... an hungry man dreameth, and, behold, he eateth; but he awaketh, and his soul is empty ...

—Isaiah, 29:8

Dale Boone can eat anything, and lots of it. He holds titles in reindeer sausage (28 in ten minutes) and Russian beef dumplings (274 in six minutes). On this beautiful morning in Chattanooga, Tennessee, it’s hot dogs. Boone is supremely confident. Last night he prepped himself at a buffet: boiled cabbage, turnip greens, carrots, corn, nothing heavy. Now his stomach is stretched and ready. His boots are shiny new, his overalls freshly ironed. Because he is a showman, and because he is in the line of Daniel Boone, he wears a coonskin cap.

"Yeeeee-haw!" he says. "This is the best I’ve felt in a long time."

The camera crews have already begun to assemble in front of the three long tables pulled across the parking lot of Coney's Deli Cafe. Banners stamped with the Nathan’s Famous logo cover the tables, which have not been set with mustard, relish, or anything remotely resembling the fixings for a hot dog. All that's on these tables is a dozen clear plastic pitchers of water, there to augment the competitive saliva.

Boone, six feet tall and 280 pounds, struts around Coney's parking lot, pausing only to jawbone the TV crews or pose for snapshots. Meanwhile, behind the Nathan's tables, a sound guy fiddles with banks of speakers as George Shea, chairman of the International Federation of Competitive Eating, presses his straw boater onto his slick black hair and smooths his golden tie.

"This is the beginning of the journey," he says.

What Shea means is that today's contest in Chattanooga is the first of an eighteen-event international qualifying series in which amateurs and professionals from Europe, the Pacific Rim, and America can qualify for the 88th Annual Fourth of July Hot Dog Eating Contest held on the Boardwalk of Coney Island—the World Cup of food bolting. The gurgitator who emerges victorious in Coney's parking lot in Chattanooga today will get the chance to battle for the mustard-colored world-championship belt at the real Coney Island. There they will also face the current champion, a five foot seven, 132-pound Japanese “food fighter” named Takeru Kobayashi, who, as far as anyone knows, has eaten more hot dogs faster than anyone else on earth: fifty and a half hot dogs and buns in twelve minutes.

For Shea, the yearly calendar revolves around that Fourth of July contest. A long-time public-relations guy, Shea has been on the Nathan’s account since 1988, when he began assisting legendary Coney Island press agent Max Rosey (the man who married couples in diving bells, crowned gefilte-fish queens, put...
Shea Communications operates out of a loft space in Manhattan replete with hardwood floors and black-turtlenecked staff in ergonomic chairs, the typical offices of a boutique ad agency or some actor's production company (the IFOCE is itself represented by the William Morris Agency). "Seven million people watched The Glutton Bowl," Rich Shea noted two weeks before Chattanooga, as we sat around the conference table.

"There's a reverence for this as history," said George. "These are the pioneers," said Rich.

\[...\]
"I hope we can use the competitive-eating table to heal the wounds."

The small crowd actually breaks into unironic cheers. The producers from Fox and the NBC affiliate zoom in.

"I think Chew Chew is a great American," proclaims Shea. "And that is the most fundamental quality of a competitive eater."

The gurgitators line up behind the table. Standing increases capacity, so there are no chairs. Now they begin their final warmups: Lipsitz the pickle champ sweats his face and neck with water from each of the dozen plastic pitchers. Chew Chew, reveling in hometown adoration, holds clenched fists above his head like a prizefighter.

Dale Boone leans down, licks a hot dog, and sneers.

In the last five months, Dale Boone has traveled to Anchorage, Alaska, filmed a documentary for Discovery, been to New York several times, Philadelphia, St. Louis. He flew to Los Angeles to tape a game show.

He now counts among his friends such IFOCE circuit luminaries as "Cookie" Jarvis, who can inhale twenty-one cannoli in six minutes; "Hungry" Charles Hardy, who works in Corrections at Rikers Island and can devour fifteen feet of sushi in 120 minutes; Eric "Badlands" Booker, a six six, 460-pound New York City subway conductor who can demolish fifteen burritos in eight minutes; "Gentleman" Joe Menchetti, who holds the world conch-fritter record (forty-five in six minutes); and griddle king Jason "Crazy Legs" Conti (three pounds, seven ounces, of sourdough pancakes in twelve minutes).

"I'm living one of my secret dreams right now," Boone says. "It's awesome. It's indescribable."

Ever since he was a little boy, everyone had told him to slow down and taste his food. Everyone, that is, except his uncle. Daniel Homer Boone was a tremendous eater, so thorough and unmerciful in his feedings that he was banned from several buffets in Asheville, North Carolina. Daniel Homer measured six feet eleven inches tall and weighed 435 pounds. His wife, on the other hand, was one inch shy of four feet.

Dale Boone was the only person who could keep up with his uncle. "He taught me how to hold a lot of capacity. He was a very big fried-chicken eater. Like I am today."

Watermelon was Dale Boone's first competitive event, at the annual Locust Grove Day in Locust Grove, Georgia. Grand prize: a six-pack of Coca-Cola. The year was 1991, and Boone had just graduated from Georgia Tech with a degree in electrical engineering. He lost to a twelve-year-old. "It got me going. I had to come back and prove myself the next year and the next year. And here's a little known fact. I have never won the Locust Grove watermelon eating contest."

Dale Boone believes he reached peak eating speeds at twenty-one, and he won pizza eating contests and wild-turkey eating contests and whatever else could be put on a plate eating contests in and around Atlanta until he retired from stunt eating, married, opened his own business, and became a vegetarian.

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But just as the pioneer Daniel Boone abandoned Boonesboro late in life to settle ever newer territories, the gurgitator Dale Boone could not deny the imperatives of his roving metabolism. In April 2002, Atlanta's 790 AM, "The Zone," announced three eating contests in a single day, to take place right there at the station, broadcast to the world. Doughnuts in the morning, pigs' feet in the afternoon, chicken wings at night. Dale Boone had made no conscious decision to come out of retirement. Still, it was inevitable that on the day of the contest the infamous "Mouth from the South" would somehow, some way, be impelled to the broadcast studio. "I just happened to show up for the doughnut contest, and I guarantee you, the people at the table did not weigh under 300 pounds. Very big boys. They were ready to eat."

Dale Boone discovered his old form was intact. He devastated a dozen Krispy Kremes in two minutes, walked away with the prize, and that afternoon returned for contest number two.

"It was one pig's foot and sixteen ounces of very sour buttermilk. Next thing I know, contest started, bang! It took me nine seconds. Nine seconds!"

After two straight wins he had to hang around for the hot wings. He knew he could eat faster than anyone else in the state and wasn't the least bit intimidated by the 350-pounder from the University of Georgia who rolled into the studio. And everything went according to plan. Dale Boone was swallowing number twenty-nine while the opposition was still gnawing number five. "The hot sauce was hitting him," Boone reminisced. "His face was like five or six shades of red. I took the last one, I wiggled it in his face. I said, 'Come on, fat boy,' and then just finished it off and threw it down." Dale Boone thus became the undisputed AM-radio champion eater of Atlanta.

Still, he was not satisfied. He had heard of other eating contests, brimming tables beyond the borders of Georgia and the Carolinas. America's borders might be set, our forests and their inhabitants destroyed, but, deep in his gut, Dale Boone knew a howling wilderness of American frontier was still out there, waiting to be conquered. So he enlisted in a legion of other stunted avatars of industrialists, frontiersmen, and founders who journey from state to state despite their knowledge that the frontier is no longer an exterior but an interior space. Freak product of American evolution, they are the digestive imperialists.

Boone got on the Internet and soon discovered www.ifoce.com. As luck would have it, the Shea brothers were organizing a Coney Island qualifier in Atlanta later that year, so Boone began to prepare. He imagined himself the incarnation of American eating, so he put together a special uniform: A shirt and a pair of pants made up entirely of American flags.

Boone rented a limousine with screech horns, and on the day of Atlanta's first IFOCE-sanctioned hotdog eating contest, he emerged from that limo brandishing American flags in each hand. "All the cameras focused on me," he recalled. "Everybody was rooting me on."

He looked and sounded unstoppable, but the fact was that Dale Boone had made a rookie mistake. He had not eaten the night before. His stomach was not, as professional gurgitators like to say, stretched and ready.

"The contest started and it was very hot. I was feeling really giddy. Last thing I remembered I did fifteen hot dogs and I think he said I was on four minutes. The grease hit me. It hit me very hard. And I mean very hard. I got so nauseated I couldn't even see straight. I couldn't even think straight."

The excitement and the heat had put too much stress on Dale Boone's system. And stomachs have a mind of their own. True, he had no one to blame but himself. Still, it was brutal. Rich Shea remembers one of the judges commenting that Boone was eating "in an unsafe fashion." Next thing anyone knew, it was—to quote Dale Boone—"regurgitation at the table."

"Everybody's heart just sank. You could hear it in the crowd. They couldn't believe what happened."

Boone retreated to his limousine in disgrace. And that evening, he...
and his wife had a long, serious discussion about his future as an eater. “I told her, ‘Look, I really have a chance to win this thing.’” But there was only one qualifier for Coney Island left in 2002, and it would be held in Philadelphia.

Boone had vowed not to give up on that mustard-yellow belt, and he remembered his heroic ancestor, who never lost hope. Taken prisoner by Indians in May 1769, Daniel Boone escaped in the middle of the night to wander the “wildness” of Kentucky, stricken with “dreadful apprehensions.” But one morning, from the summit of Pilot Knob, he peered through the blue haze down to the banks of the Ohio and vowed to make the land his own.

Dale Boone told his wife, “I’m going to fly myself to Philadelphia.”

In the weeks before the event, Boone trained hard at a place on Buford Highway called the Old Country Buffet. Here, between gallons of water and endless servings of boiled cabbage, he ruminated over his defeat. Skipping dinner had done him in, so he determined never to let such a thing happen again. He approached the manager of the Old Country Buffet and learned to his relief that there was an Old Country Buffet in Philadelphia too. Right across the street from the Home Depot where the hot-dog eating contest would be held.

“They arranged everything for me,” said Boone. “So I got a chance to eat.”

It was in Philadelphia that Boone first encountered the then reigning pickle-eating world champion, Kevin Lipsitz—and pounded him and everyone else at the table. It took eighteen hot dogs and buns, but Boone left town with a trophy and a guaranteed spot at the table on Independence Day.

On the Fourth, Boone demonstrated a capacity for greatness. In gurgitator parlance, he hit the deuce—twenty hot dogs and buns in twelve minutes. He did not beat Takeru Kobayashi, but to call Kobayashi the Tiger Woods of his sport would be to insult Takeru Kobayashi. Kobayashi eats on a level of eternal grandeur. No one

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approaches him. If beating Kobayashi were what drove competitive eaters, there would be no sport.

Boone now ranks ninth worldwide in the latest issue of The Gurgitator, the IFOCE's official newsletter (circulation: forty-three), and is the front-runner for IFOCE "Rookie of the Year" honors. His colleagues are the greatest eaters in America. He's learned all the secrets. He doesn't make rookie mistakes. And he has come to Chattanooga because it is the business of his life to eat as many hot dogs as he possibly can as fast as he possibly can. Dale Boone's dream—the dream he is living—is the dream of endless, involuntary process. When he eats, he touches the infinite.

N
oon, and dogs are on the table. George Shea goes over the rules: As many hot dogs as possible in twelve minutes. Hot dogs may be eaten separately from buns, but in order to "count," both hot dog and hot-dog bun must be consumed. No utensils, no "unsafe" eating, no "sleepers" (abandoning a hot dog in the middle of the competition table), no "mules" (placing a hot dog on the plate of an accomplice), no drugs. "Even a Zantac is forbidden," Shea says.

The contest begins. Immediately, Dale Boone's cold-blooded mastery of the art and science of eating hot dogs becomes evident. He scoops up a dog, snaps it in two (the "Solomon method"), and gobbles both halves at once while dunking the bun with a quick twist of the wrist. As he eats he dances to some secret rhythm, shaking his booby as he clears his first plate.

He's smiling, confident, the old pro. He eats so quickly and so smoothly the food does not seem to be in any way foreign to his body. "When I'm thirsty," roared Mark Twain's Mississippi River man, "I reach up and suck a cloud dry like a sponge."

Kevin Lipsitz stuffs three hot dogs into his mouth as murky water pours down his chin and arms. "I eat very healthy at home," he said before the contest. "Carrot juice, organic salads. It's like a treat when I come to do this."

The photographers close in.

Boone, who has evaporated ten dogs and buns in the first four minutes of the contest, has already moved on to his third plate. He pulls up his sleeves as he chews and peers at Lipsitz. Boone knows ten hot dogs will not be enough, but he still needs to gauge the opposition. No need to go too fast, no need to press the nucleus, no need to hit the deuce if sixteen or seventeen will do.

Another minute goes by. The spectators have grown quiet, expectant. "Concentration...!" Shea whispers into the microphone. He, too, remembers that terrible afternoon in Atlanta. "Dale has a hair-trigger stomach. I wish it weren't so."

Now children clutch their parents' necks, suck their pacifiers, turn away. "Mount Boone may erupt!"

A fear-laced fascination envelops the crowd, and they watch the table as they would the fatal proceedings of calamity. The seething and gurgling Mount Boone, like the frontier's legendary Billy Earthquake and Colonel Nimrod Wildfire, has become natural disaster incarnate.

He's downed more than a dozen dogs.

The unforgiving eight-minute mark arrives and, after swallowing a mere four and a half hot dogs and buns, a discouraged and thoroughly discredited Chew Chew stops eating. The betrayed crowd jeers, but Chew Chew just looks at Dale Boone, shakes his head, turns his back to the table, and walks away.

Only one of the amateurs remains. His name is Kelvin Bedford, and he received his gastronomic education and training in classic imperialist style, as a gunner's mate in the United States Navy. Bedford is focused, efficient, and brutal. No matter how many hot dogs Boone crams down his throat, Kelvin Bedford keeps up. He matches number thirteen with number thirteen. Boone immediately begins to press number fourteen past his lips as he scowls at Bedford, but Bedford's not looking at anyone. He has closed his eyes. Now Boone realizes he is facing a Locust, and turns his own eyes to the clear, blue, indifferent sky.

Kevin Lipsitz, meanwhile, is holding third place. But he has entered a separate realm. His jaws crank open and shut like automated pincers, his hands clench decomposing, dripping buns.

Is this disgusting? No matter. Professional gurgitators personify disgust. It is their job to channel the whole veneful host of homicidal American eaters, the fabled legions of Wolverines and Suckers and Corncrackers, from the infamous and desppicable frontiersman Mike Fink ("I can swallow niggers whole, raw, or cooked") to the legendary man on William Street who "ate beef till he had horns grow out of his forehead."

One minute, eighteen seconds remain, but neither Boone, Bedford, nor Lipsitz will quit. The Navy man stands at attention, lips pursed, cheeks swollen to the bursting point, seeking some way to power down number fourteen.

He is Chattanooga's only remaining hope. The crowd pleads, they scream desperate encouragement, but Kelvin Bedford is drowning in fourteen hot dogs and there is nothing anyone can do to help.

Dale Boone lurches forward, swallows, and thrusts hot dog number fifteen past his lips. His hands slam the table, his head flops down, and his coonskin cap rolls to the pavement. Yet somehow, some way, he holds his food. Bowed in peristaltic prayer, his bald head shines wet and white in the southern sun.

Twelve minutes are up. The contest is over. First comes silence, a great, awful silence. Then a ferocious whoop rises and reverberates from Blockbuster to Kinko's to Blimpie's to Chill's. "Yeeeee-haw!"

And then Daniel Boone's great-great-great-great-great-grandson becomes the center of that parking lot in Tennessee. Surrounded by television cameras, microphones, and newspaper reporters, he kisses the huge, four-columned, multi-tiered trophy. "I was in trouble until I caught that burp," he says. "It was making me cry."

Finally, his last interview over, Dale Boone walks through the door of Coney's Deli Cafe. George Shea sits in a corner booth, eating lunch, talking business with Stuart Rosenthal, the owner of Coney's. Rosenthal is pleased. "I think we're going to do this semi-annually," he says. Shea suggests beef tongue in the spring, no utensils. Or giant hard-boiled os-
trich eggs, which make an excellent visual. Rosenthal nods. Then they notice Boone.


Boone surveys the restaurant, from the revolving displays of white-frosted strawberry cheesecake to the great, glass-encased wedges of corned beef, pastrami, and smoked turkey. On top of a shiny metal grill rotate dozens of Nathan’s Famous hot dogs. “America’s Favorite Hot Dog,” reads the sign. Metabolism awakes. The world is all before it. Dale Boone’s dream revives, and his mouth, slave to involuntary impulse, murmurs its unfailing desire.

“You got ice cream?”

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