so the boy seemed

Even taller than he was, dunking, fantasizing,

Commentating to himself his own miraculous

Last-second successes. Narrator of his own life,

He also doubled as the invisible man who controls

Time, who can stop the clock for another chance.

But something round falls short; it always does.

He will get plenty of opportunities

To sink a winning shot, or so he thinks.

This is the genetic delusion coded so masterfully:

Boys are always stealing time or wishing acceleration.

I didn't recognize that boy for an instant—then
I did; he was my youngest son, now taller
Than his brothers, handsome, muscular,
And though my own father has been underground
35 years and I rarely think of him, I imagined him
Stopping in for a late afternoon cocktail, saying
Who's that kid with the sweet jump shot?
Papa, that's one of your grandsons—Ray.
And the others? What are their names?
Let me see a photo of your wife; I've never met her.
The lack of someone to whom it's said
Brings bubbling anger—
*Think how the first child to exhaust his clever words
In a basketball argument is the one to throw the first punch.*
But it's getting late; the other boys are well on their way,
Already men. That last morning I saw you, Papa,
You missed a belt loop. I meant to tell you that.
I figured I'd say something when you got home.

The Confidence Man's Preparation

A man schemes at his petty desk, plotting for women.
To gain intimacy, acquire fat profit, he praises falsely
Others whose habits are similar to the women he speaks to.

Anyone guilty of similar vices dismisses them as minor—
So two men can remain fast friends:
Gamblers wink across the felt & hold up their drinks to toast!

If a man fulfills his dreams, he should keep quiet, not keep accurate journals.
Hotel maids know every dark human secret but survive on minimum wages.
Before executing any scam, twirl tight the one-of-a-kind map,

Strike the wooden match with flair.
Make sure nothing in your spiel will spook or vex your target. Even
Honest men are dichotomies. The newly rich are every inch generous

While entertaining, but funnel imposter wine into the oldest, rarest bottles—
Counterfeit labels. Since their guests' palates are not sophisticated enough
To appreciate subtle nuances of age, is this a crime, harmless deception, or *favor*?

Weren't these plain people elated to be ingesting this most elegant nectar?
Didn't they later brag to close friends, rattle off the exorbitant auction prices,
Recite the bottle's lineage, describe the dusty aristocratic cellars of origin,

Repeat the colorfully poetic linguistic descriptions of the ambrosia,
Leaving not a drop of evidence to disprove the intrinsic value of what they swallowed?
Is not a man who provides such happiness to the greedy masses praised by women?

Dead Telegram to a Dead Poet

(For Jon "Spot" Anderson)

Dear Spot. Stop. An off-the-cuff off-duty reality check: you're not sleeping it off now
Or ever again—you're slumming in a permanently recycled Night Crawler-cafeteria. Stop.
This is Skate, your old pal, transmitting from this sad & often difficult planet

Earth—early in the baseball season when games are postponed for snow squalls
& must be rescheduled as mid-week twin-bills during the dog days. You'd think
They'd smarten up & play opening week in warm-weather-venues. *It's still the same:*

Man's Pavlov-insane. I miss you. You'd be happy to know the Sioux City Slugs,
Our fantasy ghost-league rotisserie team, still exists, but as usual, in accordance
With your legacy, I drafted a conglomeration of Latino players with visa issues,

DUI-convicted-wife-beater farm boys barely with high school diplomas, shaky guys
Just out of rehab, roid-rage lunatics suspended for twenty-one days after flunking banned
Human hormone tests, unheralded rookies, gray-beards on their last hurrah, & the usual

Bums. Why us? It always happens to us. Maybe we bring bad omens on ourselves—
Maybe God manufactures voodoo dolls for all of us. Did I mention I miss our five a.m.
Phone calls when I was crusty eyed & you were about to pass out on the other side

Of the country, alone in the desert? Remember when we drafted Dave Dravecky
Because we thought his name euphonious Russian vodka; he developed a cancerous
Knob in his pitching arm. Who ever heard of that? He recovered, so to speak—tumor

Removed, but his arm grew so weak one game he threw a slider & it literally snapped.
The whole stadium heard the horrible crack; they showed the highlight all night
On Sports Center; his career kaput; even hot dog vendors winced & rubber-necked.

Later, his arm had to be amputated. Just our luck you said—*a pitcher with no arm*.
Now that you're on indefinite hiatus, TV screen black, I pray you channel your mojo
Into my poems. Stop—& maybe Dravecky can learn to throw with his remaining arm?