

THREE FRAGMENTS FROM A LONGER THING

By David Foster Wallace

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1st FRAGMENT

Every whole person has ambitions, projects, objectives. This particular boy's objective was to press his lips to every square inch of his own body. His arms to the shoulders and most of the legs beneath the knee were child's play but after these areas of his body, the difficulty increased with the abruptness of a coastal shelf. The boy came to understand that unimaginable challenges lay ahead of him. He was six.

There is little to say about the animus or motive cause of the boy's goal of pressing his lips to every single square inch of his own body. He had been homebound one day with asthma—a rainy, distended morning—apparently looking through some of his father's promotional materials. The asthma was congenital. The outside area of his foot beneath and around the lateral malleolus (the young boy thought at that point of the lateral malleolus as the 'funny knob thing' on his ankle) was the first to require any real contortion. The strategy, as he understood it, was to ar-

range himself on his bedroom's carpeted floor with the inside of his knee on the floor and his calf and foot at as close to a perfect ninety-degree angle to his thigh as he could at that point manage, then he had to lean as far over to the side as he could, bending out over the splayed ankle and the foot's outside, rotating his neck over and down and straining with his fully-extended lips at a section of the foot's outside he had marked with a bull's-eye of soluble ink, struggling to breathe against the dextrorotated pressure of his ribs, stretching farther and farther to the side very early one morning until he felt a flat pop in the upper part of his back and then pain beyond naming somewhere between his shoulder-blade and spine. The boy did not cry out but merely sat silent in this tortured posture until his failure to appear for breakfast brought his father upstairs to the bedroom's door. The pain and resultant dyspnea kept the boy out of school for over a month. One can only wonder what a father might make of an injury like this in a six-year-old child.

The father's chiropractor, Dr. Kathy, was able to relieve the worst of the immediate discomfort. More important, it was Dr. Kathy who introduced the boy to the concepts of spine-as-microcosm and of spinal hygiene and postural echo and incrementalism and flexion. Dr. Kathy smelled faintly of fennel and seemed totally open and available and kind. The child lay stomach-down on a tall padded table and placed his chin in a little cup. She manipulated his head very gently but in a way that seemed to make things happen all the way down his back. Her hands were strong and soft and when she felt the boy's back, he felt as if she were asking it questions and answering them all at the same time. She had charts on her wall with exploded views of the human spine and the muscles and fascia and nerve-bundles that surrounded the spine and were connected to it. No lollipops were anywhere in view. The specific stretching exercises Dr. Kathy gave the boy were for the splenius capitis and longissimus cervicis

and the deep sheets of nerve and muscle surrounding the boy's T-2 and T-3 vertebrae, which were what he had injured. Dr. Kathy had reading glasses on a necklace and a green button-up sweater that looked as if it were made entirely of pollen. You could tell she talked to everybody the same way. She instructed the boy to do the stretching exercises every single day and not to let boredom or a reduction in symptomology keep him from performing the rehabilitative exercises in a determined way. She said the long-term goal was not relief of present discomfort but neurological hygiene and health and a wholeness he would someday appreciate very, very much. For the boy's father, Dr. Kathy prescribed an herbal relaxant.

Most professional contortionists are in fact simply persons born with congenital atrophic or dystrophic conditions of major recti or with acute lordotic flexion of the lumbar spine or both. A majority display *Chvostek's sign* or other forms of ipsilateral spasticity. Very little effort or application is involved in their 'art' therefore. In 1932, a pre-adolescent Saiwanese female was documented by British scholars of Tamiel mysticism as capable of inserting into her mouth and down her esophagus both arms to the shoulder, one leg to the groin and the other leg to just above the patella and was thereupon able to spin unaided on the orally protrusive knee at rates in excess of 300 R.P.M. The phenomenon of *suiphagia*, or self-swallowing, has subsequently been identified as a rare form of inanitive pica caused in most cases by radical deficiencies in cadmium and/or zinc.

The insides of the small boy's thighs up to the medial fork of his groin took months even to prepare for. Daily, hours spent cross-legged and bowed, slowly and incrementally stretching the long vertical fasciae of his back and neck, the spinalis thoracis and levator scapulae, the iliocostalis lum-

borum all the way to the sacrum and the interior thigh's dense and intransigent gracilis, pectineus and adductor longus which fused below *Scarpa's triangle* and transmits sickening pain through the pubis whenever the range of flexibility is exceeded. Had anyone seen him during these two and three hour sessions, bringing his feet's soles together and in to train the pectineus, bobbing slightly and then holding a deep, cross-legged lean to work the great, tight sheath of thoracolumbar fascia that connected his pelvis to his dorsal costae, the child would have appeared either prayerful or clinically autistic or both. Once the thigh's anterior targets were achieved and touched with one or both lips, the upper portions of his genitals were simple and were protrusively kissed and passed over even as plans for the ilium and outer buttocks were in conception. After these achievements would come the more difficult and neck-intensive contortions required to access the inner buttocks, perineum and extreme upper groin. The boy had turned seven.

The special place where he pursued his strange but now newly mature objective was his room, which had wallpaper with a repeating jungle motif. The room's second floor window yielded a view of the back yard's tree. Light from the sun came through the tree at different angles and intensities at different times of day and illuminated different parts of the boy as he stood, sat, inclined or lay on the room's carpet stretching and holding positions. His bedroom's carpet was white shag with a furry, polar aspect that the boy's father did not think went well with the wall's repeating scheme of tiger, zebra, lion, palm but the father kept his feelings to himself.

Radical increase of the lips' protrusive range requires systematic exercise of maxillary fascia such as the depressor septi, orbicular oris, depressor anguli oris, depressor labii

inferioris and the buccinator, circumoral and risorius groups. Zygomatic muscles are superficially involved.

PRAXIS:

- Affix string to Weatherly button of at least 1.5" diameter borrowed from father's second-best raincoat.
- Place button over upper and lower front teeth and enclose with lips.
- Pull string fully extended at 90° to face's plane and pull with gradually increasing tension on end, using lips to resist pull.
- Hold for 20 seconds.
- Repeat.
- Repeat.

Sometimes his father sat on the floor outside the boy's bedroom door with his back to the door. It's not clear whether the boy ever heard him listening for movement in the room, although the wood of the door sometimes made a creaky sound when the father sat against it or stood back up in the hallway or shifted his seated position against the door. The boy was in there stretching and holding contorted positions for extraordinary periods of time. The father was a somewhat nervous man with a rushed, fidgety manner that always lent him an air of imminent departure. He had extensive entrepreneurial activities and was in motion much of the time. His place in most people's mental album was provisional, with something like a dotted line around it; the image of someone saying something friendly over his shoulder as he made for an exit. Most clients found the father made them nervous. He was at his most effective on the phone.

By age eight, the child's long-term goal was beginning to affect his physical development. His teachers remarked changes in posture and gait. The boy's smile, which appeared by now constant because of the circumlabial hypertrophy's effects on the circumoral musculature,

looked unusual also: both rigid and overbroad, and somehow, in one Social Studies teacher's evaluative phrase, 'age inappropriate.'

FACTS:

- Italian stigmatist Padre Pio carried bloodless wounds, which penetrated the left hand and both feet medially throughout his lifetime.
- The Umbrian St. Veronica Giuliani presented with wounds in one hand as well as in her side, which wounds were observed to open and close on command.
- The 18th century holy woman Giovanna Solimani permitted pilgrims to insert special keys in her hand's wounds and to turn them, reportedly facilitating those clients' own recovery from rationalist despair.
- According to both St. Bonaventure and Thomas de Chialano, St. Francis of Assisi's manual stigmata included baculiform masses of what presented as hardened black flesh extrudant from both volar planes. If and when pressure was applied to a palm's so-called 'nail,' a hardened black rod of flesh would immediately protrude from the back of the hand just exactly as if a real so-called nail were passing through the hand. And yet, fact:
- Hands lack the anatomical mass required to support the weight of an adult human. Both Roman legal texts and modern examinations of 1st century skeletons confirm that classical crucifixion required nails to be driven through the subject's wrists, not his hands, hence the 'necessarily simultaneous truth and falsity of the stigmata' that existential theologian E.M. Cioran explicates in his 1937 *Lacrimi și Sfînți*, the same monograph in which he refers to the human heart as 'God's open wound.'

2nd FRAGMENT (*Different boy mentioned in this; utterly different boy*)

It is this boy who dons the bright-orange bandolier and shepherds the really small ones through the crosswalk outside school. This is after finishing the meals-on-wheels breakfast tour of the hospice downtown, whose administrator lunges to bolt her office door when she hears his cart's wheels in the hall. He has paid out-of-pocket for the steel whistle and the white gloves held palm-out at cars while children who did not dress themselves cross behind him, some trying to run despite *WALK DON'T RUN*, the happy-faced sandwich board he also made himself. The autos whose drivers he knows he waves at and gives an extra-big smile and tosses some words of good cheer as the crosswalk clears and the cars peel out and move through, some joshing around a little by swerving to miss him only by inches as he laughs and dances aside and makes faces of pretended terror at the flank and rear bumper. The one time that station wagon didn't miss him really was an accident and he sent the lady several notes to make absolutely sure

she knew he understood that and asked a whole lot of people he hadn't yet gotten the opportunity to make friends with to sign his cast and decorated the crutches very carefully with bits of colored ribbon and tinsel and adhesive sparkles and even before the six weeks the doctor sternly prescribed, he'd given them away to the children's wing to brighten up some other less lucky and happy kid's convalescence and by the end of the whole thing he'd been inspired to write a very long theme to enter into the annual Social Studies theme competition about how a positive attitude can make even an accidental injury into an occasion for new friends and bright new opportunities for reaching out to others and while the theme didn't even get honorable mention he honestly didn't care because he felt like writing the theme had been its own reward and he'd gotten a lot out of the whole nine-draft process and was honestly happy for the kids whose themes did win awards and told them he was 100-plus percent sure they deserved it and that if they wanted to preserve their prize themes and maybe even make displayed items out of them for their parents, he'd be happy to type them up and laminate them and even fix any spelling errors he found if they'd like him to and at home his father puts his hand on Leonard's shoulder and says he's really proud that his son's such a good sport and offers to take him to Dairy Queen as a kind of reward and Leonard tells his father he's grateful and that the gesture means a lot to him but that in all honesty he'd like it even more if they took the money his father would have spent on the ice cream and instead donated it either to Easter Seals or, better yet, to UNICEF to go toward the needs of famine-ravaged Biafran kids who he knew for a fact had probably never even *heard* of ice cream and says that he bets it'll end up giving both of them a better feeling even then the *DQ* would and as the father slips the coins in the coin-slot at the special bright-orange UNICEF volunteer cardboard pumpkin bank, Leonard takes a moment to express concern about the father's facial tick again and to gently rib him about his

reluctance to go in and have the family's MD look at it, noting again that according to the chart on the back of his bedroom door the father is four months overdue for his annual physical and that it's almost *eight* months past the date of his recommended tetanus and T.B. boosters.

He serves as hall monitor for period's one and two but gives far more official warnings than actual citations. He's there to *serve* he feels, not run people down. Usually with the official warnings he dispenses a smile and tells them you're young exactly once so enjoy it and to go get outta here and make this day *count* why don't they. He does UNICEF and Easter Seals and starts a recycling program in three straight grades. He is healthy and scrubbed and always groomed just well enough to project basic courtesy and respect for the community of which he is a part and he politely raises his hand in class for *every* question, but only if he's sure he knows not only the correct answer but the formulation of that answer that the teacher's looking for that will help advance the discussion of the overall topic they're covering that day, often staying after class to double-check with the teacher that his take on her general objectives is sound and to ask whether there was any way that his answers could have been better or more helpful.

The boy's mom has a terrible accident while cleaning the oven and is rushed to the hospital and even though he's beside himself with concern and says constant prayers for her safety, he volunteers to stay home and field calls and relay information to an alphabetized list of concerned family friends and relatives and to make sure the mail and newspaper are brought in and to keep the home's lights turned on and off in a random sequence at night as officer Chuck of the Michigan State police's Crime Stoppers public school outreach program sensibly advises when grown-ups are suddenly called away from home and also to call the gas company's emergency number, which he has memorized, to come check on what may well be a defective valve or circuit

in the oven before anyone else in the family is exposed to risk of accidental harm and also, in secret, to work on a massive display of bunting and penance and *Welcome Home* and *World's Greatest Mom* signs which he plans to use the garage's extendible aluminum ladder—with a responsible neighborhood adult holding it and supervising—to very carefully affix to the front of the home with water-soluble glue so they'll be there to greet the mom when she's released from the I.C.U. with a totally clean bill of health which Leonard calls his father repeatedly at the I.C.U. payphone to *assure* the father that he has absolutely no doubt of (the totally clean bill of health), calling hourly, right on the dot, until there is some kind of mechanical problem with the payphone and when he dials it he just gets a high tone which he duly reports to the telephone company's new automated 1618 Trouble Line.

He can do several kinds of calligraphy and has been to origami camp twice and can do extraordinary free-hand sketches of local flora with either hand and can whistle all six of Telemann's *Nouveaux Quators* and can imitate any birdcall Autoban could even ever have thought of, don't even mention spelling bees. He can make over twenty different kinds of admiral, cowboy, clerical and multi-ethnic hats out of ordinary newspaper and he volunteers to visit the school's K-through-2nd classrooms teaching the little kids how, a proposal the Carl P. Robinson Elementary principle says he appreciates and has considered very carefully before turning down.

The principle loathes the mere sight of the boy but does not quite know why. He sees the boy in his sleep, at nightmares' ragged edges; the pressed checked shirt and hair's hard little part, the freckles and ready, generous smile; *anything* he can do. The principle fantasizes about sinking a meat hook into Leonard Stesek's bright-eyed little face and dragging the boy face down behind his Volkswagen

Beetle over the rough new streets of suburban Grand Rapids. The fantasies come out of nowhere and horrify the principle, who is a devout Mennonite. Everyone hates the boy. It is a complex hatred that makes the hater feel guilty and awful and to hate themselves for feeling this way and so makes them involuntarily hate the boy even more for arousing such self-hatred. The whole thing is totally confusing and upsetting. People take a lot of Aspirin when he's around. The boy's only real friends among kids are the damaged, the handicapped, the slow, the clinically fat, the last-picked, the non-grata. He seeks them out.

All 316 invitations to his eleventh birthday *Blow-Out Bash*—322 invitations if you count the ones made on audiotape for the blind—are off, sent printed on quality velum with matching high-rag envelopes addressed in ornate Philippian II calligraphy he spent three weekends on and each invitation details in Roman Numerated outline-form the itinerary's half-day at Six Flags, private Ph.D.-guided tour of the Blanford Nature Center and reserved banquet-area-with-free-play at Shakey's Pizza & Indoor Arcade on Remembrance Drive, the whole day gratis and paid-for out of the paper and aluminum drives the boy got up at 4 a.m. all summer to organize and spearhead, the balance of the drive's receipts going to the Red Cross and the parents of a Kentwood, MI third-grader with terminal spina bifida who dreams above all-else of seeing Landry and Greer and 'Night Train' Lane live from his motorized wheelchair and the invitations explicitly call the party this: *A Blow-Out Bash* in balloon-shaped font as the caption to an illustrated explosion of good cheer and good will and no-holds-barred, let-out-all-the-stops fun with the bold-faced proviso: *Please, no presents required* in each of each card's four corners and the 316 invitations—sent via first-class mail to every student, instructor, substitute, aid, administrator, custodian and physical plant employee at C. P. Robinson Elementary—yield a total attendance of nine celebrants, not count-

ing parents and L.P.N.s of the incapacitated, and yet an undauntedly fine time was had by all was the consensus on the *Honest Appraisal and Suggestion* cards circulated at party's end. The massive remainders of chocolate cake, Neapolitan ice cream, pizza, chips, caramel corn, Hershey's kisses, United Way and Officer Chuck pamphlets on organ tissue donation and the correct procedures to follow if approached by a stranger respectively, kosher pizza for the Orthodox, biodegradable napkins and dietetic soda in souvenir *I Survived Leonard Stesek's Eleventh Birthday Blow-Out Bash, 1964* plastic glasses with built-in crazy-straws the guests were to keep as mementos all donated to the Kent County Children's Home via procedures and transport that the birthday-boy had initiated even while the big Twister free-for-all was underway, out of concerns about melted ice cream and staleness and flatness and the waste of a chance to help the less blessed and his father, driving the wood-paneled station wagon and steadying his cheek with one hand, avowed again that the boy beside him had a large, good heart and that he was proud and that if the boy's mother ever regained consciousness as they so very much hoped, he knew she'd be just awful proud as well.

3rd FRAGMENT (*Companion fragment to first fragment*)

Areas of the boy's midsection from navel to xyphoid process at the cleft of his ribs alone comprised nineteen months of stretching and postural exercises, some of the more extreme of which must have been wildly painful. At this stage, advances in flexibility were now subtle to the point of being undetectable without extremely precise daily record keeping. Certain tensile limits in the flava, capsule and process ligaments of the neck and upper back were gently but persistently stretched, the boy's chin placed to his chest at mid sternum and then slid incrementally down 1, sometimes 1.5 mm a day and this catatonic and/or meditative posture held for an hour or more.

In the summer, during his early morning routines, the tree outside the boy's window filled with grackles and became busy with grackles coming and going, then as the sun rose the tree filled with the birds' harsh sounds, tearing sounds, which as the boy sat cross-legged with his chin to his chest sounded through the window's pane like rusty

screws turning; some complexly stuck thing coming lose with a shriek. Past the tree were the foreshortened roofs of neighborhood homes and the fire hydrant and street sign of a cross street and the sixty-four identical low-sloped roofs of a townhouse development beyond the cross street and, past the development, just at the horizon, the edges of the verdant cornfields that began at the city limits. In late summer the fields' green was more sallow and later in the fall there was merely sad stubble and in the winter the fields' bare earth looked like nothing so much as just what it was.

A Bengali holy man known to followers as Prahran Sahta II underwent periods of meditative chanting during which his eyes exited their sockets and ascended to float above his head connected only by their dura-matter cords and there-upon underwent (the eyes did), floating above the holy man's head, rhythmic stylized rotary movements described by western witnesses as evocative of dancing four-faced Shivas, of charmed snakes, of interwoven genetic helices, of the counterpointed figure-eight orbits of the Milky Way and Andromeda galaxies around one another at the perimeter of the Local Group or of all four at the same time.

Nor was it ever established precisely why this boy decided to devote himself to being able to press his lips to every square inch of his own body. It is not clear even that he conceived of the objective as an achievement in the conventional sense. He did not read Ripley and had never even heard of the Brothers McWhorter. Certainly it was no kind of stunt nor any kind of self-evection; this is verified. The boy had no conscious wish to 'transcend' anything. If someone had asked him, the boy would have said only that he'd decided he wanted to press his lips to every last square micrometer of his own individual body. He would not have

been able to say more than this. Conceits or conception of his own physical inaccessibility to himself (as we are all of us inaccessible to ourselves and can, for example, press our lips to parts of one another which we cannot begin even to approach, lip wise, on ourselves) or of the boy's complete determination apparently to pierce that veil of inaccessibility—to be in some idiosyncratic way self-contained and -sufficient, fully available to himself—these were beyond the range of his consciousness. He was only a child.

His lips touched the upper aureoles of his left and right nipples in the autumn of his tenth year. The lips by this time were markedly large and protrusive. Part of his daily disciplines were tedious button and string exercises designed to promote hypertrophy of the avicularis muscles. The ability to extend his pursed lips as much, by age nine, as 11.4 cm had often been the difference between achieving part of his thorax and not. It had been the avicularis muscles more than any outstanding advances in vertebral hygiene that had permitted him to access the rear areas of his scrotum and substantial portions of the creases between his scrotum and inner thighs before he had even turned nine. These areas had been touched, tagged on the four-sided anatomical chart inside his personal ledger, then washed clean of ink and forgotten. The boy's tendency was to forget each site once he had pressed his lips to it as if the establishment of its accessibility made the site henceforth unreal for him and the site now in some sense existed only on the four-faced chart.

His mid and upper back were the first large areas of radical, perhaps impossible unavailability to his own lips, presenting challenges to flexibility and discipline that occupied a vast percentage of his inner-life in grades five and six, and ahead, of course, like the falls at a long river's end, lay the unimaginable prospects of achieving the back of his neck, the 8 cm just below the chin's mentalic point, the galea of his scalp's back and crown, the forehead and zy-

gomatic ridge, the ears, nose, eyes, as well as the paradoxical *ding an sich* of his lips themselves, accessing which appeared to be like asking a blade to cut itself. These sites occupied a near-mythic place in the overall agenda. The boy revered them in such a way as to place them almost beyond the range of conscious intent. The boy was not by nature a worrier (unlike himself, his father thought) but the inaccessibility of these last sites seemed so radically titanic that it was as if their cast shadow fell across all the slow progress up toward his clavicle in the front and lumbar curvature in the rear that occupied his twelfth year alive, darkening the entire project; tenebrist shadows the boy chose to see as lending the enterprise a somber dignity rather than any kind of futility or pathos. He did not yet know how but he believed, as he approached puberty, that his head would be his. He would find a way to access all of himself in the end. He possessed nothing that anyone could ever call doubt inside.