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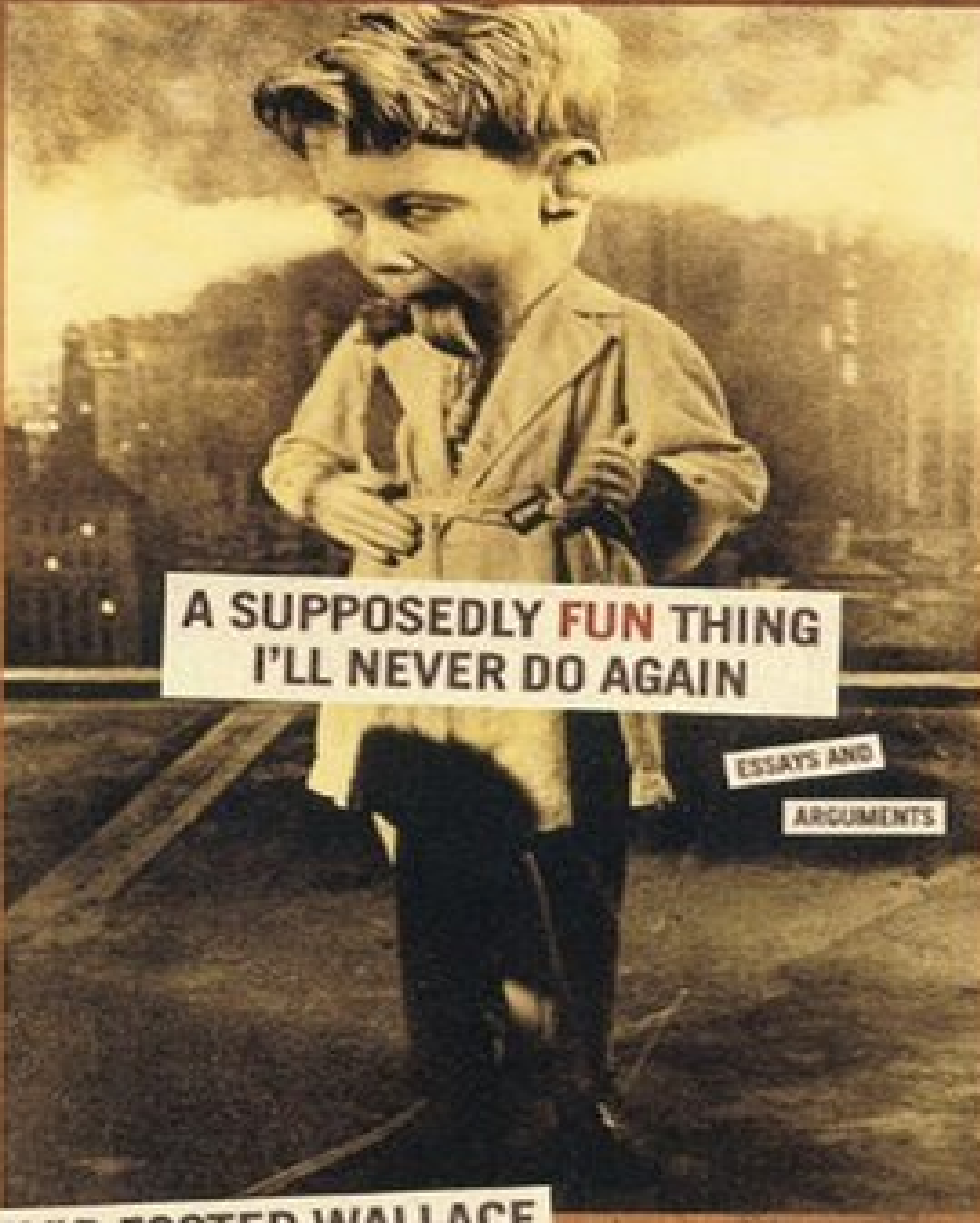

A SUPPOSEDLY FUN THING I'LL NEVER DO AGAIN

ESSAYS AND ARGUMENTS

DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

AUTHOR OF *INFINITE JEST*

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a supposedly fun thing

i'll never do again

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also by David Foster Wallace

The Broom of the System

Girl with Curious Hair

Infinite Jest

To Colin Harrison and Michael Pietsch

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The following essays have appeared previously (in somewhat different [and sometimes way shorter]

forms):

“Derivative Sport in Tornado Al ey,” “Getting Away from Pretty Much Being Away from It Al ,” and “A Supposedly Fun Thing I’l Never Do Again” in *Harper’s* in 1992,1994, and 1996 under the respective titles

“Tennis, Trigonometry, Tornadoes,” “Ticket to the Fair,”

and “Shipping Out.”

“Derivative Sport in Tornado Al ey” in Michael Martone, ed., *Townships* (University of Iowa Press, 1993).

“E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction” in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* in 1993.

“Greatly Exaggeerated” in the *Harvard Book Review* in 1992.

“David Lynch Keeps His Head” in *Premiere* in 1996.

“Tennis Player Michael Joyce’s Professional Artistry as a Paradigm of Certain Stuff About Choice, Freedom, Limitation,

Joy,

Grotesquerie,

and

Human

Completeness” in *Esquire* in 1996 under the title “The String Theory.”

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derivative sport in tornado alley

When I left my boxed township of Il inois farmland to attend my dad's alma mater in the lurid jutting Berkshires of western Massachusetts, I al of a sudden developed a jones for mathematics. I'm starting to see why this was so. Col ege math evokes and catharts a Midwesterner's sickness for home. I'd grown up inside vectors, lines and lines athwart lines, grids—and, on the scale of horizons, broad curving lines of geographic force, the weird topographical drain-swirl of a whole lot of ice-ironed land that sits and spins atop plates. The area behind and below these broad curves at the seam of land and sky I could plot by eye way before I came to know infinitesimals as easements, an integral as schema. Math at a hil y Eastern school was like waking up; it dismantled memory and put it in light.

Calculus was, quite literal y, child's play.

In late childhood I learned how to play tennis on the blacktop courts of a smal public park carved from farmland that had been nitrogenized too often to farm anymore. This was in my home of Philo, Il inois, a tiny col ection of corn silos and war-era Levittown homes whose native residents did little but sel crop insurance and nitrogen fertilizer and herbicide and col ect property

taxes from the young academics at nearby Champaign-Urbana's university, whose ranks swel ed enough in the flush 1960s to make outlying non sequiturs like "farm and bedroom community" lucid.

Between the ages of twelve and fifteen I was a near-great junior tennis player. I made my competitive bones beating up on lawyers' and dentists' kids at little Champaign and Urbana Country Club events and was soon kil ing whole summers being driven through dawns to tournaments al over Il inois, Indiana, Iowa. At fourteen I was ranked seventeenth in the United States Tennis Association's Western Section ("Western"

being the creakily ancient USTA's designation for the Midwest; farther west were the Southwest, Northwest, and Pacific Northwest sections). My flirtation with tennis excel ence had way more to do with the township where I learned and trained and with a weird proclivity for intuitive math than it did with athletic talent.

I was, even by the standards of junior competition in which everyone's a bud of pure potential, a pretty untalented tennis player. My hand-eye was OK, but I was neither large nor quick, had a near-concave chest and wrists so thin I could bracelet them with a thumb and pinkie, and could hit a tennis bal no harder or truer than most girls in my age bracket. What I could do was

"Play the Whole Court." This was a piece of tennis truistics that could mean any number of things. In my case, it meant I knew my limitations and the limitations of what I stood inside, and adjusted thusly. I was at my very best in bad conditions.

Now, conditions in Central Il inois are from a mathematical perspective interesting and from a tennis perspective bad. The summer heat and wet-mitten humidity, the grotesquely fertile soil that sends grasses and broadleaves up through the courts' surface by main force, the midges that feed on sweat and the mosquitoes that spawn in the fields' furrows and in the conferva-choked ditches that box each field, night tennis next to impossible because the moths and crap-gnats drawn by the sodium lights form a little planet around each tal lamp and the whole lit court surface is aflutter with spastic little shadows.

But mostly wind. The biggest single factor in Central Il inois' quality of outdoor life is wind. There are more local jokes than I can summon about bent weather vanes and leaning barns, more downstate sobriquets for kinds of wind than there are in Malamut for snow. The wind had a personality, a (poor) temper, and, apparently, agendas. The wind blew autumn leaves into intercalated lines and arcs of force so regular you could photograph them for a textbook on Cramer's Rule and the cross-products of curves in 3-space. It molded winter snow into blinding truncheons that buried stal ed cars and required citizens to shovel out not only driveways but the sides of homes; a Central Il inois "blizzard" starts only when the snowfal stops and the wind begins. Most people in Philo didn't comb their hair because why bother. Ladies wore those plastic flags tied down over their parlor-jobs so regularly I thought they were required for a real classy coiffure; girls on the East Coast outside with their hair hanging and tossing around looked wanton and nude to me. Wind wind etc. etc.

The people I know from outside it distil the Midwest into blank flatness, black land and fields of green fronds or five-o'clock stubble, gentle swel s and declivities that make the topology a sadistic exercise in plotting quadrics, highway vistas so same and dead they drive motorists mad. Those from IN/WI/Northern IL

think of their own Midwest as agronomics and commodity futures and corn-detasseling and bean-walking and seed-company caps, apple-cheeked Nordic types, cider and slaughter and footbal games with white fogbanks of breath exiting helmets. But in the odd central pocket that is Champaign-Urbana, Rantoul, Philo, Mahomet-Seymour, Mattoon, Farmer City, and Tolono, Midwestern life is informed and deformed by wind. Weather-wise, our township is on the eastern upcurrent of what I once heard an atmospherist in brown tweed cal a Thermal Anomaly.

Something about southward rotations of crisp air off the Great Lakes and muggy southern stuff from Arkansas and Kentucky miscegenating, plus an odd dose of weird zephyrs from the Mississippi val ey three hours west. Chicago cal s itself the Windy City, but Chicago, one big windbreak, does not know from a true religious-type wind. And meteorologists have nothing to tel people in Philo, who know perfectly wel that the real story is that to

the west, between us and the Rockies, there is basical y nothing tal , and that weird zephyrs and stirs joined breezes and gusts and thermals and downdrafts and whatever out over Nebraska and Kansas and moved east like streams into rivers and jets and military fronts that gathered like avalanches and roared in reverse down pioneer oxtrails, toward our own personal unsheltered asses.

The worst was spring, boys' high school tennis season, when the nets would stand out stiff as proud flags and an errant bal would blow clear to the easternmost fence, interrupting play on the next several courts.

During a bad blow some of us would get rope out and tel Rob Lord, who was our fifth man in singles and spectral y thin, that we were going to have to tie him down to keep him from becoming a projectile. Autumn, usual y about half as bad as spring, was a low constant roar and the massive clicking sound of continents of dry leaves being arranged into force-curves —I'd heard no sound remotely like this megaclicking until I heard, at nineteen, on New Brunswick's Bay of Fundy, my first high-tide wave break and get sucked back out over a shore of polished pebbles. Summers were manic and gusty, then often around August deadly calm. The wind would just die some August days, and it was no relief at al ; the cessation drove us nuts. Each August, we realized afresh how much the sound of wind had become part of the soundtrack to life in Philo. The sound of wind had become, for me, silence. When it went away, I was left with the squeak of the blood in my head and the aural glitter of al those little eardrum hairs quivering like a drunk in withdrawal. It was months after I moved to western MA before I could real y sleep in the pussified whisper of New England's wind-sound.

To your average outsider, Central Il inois looks ideal for sports. The ground, seen from the air, strongly suggests a board game: anal y precise squares of dun or khaki cropland al cut and divided by plumb-straight tar roads (in al farmland, roads stil seem more like impediments than avenues). In winter, the terrain always looks like Mannington bathroom tile, white quadrangles where bare (snow), black where trees and scrub have shaken free in the wind. From planes, it always looks to me like Monopoly or Life, or a lab maze for rats; then, from ground level, the arrayed fields of feed corn or

soybeans, fields furrowed into lines as straight as only an Al is Chalmers and sextant can cut them, look laned like sprint tracks or Olympic pools, hashmarked for serious bal , replete with the angles and al eys of serious tennis. My part of the Midwest always looks laid down special, as if planned.

The terrain's strengths are also its weaknesses.

Because the land seems so even, designers of clubs and parks rarely bother to rol it flat before laying the asphalt for tennis courts. The result is usual y a slight list that only a player who spends a lot of time on the courts wil notice. Because tennis courts are for sun-and eye-reasons always laid lengthwise north-south, and because the land in Central Il inois rises very gently as one moves east toward Indiana and the subtle geologic summit that sends rivers doubled back against their own feeders somewhere in the east of that state, the court's forehand half, for a rightie facing north, always seems physical y uphil from the backhand—at a tournament in Richmond IN, just over the Ohio line, I noticed the tilt was reversed. The same soil that's so ful of humus farmers have to be bought off to keep markets unflooded keeps clay courts chocked with jimson and thistle and volunteer corn, and it splits asphalt courts open with the upward pressure of broadleaf weeds whose pioneer-stock seeds are unthwarted by a half-inch cover of sealant and stone.

So that al but the very best maintained courts in the most affluent Il inois districts are their own little rural landscapes, with tufts and cracks and underground-seepage puddles being part of the lay that one plays. A court's cracks always seem to start off to the side of the service box and meander in and back toward the service line. Foliated in pockets, the black cracks, especial y against the forest green that contrasts with the barn red of the space outside the lines to signify fair territory, give the courts the eerie look of wel -

rivered sections of Il inois, seen from back aloft.

A tennis court, 78' × 27', looks, from above, with its slender rectangles of doubles al eys flanking its whole length, like a cardboard carton with flaps folded back.