

SWALLOW: FOREIGN BODIES, THEIR INGESTION, INSPIRATION, AND THE CURIOUS DOCTOR WHO EXTRACTED THEM

By Mary Cappello

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SOME BOOKS DEFY CATEGORIZATION. *SWALLOW: FOREIGN Bodies, Their Ingestion, Inspiration, and the Curious Doctor Who Extracted Them* is one. It is a repository of oddities, a soliloquy to swallowing, a meditation on the mouth, and an ode to a remarkable physician.

Swallow describes the extraordinary personal and professional life of Chevalier Jackson (1865-1958), one of America's preeminent laryngologists. He was a clinician, endoscopy pioneer, teacher, author, artist, and instrument-maker. Author Mary Cappello points out that "Before Jackson's instruments and techniques, only two patients out of one hundred might successfully cough up, regurgitate, or excrete a foreign body, and surgery resulted in death in 98 percent of all cases" and that "Jackson developed over five thousand instruments and saved as many lives." Amazingly, he removed ingested or aspirated foreign bodies without the use of anesthesia.

Among Jackson's many legacies is an astonishing collection that he assembled. A most unusual cabinet resides in the Mütter Museum of the College of Physicians in Philadelphia. Its placard reads, "Foreign Bodies Removed from the Air and Food Passageways." The cabinet houses more than 2000 items swallowed or inhaled that have been preserved after their endoscopic removal from airways or the gastrointestinal tract. This neatly catalogued collection of medical curiosities contains all kinds of materials and objects ingested or inhaled: buttons, staples, jewelry, dental objects, utensils, toys, minerals, hardware, shells, bones, cloth, and seeds. The foreign bodies most frequently requiring extraction come as no surprise: nuts, safety pins, and coins. Many of the stories associated with these wayward objects in the aerodigestive tract are beguiling—a blending of "disgust and fascination." Marvel at a sampling of the items swallowed and then stubbornly lodged in the esophagus or airways: a crucifix with attached rosary beads, tiny binoculars, a padlock, and a "perfect attendance" pin.

Swallow has a carnival sideshow flavor. Indeed, the book profiles sword swallowing and asserts that endoscopists owe a debt of gratitude to sword swallows for the notion of placing a tube in the upper gastrointestinal tract. The book introduces readers to individuals—frequently unlucky, sometimes self-destructive, and rarely heroic—who differ from the mainstream simply by virtue of what gets into their mouths, either willfully, unintentionally, or forcefully. Care-

lessness stands out as an important cause of ingesting a foreign body. *Swallow* is also a ghost story or a series of them. The patients depicted are survived by the items they ingested. Or, as the author puts it, "Foreign bodies are haunted bodies."

The cases presented are sometimes poignant. For example, Jackson successfully treated a young girl unable to drink a drop of water because of an esophageal stricture due to lye ingestion. After esophageal dilatation, she could eat any food, and 2 years later was growing strong. Jackson saved another child when he performed an emergency tracheotomy on a girl who had hidden her family's last dime in her mouth so she could buy bread for her brother. The child concealed the money because she knew her father would use it to purchase alcohol. The drunken father was beating and choking his daughter, and she was asphyxiating from obstruction by the coin. Jackson completed the rescue in spite of the father's assault. In recounting Jackson's propensity to cry as a young boy, the author writes, "He's a child with a body made of tears."

Cappello is not a scientist or medical person but rather a professor of creative writing and English. Her writing style is wistful, wacky, and wise. The medical terminology used—for example, cautoypyreiphagia (ingesting burnt matches) and geomelophagia (eating raw potatoes)—can be elegant or can tax the tongue. Either way, it insinuates that there is no limit to what individuals will put into their mouths.

Perhaps Cappello's interest in this medical material (as well as her empathy) goes back to childhood, when at age 4 she experienced gastric lavage firsthand after a slurp of bubble bath. She affectionately showers attention on the human mouth as "the part of our bodies where there is the most going on, our most visible and vulnerable of orifices, the seat of so much that is essential to our staying alive." Her homage to all things oral does not end there: "We remember the mouth as a site of nurture, breath, aggression, appetite, language, and even knowledge."

Swallow is a strange and alluring work of musings and medical history. Decorated with 46 black-and-white illustrations, the book is crammed with "the stuff of nightmare, or of whimsy." Occupying a curious position between Ripley's *Believe It or Not* and riveting biography, this book is something special. Be advised, however, that *Swallow* will not be for everyone.

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