The Personal Narrative Essay

Rising Senior Summer Reading and Writing
Spring 2018
TABLE OF CONTENTS

• INSTRUCTIONS

• OVERVIEW OF PURPOSE, STRUCTURE, AND PROMPTS

• “ON THE RAINY RIVER” BY TIM O’BRIEN

• “HANDED MY OWN LIFE” BY ANNIE DILLARD

• “SALVATION” BY LANGSTON HUGHESES

• “TICKET TO THE FAIR” BY DAVID FOSTER WALLACE

• “STABILITY IN MOTION” BY MARINA KEEGAN

• “ON BEING A REAL WESTERNER” BY TOBIAS WOLFF

• STUDENT ESSAYS: “I THINK I CAN, I THINK I CAN” AND “SPEED”
REQUIRED SUMMER READING INSTRUCTIONS

1. Read the overview and every essay in the packet.

2. Write two original personal narratives using any of the prompts suggested in the overview. Use the structural guidelines in the overview to craft the structure of your own essays. The structural guidelines are a template, not a requirement. Choose techniques that best suit the organization of your essay. Use the professional and student essays for inspiration for modes of style, content, tone, and approach. Be prepared to defend your use of these modes.

3. Have the reading completed and bring your essays to your English class on the first day of school, August 9th or 10th (depending on your block and its place in the cycle).

   One of these two essays may be one you have already written for a college application or English 11, but it must be significantly revised structurally and/or stylistically for this assignment. These two essays will become the drafts for your potential college essays. One of these two essays must be an entirely new creation never before submitted for a grade in a Randolph class.

4. You will be graded on how well you read the essay examples and also on how thoughtful and well-organized your essays are. You will be graded in your English classes. Finally, completion of these two college essays will satisfy the common essay application requirement for senior privileges.

5. Each narrative should be 2-4 typewritten, double-spaced pages.
"Narrative" is a term more commonly known as "story." Narratives written for college or personal narratives, tell a story, usually to some point, to illustrate some truth or insight. Following are some tools to help you structure your personal narrative, breaking it down into parts.

**Introduction**

- **The “Hook”** Start your paper with a statement about your story that catches the reader’s attention, for example: a relevant quotation, question, fact, or definition.

- **Set the Scene** Provide the information the reader will need to understand the story: Who are the major characters? When and where is it taking place? Is it a story about something that happened to you, the writer, or is it fiction?

- **Thesis Statement** The thesis of a narrative essay plays a slightly different role than that of an argument or expository essay. A narrative thesis can begin the events of the story: "It was sunny and warm out when I started down the path"; offer a moral or lesson learned: "I'll never hike alone again"; or identify a theme that connects the story to a universal experience: "Journeys bring both joy and hardship."

**Body Paragraph**

- **“Show, Don’t Tell”** Good story telling includes details and descriptions that help the reader understand what the writer experienced. Think about using all five senses—not just the sense of sight—to add details about what you heard, saw, and felt during the event. For example, "My heart jumped as the dark shape of the brown grizzly lurched toward me out of the woods" provides more information about what the writer saw and felt than, "I saw a bear when I was hiking."

- **Supporting Evidence** In a personal narrative, your experience acts as the evidence that proves your thesis. The events of the story should demonstrate the lesson learned, or the significance of the event to you.

- **Passage of Time** Writing about the events of your experience using time chronologically, from beginning to end, is the most common and clear way to tell a story. Whether you choose to write chronologically or not, use transition words to clearly indicate to the reader what happened first, next, and last. Some time transition words are next, finally, during, after, when, and later.

- **Transitions** In a narrative essay, a new paragraph marks a change in the action of a story, or a move from action to reflection. Paragraphs should connect to one another. For example, the end of one paragraph might be: "I turned and ran, hoping the bear hadn’t noticed me", and the start of the next might be: "There are many strategies for surviving an encounter with a bear; ‘turn and run’ is not one of them." The repetition of words connects the paragraphs. (What does the change in verb tense indicate?)

**Conclusion**

- **The Moral of the Story** The conclusion of a narrative include the closing action of the event, but also should include some reflection or analysis of the significance of the event to the writer. What lesson did you learn? How has what happened to you affected your life now?
## Outlining Your Narrative

*Try applying this structure to your own writing: write sentences for the corresponding elements of your introduction, body paragraphs, and conclusion in the space provided below.*

### Introduction:

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<th>Begin your paper with a “hook” that catches the reader’s attention and sets the scene. Where is the event set? What time of year? How old were you when this happened?</th>
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<td>State your <strong>thesis</strong>: what you learned, or how the event is significant to you.</td>
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### Body paragraphs: write three significant moments from the beginning, middle, and end of the event.

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### Conclusion:

| | Analyze and reflect on the action of the story, including how the events are significant to you. |

### Writing Strategies to Consider

**First Person vs. Third Person** Narratives are a mode of writing in which writers often use first person perspective (“I saw”, “I did”). Check with your instructor to determine whether you can use “I” when telling your story.

**Verb Tense: Reporting vs. Reflecting** The events of most narratives are told in past tense: “As I hiked, I felt the warm sun on my back.” Use present tense when reflecting on the events: “Now I know how unprepared I was.” Notice the change in tense in this sentence as the writer reflects on the past event, from the present.
**Personal Essay Structure**

Purpose: To describe and analyze a narrative about a change in your life in an entertaining, thoughtful way.

- A personal essay is always a combination of two writing techniques—**narrative** (storytelling full of powerful sensory details and word choice) and **analysis** (language that explains the significance and meaning of narrative moments.) Remember, a personal essay is not just a story without analysis, nor is it an essay explaining change without telling a creative, entertaining story.
- Narrative is communicated in **anecdotes**, or small, short scenes. Each anecdote then has analysis explaining how the anecdote shows the speaker feelings or perspectives at that moment.
- In order to show change, the overall essay structure usually follows a three-part map of anecdotes: **before, during, and after**. The central or “during” moment is usually the one that changed the speaker. Sometimes all three anecdotes occur in a relatively short amount of narrative time, like a day or even a few minutes. Other times, there are scene changes, and each anecdote might be separated by days, weeks, or years.
- All personal essays must have a clear, powerfully-worded **thesis statement** that has both claim and reasoning. However, since this is a more creative format, theses often appear at various points, even the end of the essay.
- The techniques of **In Medias Res** and **Flashback** are useful to frame your essay and engage the reader immediately.
- Other characters liven up your essay, especially if they are accompanied by clever **characterization** like facial features, body language, tone of voice, and snippets of dialogue.
- Consider doing a “War Story” by purposely **exaggerating** certain moments or descriptions in order to communicate the true feelings of the events...even if it means stretching the truth of the details a bit.
- In revision, careful attention to word choice can help achieve a desired **tone**, making your essay inspirational, thoughtful, philosophical, or even satirical.

**Essay Topic Suggestions**

- “My Ideal School” Write an essay in which you describe how you would design an ideal school to deal with an academic or social problem you identified in your writing. You can be imaginative or even fantastical in your school design. Use anecdotes from your own life to justify the design of your ideal school.
- “The Perfect Me” Describe your struggle to live up to all the external and internal expectations in your life. What would a “perfect you” do in a day? How realistic is this? Tell real-life anecdotes of successes and failures that have taught you how to moderate your expectations of this “perfect persona”. Have fun by naming the “perfect persona” and by describing with hyperbole their perfect day.
- “Naturally Conservative” What do you wish would never change? Give anecdotal evidence of the comforting or inspirational moments or relationships in your daily life. Contrast these with anecdotes of impatience: areas of your life you cannot wait to change. Analyze the two
categories: are there some habits you are comfortable with that maybe you should be more open to changing? Are there some places in your life where you are impatient but perhaps could be more open to appreciating? Have fun by giving us a picture of your comfort and impatience in a daily routine.

- “Independent Reading” Describe how a fictional story—written, film, television—changed your view of youth or adulthood. When did you first encounter the story? Which perspectives or values did the story challenge or provoke? Detail how you changed from the experience. Have fun by capturing the magic of the storytelling; describe how it excited your imagination or “blew your mind.”

- “Discipline and Punishment” Describe powerful moments of discipline that have formed you as a young adult. This can be discipline from the outside world or self discipline. You can contrast anecdotes in which discipline was effective and inspirational with other moments where discipline was ineffective or demoralizing. How does your reaction to these techniques capture your character? Have fun by describing moments of rebellion or humility with self-deprecating humor or gripping wit.

- “Kumbaya” How can the divide between adults and children be better bridged? Describe an event that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood, and analyze the difficulties in reaching that moment. How could the adult world have better communicated or assisted you in getting to that point? How could the child in you have reached that point faster? Are we stuck with the inevitable conflict of generations? Give anecdotes of this struggle for you and explain how you might try to change your behavior towards youth (maybe even freshmen?) based on these experiences.

- “Cookie Monster” What talent or power within you do you often try to hide? Why? Or, what ambitions, goals, or dreams do you have that often seem overwhelming or difficult to achieve? Describe moments that capture these overwhelming moments. Is self discipline the answer, or do you need to accept and even embrace this inner power? Describe what you are doing now about this inner world now that you have made this discovery.

- Describe a relationship with an important person. How do the stages of that relationship resemble your unique way of learning? (My brother and I have known each other since we were young, but we still don’t get along. I have tried to learn Geometry for years, but it is still a painful experience.)

- Describe a process in nature that resembles your unique way of learning. (I learn in the same way that ants build. First, I send out feelers, then, I start digging, then I start pushing out the refuse to get comfortable.)

- Describe a book, movie, television show, or album that resembles your unique way of learning. (I learn like Sheldon in Big Bang Theory; I am ignorant at first, and only through acute embarrassment do I become enlightened.)

- Describe an everyday activity, sport, or significant event that resembles your unique way of learning. (I figure out how to write an essay in the same way that I cook chili. I look in the fridge and figure out what ingredients I have, then make them work. I check for taste at every step.) This activity may act as a framing device. How did this activity help you discover your passion?

- Describe an imaginary, ideal school or job that would perfectly fit your unique way of learning. (Randolph, of course, is the ideal school for me because it stimulates my curiosity and lets me explore my own interests.)
College Common Application Essay Prompts

“The more detailed prompts included here are designed to stimulate your ideas and help you form specific, engaging theses. Also, the more specific prompts can all easily fit into one of the following Common Application Essay Prompts. However, we have also included the 2018-2019 Common Essay Prompts if you would like to directly answer them. We recommend that you also reference other prompts in order to answer the Common Essay prompts in a specific, engaging way.”

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.

2. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?

3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?

4. Describe a problem you’ve solved or a problem you’d like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma - anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.

5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.

6. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?

7. Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you’ve already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.
On the Rainy River

This is one story I've never told before. Not to anyone. Not to my parents, not to my brother or sister, not even to my wife. To go into it, I've always thought, would only cause embarrassment for all of us, a sudden need to be elsewhere, which is the natural response to a confession. Even now, I'll admit, the story makes me squirm. For more than twenty years I've had to live with it, feeling the shame, trying to push it away, and so by this act of remembrance, by putting the facts down on paper, I'm hoping to relieve at least some of the pressure on my dreams. Still, it's a hard story to tell. All of us, I suppose, like to believe that in a moral emergency we will behave like the heroes of our youth, bravely and forthrightly, without thought of personal loss or discredit. Certainly that was my conviction back in the summer of 1968. Tim O'Brien: a secret hero. The Lone Ranger. If the stakes ever became high enough—if the evil were evil enough, if the good were good enough—I would simply tap a secret reservoir of courage that had been ac-
cumulating inside me over the years. Courage, I seemed to think, comes to us in finite quantities, like an inheritance, and by being frugal and stashing it away and letting it earn interest, we steadily increase our moral capital in preparation for that day when the account must be drawn down. It was a comforting theory. It dispensed with all those bothersome little acts of daily courage; it offered hope and grace to the repetitive coward; it justified the past while amortizing the future.

In June of 1968, a month after graduating from Macalester College, I was drafted to fight a war I hated. I was twenty-one years old. Young, yes, and politically naive, but even so the American war in Vietnam seemed to me wrong. Certain blood was being shed for uncertain reasons. I saw no unity of purpose, no consensus on matters of philosophy or history or law. The very facts were shrouded in uncertainty: Was it a civil war? A war of national liberation or simple aggression? Who started it, and when, and why? What really happened to the USS Maddox on that dark night in the Gulf of Tonkin? Was Ho Chi Minh a Communist stooge, or a nationalist savior, or both, or neither? What about the Geneva Accords? What about SEATO and the Cold War? What about dominoes? America was divided on these and a thousand other issues, and the debate had spilled out across the floor of the United States Senate and into the streets, and smart men in pinstripes could not agree on even the most fundamental matters of public policy. The only certainty that summer was moral confusion. It was my view then, and still is, that you don’t make war without knowing why. Knowledge, of course, is always imperfect, but it seemed to me that when a nation goes to war it must have reasonable confi-
dence in the justice and imperative of its cause. You can’t fix your mistakes. Once people are dead, you can’t make them undead.

In any case those were my convictions, and back in college I had taken a modest stand against the war. Nothing radical, no hothead stuff, just ringing a few doorbells for Gene McCarthy, composing a few tedious, uninspired editorials for the campus newspaper. Oddly, though, it was almost entirely an intellectual activity. I brought some energy to it, of course, but it was the energy that accompanies almost any abstract endeavor; I felt no personal danger; I felt no sense of an impending crisis in my life. Stupidly, with a kind of smug removal that I can’t begin to fathom, I assumed that the problems of killing and dying did not fall within my special province.

The draft notice arrived on June 17, 1968. It was a humid afternoon, I remember, cloudy and very quiet, and I’d just come in from a round of golf. My mother and father were having lunch out in the kitchen. I remember opening up the letter, scanning the first few lines, feeling the blood go thick behind my eyes. I remember a sound in my head. It wasn’t thinking, just a silent howl. A million things all at once—I was too good for this war. Too smart, too compassionate, too everything. It couldn’t happen. I was above it. I had the world dicked—Phi Beta Kappa and summa cum laude and president of the student body and a full-ride scholarship for grad studies at Harvard. A mistake, maybe—a foul-up in the paperwork. I was no soldier. I hated Boy Scouts. I hated camping out. I hated dirt and tents and mosquitoes. The sight of blood made me queasy, and I couldn’t tolerate authority, and I didn’t know a rifle from a
slingshot. I was a liberal, for Christ sake: If they needed fresh bodies, why not draft some back-to-the-stone-age h awk? Or some dumb jingo in his hard hat and Bomb Hanoi button, or one of LBJ’s pretty daughters, or Westmoreland’s whole handsome family—nephews and nieces and baby grandson. There should be a law, I thought. If you support a war, if you think it’s worth the price, that’s fine, but you have to put your own precious fluids on the line. You have to head for the front and hook up with an infantry unit and help spill the blood. And you have to bring along your wife, or your kids, or your lover. A law, I thought.

I remember the rage in my stomach. Later it burned down to a smoldering self-pity, then to numbness. At dinner that night my father asked what my plans were. “Nothing,” I said. “Wait.”

I spent the summer of 1968 working in an Armour meat-packing plant in my hometown of Worthington, Minnesota. The plant specialized in pork products, and for eight hours a day I stood on a quarter-mile assembly line—more properly, a disassembly line—removing blood clots from the necks of dead pigs. My job title, I believe, was Declotter. After slaughter, the hogs were decapitated, split down the length of the belly, pried open, eviscerated, and strung up by the hind hocks on a high conveyor belt. Then gravity took over. By the time a carcass reached my spot on the line, the fluids had mostly drained out, everything except for dense clots of blood in the neck and upper chest cavity. To remove the stuff, I used a kind of water gun. The machine was heavy, maybe eighty pounds, and was suspended from the ceiling by a thick rubber cord. There was some bounce to it,
an elastic up-and-down give, and the trick was to manuever the gun with your whole body, not lifting with the arms, just letting the rubber cord do the work for you. At one end was a trigger; at the muzzle end was a small nozzle and a steel roller brush. As a carcass passed by, you'd lean forward and swing the gun up against the clots and squeeze the trigger, all in one motion, and the brush would whirl and water would come shooting out and you'd hear a quick splattering sound as the clots dissolved into a fine red mist. It was not pleasant work. Goggles were a necessity, and a rubber apron, but even so it was like standing for eight hours a day under a lukewarm blood-shower. At night I'd go home smelling of pig. It wouldn't go away. Even after a hot bath, scrubbing hard, the stink was always there—like old bacon, or sausage, a greasy pig-stink that soaked deep into my skin and hair. Among other things, I remember, it was tough getting dates that summer. I felt isolated; I spent a lot of time alone. And there was also that draft notice tucked away in my wallet.

In the evenings I'd sometimes borrow my father's car and drive aimlessly around town, feeling sorry for myself, thinking about the war and the pig factory and how my life seemed to be collapsing toward slaughter. I felt paralyzed. All around me the options seemed to be narrowing, as if I were hurtling down a huge black funnel, the whole world squeezing in tight. There was no happy way out. The government had ended most graduate school deferments; the waiting lists for the National Guard and Reserves were impossibly long; my health was solid; I didn't qualify for CO status—no religious grounds, no history as a pacifist. Moreover, I could not claim to be opposed to war as a matter of general principle.
There were occasions, I believed, when a nation was justified in using military force to achieve its ends, to stop a Hitler or some comparable evil, and I told myself that in such circumstances I would've willingly marched off to the battle. The problem, though, was that a draft board did not let you choose your war.

Beyond all this, or at the very center, was the raw fact of terror. I did not want to die. Not ever. But certainly not then, not there, not in a wrong war. Driving up Main Street, past the courthouse and the Ben Franklin store, I sometimes felt the fear spreading inside me like weeds. I imagined myself dead. I imagined myself doing things I could not do—charging an enemy position, taking aim at another human being.

At some point in mid-July I began thinking seriously about Canada. The border lay a few hundred miles north, an eight-hour drive. Both my conscience and my instincts were telling me to make a break for it, just take off and run like hell and never stop. In the beginning the idea seemed purely abstract, the word Canada printing itself out in my head; but after a time I could see particular shapes and images, the sorry details of my own future—a hotel room in Winnipeg, a battered old suitcase, my father's eyes as I tried to explain myself over the telephone. I could almost hear his voice, and my mother's. Run, I'd think. Then I'd think, Impossible. Then a second later I'd think, Run.

It was a moral split. I couldn't make up my mind. I feared the war, yes, but I also feared exile. I was afraid of walking away from my own life, my friends and my family, my whole history, everything that mattered to me. I feared losing the respect of my parents. I feared the law. I feared ridicule and censure. My hometown was a conservative little spot on the
prairie, a place where tradition counted, and it was easy to imagine people sitting around a table down at the old Gobbler Café on Main Street, coffee cups poised, the conversation slowly zeroing in on the young O'Brien kid, how the damned sissy had taken off for Canada. At night, when I couldn't sleep, I'd sometimes carry on fierce arguments with those people. I'd be screaming at them, telling them how much I detested their blind, thoughtless, automatic acquiescence to it all, their simplminded patriotism, their prideful ignorance, their love-it-or-leave-it platitudes, how they were sending me off to fight a war they didn't understand and didn't want to understand. I held them responsible. By God, yes, I did. All of them—I held them personally and individually responsible—the polyestered Kiwanis boys, the merchants and farmers, the pious churchgoers, the chatty housewives, the PTA and the Lions club and the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the fine upstanding gentry out at the country club. They didn't know Bao Dai from the man in the moon. They didn't know history. They didn't know the first thing about Diem's tyranny, or the nature of Vietnamese nationalism, or the long colonialism of the French—this was all too damned complicated, it required some reading—but no matter, it was a war to stop the Communists, plain and simple, which was how they liked things, and you were a treasonous pussy if you had second thoughts about killing or dying for plain and simple reasons.

I was bitter, sure. But it was so much more than that. The emotions went from outrage to terror to bewilderment to guilt to sorrow and then back again to outrage. I felt a sickness inside me. Real disease.

Most of this I've told before, or at least hinted at, but
what I have never told is the full truth. How I cracked. How at work one morning, standing on the pig line, I felt something break open in my chest. I don't know what it was. I'll never know. But it was real, I know that much, it was a physical rupture—a cracking-leaking-popping feeling. I remember dropping my water gun. Quickly, almost without thought, I took off my apron and walked out of the plant and drove home. It was midmorning, I remember, and the house was empty. Down in my chest there was still that leaking sensation, something very warm and precious spilling out, and I was covered with blood and hog-stink, and for a long while I just concentrated on holding myself together. I remember taking a hot shower. I remember packing a suitcase and carrying it out to the kitchen, standing very still for a few minutes, looking carefully at the familiar objects all around me. The old chrome toaster, the telephone, the pink and white Formica on the kitchen counters. The room was full of bright sunshine. Everything sparked. My house, I thought. My life. I'm not sure how long I stood there, but later I scribbled out a short note to my parents.

What it said, exactly, I don't recall now. Something vague. Taking off, will call, love Tim.

I drove north.

It's a blur now, as it was then, and all I remember is velocity and the feel of a steering wheel in my hands. I was riding on adrenaline. A giddy feeling, in a way, except there was the dreamy edge of impossibility to it—like running a dead-end maze—no way out—it couldn't come to a happy conclusion and yet I was doing it anyway because it was all I could think of to do. It was pure flight, fast and mindless.
I had no plan. Just hit the border at high speed and crash through and keep on running. Near dusk I passed through Bemidji, then turned northeast toward International Falls. I spent the night in the car behind a closed-down gas station a half mile from the border. In the morning, after gassing up, I headed straight west along the Rainy River, which separates Minnesota from Canada, and which for me separated one life from another. The land was mostly wilderness. Here and there I passed a motel or bait shop, but otherwise the country unfolded in great sweeps of pine and birch and sumac. Though it was still August, the air already had the smell of October, football season, piles of yellow-red leaves, everything crisp and clean. I remember a huge blue sky. Off to my right was the Rainy River, wide as a lake in places, and beyond the Rainy River was Canada.

For a while I just drove, not aiming at anything, then in the late morning I began looking for a place to lie low for a day or two. I was exhausted, and scared sick, and around noon I pulled into an old fishing resort called the Tip Top Lodge. Actually it was not a lodge at all, just eight or nine tiny yellow cabins clustered on a peninsula that jutted northward into the Rainy River. The place was in sorry shape. There was a dangerous wooden dock, an old minnow tank, a flimsy tar paper boathouse along the shore. The main building, which stood in a cluster of pines on high ground, seemed to lean heavily to one side, like a cripple, the roof sagging toward Canada. Briefly, I thought about turning around, just giving up, but then I got out of the car and walked up to the front porch.

The man who opened the door that day is the hero of my life. How do I say this without sounding sappy? Blurt it
out—the man saved me. He offered exactly what I needed, without questions, without any words at all. He took me in. He was there at the critical time—a silent, watchful presence. Six days later, when it ended, I was unable to find a proper way to thank him, and I never have, and so, if nothing else, this story represents a small gesture of gratitude twenty years overdue.

Even after two decades I can close my eyes and return to that porch at the Tip Top Lodge. I can see the old guy staring at me. Elroy Berdahl: eighty-one years old, skinny and shrunken and mostly bald. He wore a flannel shirt and brown work pants. In one hand, I remember, he carried a green apple, a small paring knife in the other. His eyes had the bluish gray color of a razor blade, the same polished shine, and as he peered up at me I felt a strange sharpness, almost painful, a cutting sensation, as if his gaze were somehow slicing me open. In part, no doubt, it was my own sense of guilt, but even so I’m absolutely certain that the old man took one look and went right to the heart of things—a kid in trouble.

When I asked for a room, Elroy made a little clicking sound with his tongue. He nodded, led me out to one of the cabins, and dropped a key in my hand. I remember smiling at him. I also remember wishing I hadn’t. The old man shook his head as if to tell me it wasn’t worth the bother.

“Dinner at five-thirty,” he said. “You eat fish?”

“Anything,” I said.

Elroy grunted and said, “I’ll bet."

We spent six days together at the Tip Top Lodge. Just the two of us. Tourist season was over, and there were no boats on the river, and the wilderness seemed to withdraw
into a great permanent stillness. Over those six days Elroy Berdahl and I took most of our meals together. In the mornings we sometimes went out on long hikes into the woods, and at night we played Scrabble or listened to records or sat reading in front of his big stone fireplace. At times I felt the awkwardness of an intruder, but Elroy accepted me into his quiet routine without fuss or ceremony. He took my presence for granted, the same way he might've sheltered a stray cat—no wasted sighs or pity—and there was never any talk about it. Just the opposite. What I remember more than anything is the man's willful, almost ferocious silence. In all that time together, all those hours, he never asked the obvious questions: Why was I there? Why alone? Why so preoccupied? If Elroy was curious about any of this, he was careful never to put it into words.

My hunch, though, is that he already knew. At least the basics. After all, it was 1968, and guys were burning draft cards, and Canada was just a boat ride away. Elroy Berdahl was no hick. His bedroom, I remember, was cluttered with books and newspapers. He killed me at the Scrabble board, barely concentrating, and on those occasions when speech was necessary he had a way of compressing large thoughts into small, cryptic packets of language. One evening, just at sunset, he pointed up at an owl circling over the violet-lighted forest to the west. "Hey, O'Brien," he said. "There's Jesus." The man was sharp—he didn't miss much. Those razor eyes. Now and then he'd catch me staring out at the river, at the far shore, and I could almost hear the tumblers clicking in his head. Maybe I'm wrong, but I doubt it.

One thing for certain, he knew I was in desperate trouble. And he knew I couldn't talk about it. The wrong word—or
even the right word—and I would've disappeared. I was wired and jittery. My skin felt too tight. After supper one evening I vomited and went back to my cabin and lay down for a few moments and then vomited again; another time, in the middle of the afternoon, I began sweating and couldn't shut it off. I went through whole days feeling dizzy with sorrow. I couldn't sleep; I couldn't lie still. At night I'd toss around in bed, half awake, half dreaming, imagining how I'd sneak down to the beach and quietly push one of the old man's boats out into the river and start paddling my way toward Canada. There were times when I thought I'd gone off the psychic edge. I couldn't tell up from down, I was just falling, and late in the night I'd lie there watching bizarre pictures spin through my head. Getting chased by the Border Patrol—helicopters and searchlights and barking dogs—I'd be crashing through the woods, I'd be down on my hands and knees—people shouting out my name—the law closing in on all sides—my hometown draft board and the FBI and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. It all seemed crazy and impossible. Twenty-one years old, an ordinary kid with all the ordinary dreams and ambitions, and all I wanted was to live the life I was born to—a mainstream life—I loved baseball and hamburgers and cherry Cokes—and now I was off on the margins of exile, leaving my country forever, and it seemed so grotesque and terrible and sad.

I'm not sure how I made it through those six days. Most of it I can't remember. On two or three afternoons, to pass some time, I helped Elroy get the place ready for winter, sweeping down the cabins and hauling in the boats, little chores that kept my body moving. The days were cool and bright. The nights were very dark. One morning the old man
showed me how to split and stack firewood, and for several hours we just worked in silence out behind his house. At one point, I remember, Elroy put down his maul and looked at me for a long time, his lips drawn as if framing a difficult question, but then he shook his head and went back to work. The man’s self-control was amazing. He never cried. He never put me in a position that required lies or denials. To an extent, I suppose, his reticence was typical of that part of Minnesota, where privacy still held value, and even if I’d been walking around with some horrible deformity—four arms and three heads—I’m sure the old man would’ve talked about everything except those extra arms and heads. Simple politeness was part of it. But even more than that, I think, the man understood that words were insufficient. The problem had gone beyond discussion. During that long summer I’d been over and over the various arguments, all the pros and cons, and it was no longer a question that could be decided by an act of pure reason. Intellect had come up against emotion. My conscience told me to run, but some irrational and powerful force was resisting, like a weight pushing me toward the war. What it came down to, stupidly, was a sense of shame. Hot, stupid shame. I did not want people to think badly of me. Not my parents, not my brother and sister, not even the folks down at the Gobbler Café. I was ashamed to be there at the Tip Top Lodge. I was ashamed of my conscience, ashamed to be doing the right thing.

Some of this Elroy must’ve understood. Not the details, of course, but the plain fact of crisis.

Although the old man never confronted me about it, there was one occasion when he came close to forcing the whole thing out into the open. It was early evening, and
we'd just finished supper, and over coffee and dessert I asked him about my bill, how much I owed so far. For a long while the old man squinted down at the tablecloth.

"Well, the basic rate," he said, "is fifty bucks a night. Not counting meals. This makes four nights, right?"

I nodded. I had three hundred and twelve dollars in my wallet.

Elroy kept his eyes on the tablecloth. "Now that's an on-season price. To be fair, I suppose we should knock it down a peg or two." He leaned back in his chair. "What's a reasonable number, you figure?"

"I don't know," I said. "Forty?"

"Forty's good. Forty a night. Then we tack on food—say another hundred? Two hundred sixty total?"

"I guess."

He raised his eyebrows. "Too much?"

"No, that's fair. It's fine. Tomorrow, though... I think I'd better take off tomorrow."

Elroy shrugged and began clearing the table. For a time he fussed with the dishes, whistling to himself as if the subject had been settled. After a second he slapped his hands together.

"You know what we forgot?" he said. "We forgot wages. Those odd jobs you done. What we have to do, we have to figure out what your time's worth. Your last job—how much did you pull in an hour?"

"Not enough," I said.

"A bad one?"

"Yes. Pretty bad."

Slowly then, without intending any long sermon, I told him about my days at the pig plant. It began as a straight
recitation of the facts, but before I could stop myself I was talking about the blood clots and the water gun and how the smell had soaked into my skin and how I couldn't wash it away. I went on for a long time. I told him about wild hogs squealing in my dreams, the sounds of butchery, slaughterhouse sounds, and how I'd sometimes wake up with that greasy pig-stink in my throat.

When I was finished, Elroy nodded at me.

"Well, to be honest," he said, "when you first showed up here, I wondered about all that. The aroma, I mean. Smelled like you was awful damned fond of pork chops." The old man almost smiled. He made a snuffling sound, then sat down with a pencil and a piece of paper. "So what'd this crud job pay? Ten bucks an hour? Fifteen?"

"Less."

Elroy shook his head. "Let's make it fifteen. You put in twenty-five hours here, easy. That's three hundred seventy-five bucks total wages. We subtract the two hundred sixty for food and lodging, I still owe you a hundred and fifteen."

He took four fifties out of his shirt pocket and laid them on the table.

"Call it even," he said.

"No."

"Pick it up. Get yourself a haircut."

The money lay on the table for the rest of the evening. It was still there when I went back to my cabin. In the morning, though, I found an envelope tacked to my door. Inside were the four fifties and a two-word note that said EMERGENCY FUND.

The man knew.
Looking back after twenty years, I sometimes wonder if the events of that summer didn’t happen in some other dimension, a place where your life exists before you’ve lived it, and where it goes afterward. None of it ever seemed real. During my time at the Tip Top Lodge I had the feeling that I’d slipped out of my own skin, hovering a few feet away while some poor yo-yo with my name and face tried to make his way toward a future he didn’t understand and didn’t want. Even now I can see myself as I was then. It’s like watching an old home movie: I’m young and tan and fit. I’ve got hair—lots of it. I don’t smoke or drink. I’m wearing faded blue jeans and a white polo shirt. I can see myself sitting on Elroy Berdahl’s dock near dusk one evening, the sky a bright shimmering pink, and I’m finishing up a letter to my parents that tells what I’m about to do and why I’m doing it and how sorry I am that I’d never found the courage to talk to them about it. I ask them not to be angry. I try to explain some of my feelings, but there aren’t enough words, and so I just say that it’s a thing that has to be done. At the end of the letter I talk about the vacations we used to take up in this north country, at a place called Whitefish Lake, and how the scenery here reminds me of those good times. I tell them I’m fine. I tell them I’ll write again from Winnipeg or Montreal or wherever I end up.

On my last full day, the sixth day, the old man took me out fishing on the Rainy River. The afternoon was sunny and cold. A stiff breeze came in from the north, and I remember how the little fourteen-foot boat made sharp rocking motions as we pushed off from the dock. The current was fast. All around us, there was a vastness to the world, an unpeo-
pled rawness, just the trees and the sky and the water reaching out toward nowhere. The air had the brittle scent of October.

For ten or fifteen minutes Elroy held a course upstream, the river choppy and silver-gray, then he turned straight north and put the engine on full throttle. I felt the bow lift beneath me. I remember the wind in my ears, the sound of the old outboard Evinrude. For a time I didn’t pay attention to anything, just feeling the cold spray against my face, but then it occurred to me that at some point we must’ve passed into Canadian waters, across that dotted line between two different worlds, and I remember a sudden tightness in my chest as I looked up and watched the far shore come at me. This wasn’t a daydream. It was tangible and real. As we came in toward land, Elroy cut the engine, letting the boat fishtail lightly about twenty yards off shore. The old man didn’t look at me or speak. Bending down, he opened up his tackle box and busied himself with a bobber and a piece of wire leader, humming to himself, his eyes down.

It struck me then that he must’ve planned it. I’ll never be certain, of course, but I think he meant to bring me up against the realities, to guide me across the river and to take me to the edge and to stand a kind of vigil as I chose a life for myself.

I remember staring at the old man, then at my hands, then at Canada. The shoreline was dense with brush and timber. I could see tiny red berries on the bushes. I could see a squirrel up in one of the birch trees, a big crow looking at me from a boulder along the river. That close—twenty yards—and I could see the delicate latticework of the leaves, the texture of the soil, the browned needles beneath
the pines, the configurations of geology and human history. Twenty yards. I could’ve done it. I could’ve jumped and started swimming for my life. Inside me, in my chest, I felt a terrible squeezing pressure. Even now, as I write this, I can still feel that tightness. And I want you to feel it—the wind coming off the river, the waves, the silence, the wooded frontier. You’re at the bow of a boat on the Rainy River. You’re twenty-one years old, you’re scared, and there’s a hard squeezing pressure in your chest.

What would you do?

Would you jump? Would you feel pity for yourself? Would you think about your family and your childhood and your dreams and all you’re leaving behind? Would it hurt? Would it feel like dying? Would you cry, as I did?

I tried to swallow it back. I tried to smile, except I was crying.

Now, perhaps, you can understand why I’ve never told this story before. It’s not just the embarrassment of tears. That’s part of it, no doubt, but what embarrasses me much more, and always will, is the paralysis that took my heart. A moral freeze: I couldn’t decide, I couldn’t act, I couldn’t comport myself with even a pretense of modest human dignity.

All I could do was cry. Quietly, not bawling, just the chest-chokes.

At the rear of the boat Elroy Berdahl pretended not to notice. He held a fishing rod in his hands, his head bowed to hide his eyes. He kept humming a soft, monotonous little tune. Everywhere, it seemed, in the trees and water and sky, a great worldwide sadness came pressing down on me, a crushing sorrow, sorrow like I had never known it before.
And what was so sad, I realized, was that Canada had become a pitiful fantasy. Silly and hopeless. It was no longer a possibility. Right then, with the shore so close, I understood that I would not do what I should do. I would not swim away from my hometown and my country and my life. I would not be brave. That old image of myself as a hero, as a man of conscience and courage, all that was just a threadbare pipe dream. Bobbing there on the Rainy River, looking back at the Minnesota shore, I felt a sudden swell of helplessness come over me, a drowning sensation, as if I had toppled overboard and was being swept away by the silver waves. Chunks of my own history flashed by. I saw a seven-year-old boy in a white cowboy hat and a Lone Ranger mask and a pair of bolstered six-shooters; I saw a twelve-year-old Little League shortstop pivoting to turn a double play; I saw a sixteen-year-old kid decked out for his first prom, looking spiffy in a white tux and a black bow tie, his hair cut short and flat, his shoes freshly polished. My whole life seemed to spill out into the river, swirling away from me, everything I had ever been or ever wanted to be. I couldn’t get my breath; I couldn’t stay afloat; I couldn’t tell which way to swim. A hallucination, I suppose, but it was as real as anything I would ever feel. I saw my parents calling to me from the far shoreline. I saw my brother and sister, all the townsfolk, the mayor and the entire Chamber of Commerce and all my old teachers and girlfriends and high school buddies. Like some outlandish sporting event: everybody screaming from the sidelines, rooting me on—a loud stadium roar. Hotdogs and popcorn—stadium smells, stadium heat. A squad of cheerleaders did cartwheels along the banks of the Rainy River; they had megaphones and pompoms and
smooth brown thighs. The crowd swayed left and right. A
marching band played fight songs. All my aunts and uncles
were there; and Abraham Lincoln, and Saint George, and a
nine-year-old girl named Linda who had died of a brain tu-
mor back in fifth grade, and several members of the United
States Senate, and a blind poet scribbling notes, and LBJ,
and Huck Finn, and Abbie Hoffman, and all the dead sol-
diers back from the grave, and the many thousands who
were later to die—villagers with terrible burns, little kids
without arms or legs—yes, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff were
there, and a couple of popes, and a first lieutenant named
Jimmy Cross, and the last surviving veteran of the Ameri-
can Civil War, and Jane Fonda dressed up as Barbarella, and
an old man sprawled beside a pigpen, and my grandfather,
and Gary Cooper, and a kind-faced woman carrying an un-
brella and a copy of Plato’s Republic, and a million fero-
cious citizens waving flags of all shapes and colors—people
in hard hats, people in headbands—they were all whooping
and chanting and urging me toward one shore or the other.
I saw faces from my distant past and distant future. My wife
was there. My unborn daughter waved at me, and my two
sons hopped up and down, and a drill sergeant named Bly-
ton sneered and shot up a finger and shook his head. There
was a choir in bright purple robes. There was a cabbie from
the Bronx. There was a slim young man I would one day kill
with a hand grenade along a red clay trail outside the village
of My Khe.

The little aluminum boat rocked softly beneath me.
There was the wind and the sky.

I tried to will myself overboard.

I gripped the edge of the boat and leaned forward and
thought, Now.
I did try. It just wasn't possible.

All those eyes on me—the town, the whole universe—and I couldn't risk the embarrassment. It was as if there
were an audience to my life, that swirl of faces along the
river, and in my head I could hear people screaming at me.
Treason! they yelled. Turncoat! Pussy! I felt myself blush. I
couldn't tolerate it. I couldn't endure the mockery, or the
disgrace, or the patriotic ridicule. Even in my imagination,
the shore just twenty yards away, I couldn't make myself be
brave. It had nothing to do with morality. Embarrassment,
that's all it was.

And right then I submitted.

I would go to the war—I would kill and maybe die—because I was embarrassed not to.

That was the sad thing. And so I sat in the bow of the
boat and cried.

It was loud now. Loud, hard crying.

Elroy Berdahl remained quiet. He kept fishing. He
worked his line with the tips of his fingers, patiently, squint-
ing out at his red and white bobber on the Rainy River. His
eyes were flat and impassive. He didn't speak. He was sim-
ply there, like the river and the late-summer sun. And yet by
his presence, his mute watchfulness, he made it real. He was
the true audience. He was a witness, like God, or like the
gods, who look on in absolute silence as we live our lives, as
we make our choices or fail to make them.

"Ain't bitin'," he said.

Then after a time the old man pulled in his line and
turned the boat back toward Minnesota.

I don't remember saying goodbye. That last night we had
dinner together, and I went to bed early, and in the morning
Elroy fixed breakfast for me. When I told him I'd be leaving, the old man nodded as if he already knew. He looked down at the table and smiled.

At some point later in the morning it's possible that we shook hands—I just don't remember—but I do know that by the time I'd finished packing the old man had disappeared. Around noon, when I took my suitcase out to the car, I noticed that his old black pickup truck was no longer parked in front of the main lodge. I went inside and waited for a while, but I felt a bone certainty that he wouldn't be back. In a way, I thought, it was appropriate. I washed up the breakfast dishes, left his two hundred dollars on the kitchen counter, got into the car, and drove south toward home.

The day was cloudy. I passed through towns with familiar names, through the pine forests and down to the prairie, and then to Vietnam, where I was a soldier, and then home again. I survived, but it's not a happy ending. I was a coward. I went to the war.
Annie Dillard, “Handed my own life”

After I read The Field Book of Ponds and Streams several times, I longed for a microscope. Everybody needed a microscope. Detectives used microscopes, both for the FBI and at Scotland Yard. Although I usually had to save my tiny allowance for things I wanted, that year for Christmas my parents gave me a microscope kit.

In a dark basement corner, on a white enamel table, I set up the microscope kit. I supplied a chair, a lamp, a batch of jars, a candle, and a pile of library books. The microscope kit supplied a blunt black three-speed microscope, a booklet, a scalpel, a dropper, an ingenious device for cutting thin segments of fragile tissue, a pile of clean slides and cover slips, and a dandy array of corked test tubes.

One of the test tubes contained “hay infusion.” Hay infusion was a wee brown chip of grass blade. You added water to it, and after a week it became a jungle in a drop, full of one-celled animals. This did not work for me. All I saw in the microscope after a week was a wet chip of dried grass, much enlarged.

Another test tube contained “diatomaceous earth.” This was, I believed, an actual pinch of the white cliffs of Dover. On my palm it was an airy, friable chalk. The booklet said it was composed of the siliceous bodies of diatoms—one-celled creatures that lived in, as it were, small glass jewelry boxes with fitted lids. Diatoms, I read, come in a variety of transparent geometrical shapes. Broken and dead and dug out of geological deposits, they made chalk and a fine abrasive used in silver polish and toothpaste. What I saw in the microscope must have been the fine abrasive—grit enlarged. It was years before I saw a recognizable, whole diatom. The kit’s diatomaceous earth was a bust.

All that winter I played with the microscope. I prepared slides from things at hand, as the books suggested. I looked at the transparent membrane inside an onion’s skin and saw the cells. I looked at a section of cork and saw the cells, and at scrapings from the inside of my cheek, ditto. I looked at my blood and saw not much; I looked at my urine and saw long iridescent crystals, for the drop had dried.

All this was very well, but I wanted to see the wildlife I had read about. I wanted especially to see the famous amoeba, who had eluded me. He was supposed to live in the hay infusion, but I hadn’t found him there. He lived outside in warm ponds and streams, too, but I lived in Pittsburgh, and it had been a cold winter.

Finally late that spring I saw an amoeba. The week before, I had gathered puddle water from Frick Park; it had been festering in a jar in the basement. This June night after dinner I figured I had waited long enough. In the basement at my microscope table I spread a scummy drop of Frick Park puddle water on a slide, peeked in, and lo, there was the famous amoeba. He was as blobby and grainy as his picture; I would have known him anywhere.

Before I had watched him at all, I ran upstairs. My parents were still at table, drinking coffee. They, too, could see the famous amoeba. I told them, bursting, that he was all set up, that they should hurry before his water dried. It was the chance of a lifetime.

Father had stretched out his long legs and was tilting back in his chair. Mother sat with her knees crossed, in blue slacks, smoking a Chesterfield. The dessert dishes were
still on the table. My sisters were nowhere in evidence. It was a warm evening; the big dining-room windows gave onto blooming rhododendrons.

Mother regarded me warmly. She gave me to understand that she was glad I had found what I had been looking for, but that she and Father were happy to sit with their coffee, and would not be coming down. She did not say, but I understood at once, that they had their pursuits (coffee) and I had mine. She did not say, but I began to understand then, that you do what you do out of your private passion for the thing itself.

I had essentially been handed my own life, in subsequent years my parents would praise my drawings and poems, and supply me with books, art supplies, and sports equipment, and listen to my troubles and enthusiasm, and supervise my hours, and discuss and inform, but they would not get involved with my detective work, nor hear about my reading, nor inquire about my homework or term papers or exams, nor visit the salamanders I caught, nor listen to me play piano, nor attend my field hockey games, nor fuss over my insect collection. My days and nights were my own to plan and fill.

*     *     *

When I left the dining room that evening and started down the dark basement stairs, I had a life, I sat to my wonderful amoeba, and there he was, rolling his grains more slowly now, extending an arc of his edge for a foot and drawing himself along by that foot, and absorbing it again and rolling on. I gave him some more pond water.

I had hit pay dirt. For all I knew, there was paramecia, too, in that pond water, or daphniae, or stentors, or any of the many other creatures I had read about and never seen: volvox, the spherical algal colony; euglena with its one red eye; the elusive, glassy diatom; hydra, rotifers, water bears, worms. Anything was possible. The sky was the limit.
"Salvation" by Langston Hughes

I was saved from sin when I was going on thirteen. But not really saved. It happened like this. There was a big revival at my Auntie Reed's church. Every night for weeks there had been much preaching, singing, praying, and shouting, and some very hardened sinners had been brought to Christ, and the membership of the church had grown by leaps and bounds. Then just before the revival ended, they held a special meeting for children, "to bring the young lambs to the fold." My aunt spoke of it for days ahead. That night I was escorted to the front row and placed on the mourners' bench with all the other young sinners, who had not yet been brought to Jesus.

My aunt told me that when you were saved you saw a light, and something happened to you inside! And Jesus came into your life! And God was with you from then on! She said you could see and hear and feel Jesus in your soul. I believed her. I had heard a great many old people say the same thing and it seemed to me they ought to know. So I sat there calmly in the hot, crowded church, waiting for Jesus to come to me.

The preacher preached a wonderful rhythmical sermon, all moans and shouts and lonely cries and dire pictures of hell, and then he sang a song about the ninety and nine safe in the fold, but one little lamb was left out in the cold. Then he said: "Won't you come? Won't you come to Jesus? Young lambs, won't you come?" And he held out his arms to all us young sinners there on the mourners' bench. And the little girls cried. And some of them jumped up and went to Jesus right away. But most of us just sat there.

A great many old people came and knelt around us and
prayed, old women with jet-black faces and braided hair, old men with work-gnarled hands. And the church sang a song about the lower lights are burning, some poor sinners to be saved. And the whole building rocked with prayer and song.

Still I kept waiting to see Jesus.

Finally all the young people had gone to the altar and were saved, but one boy and me. He was a rounder's son named Westley. Westley and I were surrounded by sisters and deacons praying. It was very hot in the church, and getting late now. Finally Westley said to me in a whisper: "God damn! I'm tired o' sitting here. Let's get up and be saved." So he got up and was saved.

Then I was left all alone on the mourners' bench. My aunt came and knelt at my knees and cried, while prayers and song swirled all around me in the little church. The whole congregation prayed for me alone, in a mighty wail of moans and voices. And I kept waiting serenely for Jesus, waiting, waiting - but he didn't come. I wanted to see him, but nothing happened to me. Nothing! I wanted something to happen to me, but nothing happened.

I heard the songs and the minister saying: "Why don't you come? My dear child, why don't you come to Jesus? Jesus is waiting for you. He wants you. Why don't you come? Sister Reed, what is this child's name?"

"Langston," my aunt sobbed.

"Langston, why don't you come? Why don't you come and be saved? Oh, Lamb of God! Why don't you come?"

Now it was really getting late. I began to be ashamed of myself, holding everything up so long. I began to wonder
what God thought about Westley, who certainly hadn't seen Jesus either, but who was now sitting proudly on the platform, swinging his knickerbockered legs and grinning down at me, surrounded by deacons and old women on their knees praying. God had not struck Westley dead for taking his name in vain or for lying in the temple. So I decided that maybe to save further trouble, I'd better lie, too, and say that Jesus had come, and get up and be saved.

So I got up.

Suddenly the whole room broke into a sea of shouting, as they saw me rise. Waves of rejoicing swept the place. Women leaped in the air. My aunt threw her arms around me. The minister took me by the hand and led me to the platform.

When things quieted down, in a hushed silence, punctuated by a few ecstatic "Amens," all the new young lambs were blessed in the name of God. Then joyous singing filled the room.

That night, for the first time in my life but one for I was a big boy twelve years old - I cried. I cried, in bed alone, and couldn't stop. I buried my head under the quilts, but my aunt heard me. She woke up and told my uncle I was crying because the Holy Ghost had come into my life, and because I had seen Jesus. But I was really crying because I couldn't bear to tell her that I had lied, that I had deceived everybody in the church, that I hadn't seen Jesus, and that now I didn't believe there was a Jesus anymore, since he didn't come to help me.

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Ticket to the Fair

Wherein our reporter gorges himself on corn dogs, gapes at terrifying rides, acquaints himself with the odor of pigs, exchanges unpleasant anecdotes with tattooed carnie, and admires the loveliness of cows.

By David Foster Wallace

August 5, 1993, Interstate 55, Westbound, 8:00 a.m.

Today is Press Day at the Illinois State Fair in Springfield, and I’m supposed to be at the fairgrounds by 9:00 a.m. to get my credentials. I imagine credentials to be a small white card in the band of a fedora. I’ve never been considered press before. My real interest in credentials is getting into rides and shows for free. I’m fresh in from the East Coast, for an East Coast magazine. Why exactly they’re interested in the Illinois State Fair remains unclear to me. I suspect that every so often editors at East Coast magazines slap their foreheads and remember that about 90 percent of the United States lies between the coasts, and figure they’ll engage somebody to do pith-helmeted anthropological reporting on something rural and heartlandish. I think they asked me to do this because I grew up here, just a couple hours’ drive from downtown Springfield. I never did go to the state fair, though—I pretty much topped out at the country-fair level. Actually, I haven’t been back to Illinois for a long time, and can’t say I’ve missed it.

The heat is all too familiar. In August it takes hours for the dawn fog to burn off. The air is like wet wool. Eight A.M. is too early to justify turn-
No anthropologist worth his pith helmet would be without the shrewd counsel of a colorful local, and I’ve lured a Native Companion here with the promise of free admission and unlimited corn dogs.

ing on the car’s AC. The sun is a blotch in a sky that isn’t so much cloudy as opaque. The corn starts just past the breakdown lanes and goes right to the sky’s hem. August corn in Illinois is as tall as a tall man. With all the advances in fertilization, it’s now knee-high by June 1. Locus chitter in every field, a brassy electric sound that Dopplers oddly inside the speeding car. Corn, corn, soybeans, corn, exit ramp, corn, and every few miles an outpost way off on a reach in the distance—house, tree with tire swing, barn, satellite dish. Grain silos are the only skyline. A fog hangs just over the fields. It is over eighty degrees and climbing with the sun. It’ll be over ninety degrees by 10:00 A.M. There’s that tightening quality to the air, like it’s drawing itself in and down for a siege. The interstate is dull and pale. Occasional other cars look ghostly, their drivers’ faces humidity-stunned.

9:00 A.M.

It’s still a week before the fair, and there’s something surreal about the emptiness of parking facilities so huge and complex that they have their own map. The parts of the fairgrounds that I can see are half-permanent structures and half tents and displays in various stages of erection, giving the whole thing the look of somebody half-dressed for a really important date.

9:05 A.M.

The man processing print-press credentials has a mustache and short-sleeve knit shirt. In line before me are newshounds from Today’s Agriculture, the Decatur Herald & Review, Illinois Crafts Newsletter, 4-H News, and Livestock Weekly. Credentials are just a laminated mug shot with a gator clip for your pocket. Not a fedora in the house. Two older ladies behind me from a local horticulture organ engage me inshop talk. One lady is the unofficial historian of the Illinois State Fair; she gives slide shows on the fair at nursing homes and Rotary lunches. She begins to emit historical data, at a great rate—the fair started in 1853; there was a fair during the Civil War but not during WWII, and not in 1893, because Chicago was hosting the World’s Columbian Exposition; the governor has failed to cut the ribbon personally on opening day only twice; etc. It occurs to me that I ought to have brought a notebook.

I’m also the only person in the room in a T-shirt. It is a fluorescent-lit cafeteria in something called the Illinois Building Senior Center; uncooled. The local TV crews have their equipment spread out on tables and are lounging against walls. They all have mustaches and short-sleeve knit shirts. In fact, the only other males in the room without mustaches and golf shirts are the local TV reporters, four of them, all in suits. They are sleek, sweatless, deep blue-eyed. They stand together up by the door, which has a podium and a flag and a banner reading “Give Us a Whirl”—this year’s theme. Middle-management types enter. A squeal of feedback on a loudspeaker brings the official Press Welcome & Briefing to order. It’s dull. The words “excited,” “proud,” and “opportunity” are used repeatedly. Ms. Illinois County Fairs, tiara bolted to the tallest coiffure I’ve ever seen ( bun atop bun, multiple layers, a wig of hair), is proudly excited to have the opportunity to present two corporate guys, sweating freely in suits, who report the excited pride of McDonald’s and Wal-Mart to have the opportunity to be this year’s corporate sponsors.

9:15 A.M.

Under way at 4 mph on the Press Tour, on a kind of flatboat with wheels and a lengthwise bench so queerly high that everybody’s feet dangle. The tractor pulling us has signs that say “ethanol” and “agripowered.” I’m particularly keen to see the carriers setting up the rides in the fairgrounds “Happy Hollow,” but we head first to the corporate and political tents. Most every tent is still setting up. Workmen crawl over structural frames. We wave at them; they wave back; it’s absurd: we’re only going 4 mph. One tent says “Corn: Touching Our Lives Every Day.” There are massive many-hued tents courtesy of McDonald’s, Miller Genuine Draft, Morton Commercial Structures Corp., the Land of Lincoln Soybean Association (“Look Where Soybeans Go!”), Pekin Energy Corp. (“Proud of Our Sophisticated Computer-Controlled Processing Technology”), Illinois Pork Producers, the John Birch Society. Two tents that say “Republican” and “Democrat.” Other, smaller tents for various Illinois officeholders. It is well up in the nineties and the sky is the color of old jeans.

We go over a system of crests to Farm Expo—twelve acres of wicked-looking needle-rooted
harrows, tractors, seeders, harvesters. Then back around the rear of the big permanent Artisans' Building, Illinois Building Senior Center, Expo Center, passing tantalizingly close to Happy Hollow, where half-assembled rides stand in giant arcs and rays and shirtless guys with tattoos and wrenches slouch around them, fairly coaxing menace and human interest, but on at a crawl up a blacktop path to the livestock buildings. By this time, most of the press is off the tram and walking in order to escape the tour's PA speaker, which is tinny and brutal. Horse Complex, Cattle Complex, Swine Barn, Sheep Barn, Poultry Building and Goat Barn. These are all long brick barracks open down both sides of their length. Some contain stalls; others have pens divided into squares with aluminum rails. Inside, they're gray cement, dim and yeasty, huge fans overhead, workers in overalls and waders soaking everything down. No animals yet, but the smells still hang from last year—horses' odors, sharp, cows' rich, sheep's oily, swine's unspeakable. No idea what the Poultry Building smelled like, because I couldn't bring myself to go in. Traumatically picked once, as a child, at the Champaign County Fair, I have a long-standing phobic thing about poultry.

The ethanol tractor's exhaust is literally fluorescent-smelling as we crawl out past the Grandstand, where later there will be evening concerts and harness and auto racing—"World's Fastest One-Mile Dirt Track"—and head for something called the Help Me Grow tent, to interface with the state's First Lady, Brenda Edgar. The first sign of the Help Me Grow area is the nauseous bright red of Ronald McDonald's hair. He's capering around a small plastic playground area under candy-stripe tenting. Though the fair is ostensibly closed, troops of kids mysteriously appear and engage in rather rehearsed-looking play as we approach. Two of the kids are black, the first black people I've seen anywhere on the grounds. No parents in view. The governor's wife stands surrounded by flinty-eyed aides. Ronald pretends to fall down. The press forms into a ring. There are several state troopers in khaki and tan, streaming sweat under their Nelson Eddy hats. Mrs. Edgar is cool and groomed and pretty in a lacquered way. She's of the female age that's always suffused with "-ish." Her tragic flaw is her voice, which sounds almost halitosed. The Help Me Grow program, when you decoct the rhetoric, is basically a statewide crisis line for over-the-edge parents to call and get talked out of beating up their kids. The number of calls Mrs. Edgar says the line has fielded just this year is both de- and impressive. Shiny pamphlets are distributed. Ronald McDonald, voice slurry and makeup cottage-cheesish in the heat, cues the kids to come over for some low-rent sleight of hand and Socratic banter. Lacking a real journalist's killer instinct, I've been jostled way to the back, and my view is obscured by the towering hair of Ms. Illinois County Fairs, whose function here is unclear. I don't want to asperse, but Ronald McDonald sounds like he's under the influence of something more than fresh country air. I drift away under the tent. All the toys and plastic playground equipment have signs that say "Courtesy of" and then a corporate name. A lot of the photographers in the ring have dusty green safari vests, and they sit cross-legged in the sun, getting low-angle shots of Ms. Edgar. There are no tough questions from the media. The tram's tractor is putting out a steady sweatsock shape of blue-green exhaust. I notice that the grass under the Help Me Grow tent is different—pine-green and prickly-looking. Solid investigative bent-over journalism reveals that it is artificial. A huge mat of plastic artificial grass has been spread over the knoll's real grass, under the tent. I have my first moment of complete East Coast cynicism: a quick look under the edge of the fake-grass mat reveals the real grass underneath, flattened and already yellowing.

AUGUST 15, 9:25 A.M.

Official opening. Ceremony, introductions, verbiage. Big brass shears, for cutting the ribbon across the main gate. It is cloudless and dry, but forehead-tighteningly hot. Noon will be a kiln. No anthropologist worth his pit helmet would be without the shrewd counsel of a colorful local; and, I've lured a Native Companion here for the day with the promise of free admission, unlimited corn dogs, and various shiny trinkets. Knit-shirt press and rabid early fairgoers are massed from the gate all the way cut to Springfield's Sangamon Avenue, where homeowners with plastic flags invite you to park on.
Rural Midwesterners live surrounded by unpopulated land, marooned in a space whose emptiness is both physical and spiritual. Here the land is not an environment but a commodity for her cigarette lighter, quite a bit more interested in that.

10:40 A.M.

The livestock venues are at full occupancy animalwise, but we seem to be the only fairgoing tourists from the ceremony who've dashed right over to tour them. You can tell which barns are for which animals with your eyes closed. The horses stand in hay. Billy Ray Cyrus plays loudly on some stableboy's boom box. The horses have tight hides and apple-sized eyes that are set on the sides of their heads, like fish. I've barely been this close to fine livestock. The horses' faces are long and somehow suggestive of coffins. The racers are lanky, velvet over bone. The draft and show horses are mammoth and spotlessly groomed, and more or less odorless: the acid smell in here is just the horses' pee. All their muscles are beautiful, the hides enhance them. They make farty noises when they sigh, heads hanging over the short doors. They're not for petting, though. When you come close they flatten their ears and show big teeth. The grooms laugh at themselves as we jump back. These are special competitive horses, with intricately bred high-strung artistic temperaments. I wish I'd brought carrots. Animals can be bought, emotionally. Stall after stall of horses. Standard horse-type colors. They eat the same hay they stand in. Occasional feedbags look like gas masks. A sudden clattering spay-sound like somebody hosing down siding turns out to be a glossy dun stallion peeing. He's at the back of his stall getting combed, and the door is wide open. The stream of pee is an inch in diameter and throws up dust and hay and it looks like even chips of wood from the floor. A stallion is a male horse. We hunker down and have a look upward, and suddenly for the first time I understand a certain expression describing certain human males, an expression I'd heard but never quite understood till now.

You can hear the cows all the way from the Horse Complex. The cow stalls are all doorless and open to view. I don't guess a cow presents much of an escape risk. They are white-spotted dun or black, or else white with big continents of dun or black. They have no lips and their tongues are
wide. Their eyes roll and they have huge nostrils, gaping and wet and pink or black. Cow manure smells wonderful—warm and herbal and blameless—but cows themselves stink in a rich biotic way, rather like a wet boot. Some of the owners are scrubbing down their entries for the upcoming beef show over at the Coliseum (so says my detailed media guide). These cows stand immobilized in webs of canvas straps inside a steel frame while ag-professionals scrub them down with a hose and brush thing that also oozes soap. The cows do not like this one bit. One cow, whose face is eerily reminiscent of Winston Churchill's, trembles and shudders and makes the frame clank, lowing, its eyes rolling up almost to the whites. Native Companion and I cringe and make soft appalled noises. The cow's lowing starts other cows lowing, or maybe they just see what they're in for. The cow's legs keep half-buckling, and the owner kicks at them. White mucus hangs from its snout. Other ominous drippings and gushings from elsewhere. The cow almost tips the frame over, and the owner punches her in the ribs.

Swine Barn. Swine have fury! I never thought of swine as having fur. I've actually never been up very close to swine, for olfactory reasons. A lot of the swine in here are show hogs, a breed called Poland China, their thin fur a kind of white crewcut over pink skin. A lot of the swine are down on their sides, stuporous and throbbing in the barn's heat. The awake ones grunt. They stand and lie on very clean large-curd sawdust in low-fenced pens. A couple of barrows are eating both the sawdust and their own excrement. Again, we're the only tourists here. A bullhorn on a wall announces that the Junior Pygmy Goat judging is underway over at the Goat Barn. A lot of these swine are frankly huge—say a third the size of a Volkswagen. Every once in a while you hear about farmers getting mauled or killed by swine. No teeth in view here, though their hoofs are cloven and pink and obscene. I'm not sure whether they're called hoofs or feet on swine. Rural Midwesterners learn in second grade that there's no such word as "hooves." Some of the swine have large fans blowing in front of their pens, and twelve calling fans roar, but it is still hellish in here. Pig smell is both vomit and excruciating, like some hideous digestive disorder on a grand scale. Maybe a cholera ward would come close. The swineherds and owners have on rubber boots nothing like the LL Bean boots worn on the East Coast. Some of the standing swine commune through the bars of their pens, snorts almost touching. The sleeping swine thrash in dreams, their legs working. Unless they're in distress, swine grunt at a low constant pitch. It is a pleasant sound.

But now one butterscotch-colored swine is screaming. Distressed swine scream. The sound is both human and inhuman enough to make your hair stand. The professional swine men ignore the pig, but we fuss on over, Native Companion making concerned baby-talk sounds until I shush her. The distressed pig's sides are heaving; it is sitting up with its front legs quivering, screaming horribly. This pig's keeper is nowhere in sight. A small sign on its pen says it is a Hampshire. It is having respiratory trouble, clearly. I'm guessing it inhaled either sawdust or excrement.

Its front legs now buckle, so it is on its side, spasming. Whenever it can get enough breath it screams. It's unendurable, but none of the ag-professionals comes vaulting over the pens to administer aid. Native Companion and I wring our hands with sympathy. We both make plangent little noises at the pig. Native Companion tells me to go get somebody instead of standing there with my thumb up my butt. I feel enormous stress—the nauseous smell, impotent sympathy, plus we're behind schedule. We are currently missing the Junior Pygmy Goats, Philatelic Judging at the Expo Building, 4-H Dog Show at Club Mickey D's, the semifinals of the Midwest Arm-Wrestling Championships, a Ladies Camping Seminar, and the opening rounds of the Speed Casting Tournament. A swineherd kicks her. Poland China sow awake so she can add more sawdust to its pen; Native Companion utters a prised sound. There are clearly only two animal-rights advocates in this Swine Barn. We both can observe a kind of sullen, callous expertise in the demeanor of the ag-pros. Prime example of spiritual-alienation-from-land-as-commodity, I posit. Except why take all the trouble to breed and care for and train a special animal and bring it to the Illinois State Fair if you don't care anything about it?

Then it occurs to me that I had bacon yesterday and am even now looking forward to my first corn dog of the fair. I'm standing here wringing
Now the Zipper operator is making Native Companion's car spin around and around on its hinges. There is a distended scream from the whirling car, as she is being slow-roasted inside.

my hands over a distressed swine and then I'm going to go pound down a corn dog. This is connected to my reluctance to charge over to a swine pro and demand emergency resuscitative care for this agonized Hampshire. I can sort of picture the look the farmer would give me.

Not that it's profound, but I'm struck, amid the pig's screams and wheezes, by the fact that these agricultural pros do not see their stock as pets or friends. They are just in the agribusiness of weight and meat. They are unconnected, even at the fair's self-consciously special occasion of connection. And why not?—even at the fair their products continue to drool and smell and scream, and the work goes on. I can imagine what they think of us, cooing at the swine; we fairgoers don't have to deal with the business of breeding and feeding our meat; our meat simply materializes at the corn-dog stand, allowing us to separate our healthy appetites from fur and screams and rolling eyes. We tourists get to indulge our tender animal-rights feelings with our tummies full of bacon. I don't know how keen these sullen-farmers' sense of irony is, but mine's been honed East Coast keen, and I feel like a bit of an ass in the Swine Barn.

11:50 A.M.

Since Native Companion was lured here for the day by the promise of free access to high-velocity rides, we make a quick descent into Happy Hollow. Most of the rides aren't even twirling-hellsibly yet. Guys with ratchet wrenches are still cranking away, assembling the Ring of Fire. The Giant Condola Wheel is only half-built, and its seat-draped lower half resembles a hideous molar grin. It is over 100 degrees in the sun, easy.

Happy Hollow's dirt midway is flanked by carnival-game booths and ticket booths and rides. There's a merry-go-round and a couple of tame kiddie rides, but most of the rides look like genuine Near-Death Experiences. The Hollow seems to be open only technically, and the ticket booths are unmanned, though little heartbreaking jets of AC air are blowing out through the money slots in the booths' glass. Attendance is sparse, and I notice that none of the ag-pro or farm people are anywhere in sight down here. A lot of the carneys slouch and slump in the shade of awnings. Every one of them seems to chain-smoke. The Tilt-a-Whirl operator has got his boots up on his control panel reading a motorcycle-and-naked-girl magazine while guys attach enormous rubber hoses to the ride's guts. We slide over for a chat. The operator is twenty-four and from Bee Branch, Arkansas, and has an earing and a huge tattoo of a flaming skull on his triceps. He's far more interested in chatting with Native Companion than with me. He's been at this gig five years, touring with this one here same company here. Couldn't rightly say if he liked it or not. Broke in on the Toss-a-Quarter- Onto-the-Plates game and got, like, transferred over to the Tilt-a-Whirl in '91. He smokes Marlboro 100's but wears a cap that says "Winston."

All the carney game barker have headset microphones; some are saying "Testing" and reciting their pitch lines in tentative warm-up ways. A lot of the pitches seem frankly sexual: You got to get it up to get it in. Take it out and lay'er down, only a dollar. Make it stand up. Two dollars, five chances. Make it stand up. Rows of stuffed animals hang by their feet in the booths like game put out to cure. It smells like machine grease and hair tonic down here, and there's already a spoiled, garbagy smell. The media guide says Happy Hollow is contracted to "one of the largest owners of amusement attractions in the country," one Brosnens-Thebault Enterprises, of Crystal Lake, Illinois, near Chicago. But the carneys are all from the middle South—Tennessee, Arkansas, Oklahoma. They are visibly unimpressed by the press credentials clipped to my shirt. They tend to look at Native Companion like she's food, which she ignores. I lose four dollars trying to "get it up and in," tossing miniature basketballs into angled baskets in such a way that they don't bounce out. The game's Barker can toss them behind his back and get them to stay, but he's right up next to the baskets. My shorts come out from eight feet away; the straw baskets look soft, but their bottoms make a suspicious steely sound when hit.

It's so hot that we move, in quick vectors between areas of shade. I'm reluctant to go shirtless because there'd be no way to display my credentials. We zigzag gradually westward. One of the fully assembled rides near the Hollow's west end is something called the Zipper. It's rideless as we approach, but in furious motion; a kind of Ferris wheel on amphetamines. Individual caged cans are hinged to spin on their own axes as they go around in a tight vertical ellipse. The machine looks less...
like a Zipper than the head of a chain saw. It sounds like a humming V-12 engine, and it is something I’d run a mile in tight shoes to avoid riding.

Native Companion starts clapping and hopping, though. The operator at the controls sees her and shouts down to git on over and git some, if she’s a mind. He claims they want to test it somehow. He’s elbowing a colleague next to him in a way I don’t much care for. We have no tickets, I point out, and none of the cash-for-ticket booths are manned. “Ain’t no sweat off my balls,” the operator says without looking at me. The operator’s colleague conducts Native Companion up the waffled-steel steps and straps her into a cage, upping a thumb at the operator, who pulls a lever. She starts to ascend. Pathetic little fingers appear in the cage’s mesh. The Zipper’s operator is ageless and burn-brown and has a mustache waxed to wicked points like a steer’s horns, rolling a Drum cigarette with one hand as he nudges levers upward and the ellipse of cars speeds up and the individual cars themselves start to spin on their hinges. Native Companion is a blur of color inside her cage, but operator and colleague (whose jeans have worked down his hips to the point that the top of his butt-crack is visible) watch audaciously as Native Companion’s spinning car and the clanking empty cars circle the ellipse once a second. I can barely watch. The Zipper is the color of unbrushed teeth, with big scabs of rust. The operator and colleague sit on a little steel deck before a panel of black-knobbed levers. The colleague spits Skoal into a can he holds and tells the operator, “Well then take her up to eight then you pussy.” The Zipper begins to whine and the thing to spin so fast that a detached car would surely be hurled into orbit. The colleague has a small American flag folded into a bandanna around his head. The empty cars shudder and clank as they whirl and spin. One long scream, wobbled by changes in vector, is coming from Native Companion’s cage, which is going around and around on its hinges while a shape inside tumbles like stuff in a clothes dryer. My neurological makeup (extremely sensitive: earsick, airick, heightick) makes just watching this an act of great personal courage. The scream goes on and on; it is nothing like a swine’s. Then the operator stops the ride abruptly with her car at the top, so she’s hanging upside down inside the cage. I call up—is she okay? The response is a strange high-pitched noise. I see the two carriages going upward very intently, shading their eyes. The operator is stroking his mustache contemplatively. The cage’s inversion has made Native Companion’s dress fall up. They’re ogling her nethers, obviously.

Now the operator is joggling the choke lever so the Zipper stutters back and forth, forward and backward, making Native Companion’s top car spin around and around on its hinges. His colleague’s T-shirt has a stoned Ninja Turtle on it, taking on a joint. There’s a disended A-sharp scream from the whirling car, as if Native Companion is being slow-roasted. I summon saliva to step in and really say something stern, but at this point they start bringing her down. The operator is left at his panel; the car’s descent is almost fluffy. His hands on the levers are a kind of parody of tender care. The descent takes forever—ominous silence from Native Companion’s car. The two carriages are laughing and slapping their knee. I clear my throat twice. Native Companion’s car descends, stops. Jiggles of movement in the car, then the door’s latch slowly turns. I expect whatever husk of a person emerges from the car to be hunched and sheet-white, dribbling fluids.

Instead she bounds out. “That was fucking great! Joo see that! Son of a bitch spun that car sixteen times, did you see?” This woman is native Midwestern, from my hometown. My prom date a dozen years ago. Her color is high. Her dress looks like the world’s worst case of static cling. She’s still got her chewing gum in, for God’s sake. She turns to the carriages: “You sons bitches, that was fucking great.” The colleague is half-draped over the operator; they’re roaring with laughter. Native Companion has her hands on her hips, but she’s grinning. Am I the only one who’s in touch with the sexual-harassment element in this whole episode? She takes the steel stairs several at a
time and starts up the hillside toward the food booths. Behind us the operator calls out, "They don't call me King of the Zipper for nuthin', sweet thang!"

She snorts and calls back over her shoulder, "Oh, you."

I'm having a hard time keeping up. "Did you hear that?" I ask her.

"Jesus I thought I bought it for sure, that was so great. Assholes. But did you see that one spin up top at the end, thought?"

"Did you hear that Zipper King comment?" I protest. She has her hand around my elbow and is helping me up the hillside's slick grass: "Did you sense something kind of sexual-harassmentish going on through that whole sick little exercise?"

"Oh for f*ck's sake, it was fun—son of a bitch spun that car sixteen times."

"They were looking up your dress. You couldn't see them, maybe. They hung you upside down at a great height and made your dress fall up and ogled you. They shaded their eyes and commented to each other."

"Oh for Christ's sake."

I slide a bit and she catches my arm. "So this doesn't bother you? As a Midwesterner, you're unbothered? Or did you just not have a sense of what was going on?"

"So if I noticed or didn't, why does it have to be my deal? What, because there's assholes in the world I don't get to ride the Zipper?"

"This is potentially key," I say. "This may be just the sort of regional erotic-political contrast the East Coast magazine is keen for. The core value informing a kind of erotic-willed political stoicism on your part is your prototypical Midwestern appreciation of fun—"

"Buy me some pork skins, you dipshit."

"—whereas on the East Coast, erotic-political indignation is the fun."

In New York a woman who'd been hung upside down and ogled would get a whole lot of other women together and there'd be this frenzy of erotic-political indignation. They'd confront the guy. File an injunction. The management would find themselves litigating—violation of a woman's right to non-harassed fun. I'm telling you. Personal and political fun merge somewhere just east of Cleveland, for women."

Native Companion kills a mosquito without looking. "And they all take Prozac and stick their finger down their throat too out there. They ought to try just climbing on and spinning and saying, 'Fuck 'em.' That's pretty much all you can do with assholes."

12:56 P.M.

Luncheon time. The fairgrounds are a Saint Vitus' dance of blacktop footpaths, the axons and dendrites of mass speculation, connecting buildings and barns and corporate tents. Each path is flanked, pretty much along its whole length, by booths hawking food, and I realize that there's a sort of digestive subtheme running all through the fair. In a way, we're all here to be swallowed up. The main gate's sawdust admits us, and tightly packed slow masses move peristaltically along complex systems of branching paths, engage in complex cash-and-energy transfers at the vili alongside the paths, and are finally, both filled and depletes, expelled out of exits designed for heavy-flow expulsion. And then, of course, the food itself. There are tall Kool-aid-colored shack that sell Illinois Dairy Council milk shakes for an off-the-scale $2.50—though they're mind-bendingly good milk shakes, silky and thick thus they don't even insult your intelligence with a straw or spoon, giving you instead a kind of plastic trowel. There are uncountable pork options—Paulie's Pork Out, The Pork Patio, Freshfried Pork Skins, The Pork Avenue Cafe. The Pork Avenue Cafe is a "100 Percent All-Pork Establishment," says its loudspeaker. No way I'm eating any pork after this morning's swine stress, anyway. And it is at least ninety-five degrees in the shade, and due east of Livestock the breeze is, shall we say, fragrant. But food is being bought and ingested at an incredible clip all up and down the path. Everyone's packed in, eating and walking, moving slowly, twenty abreast, sweating, shoulders rubbing, the air spicy with armpits and Copperline, cheek to jowl, a peripatetic feeding frenzy. Fifteen percent of the female fairgoers here have their hair in curlers. Forty percent are clinically fat. By the way, Midwestern fat people have no compunction about wearing shorts or halter tops. The food booths are ubiquitous, and each one has a line before it. Zipper or no, Native Companion is "stowed," she says, "just go."

There are Lemon Shake-Ups, Ice Cold Melon Man booths, Citrus Push-Ups, and Hawaiian Shaved Ice you can suck the syrup out of and then crunch the ice. But a lot of what's getting bought and gobbled is not hot-weather food at all: bright-yellow popcorn that stinks of salt; onion rings as big as leis; Poco Peños Stuffed Jalapeño
Everyone is densely packed in, eating and walking, moving slowly, twenty abreast, sweating, shoulders rubbing, the air spicy with armpits and Coppertone, cheek to jowl, a peripatetic feeding frenzy.

Peppers, Zorba’s Gyros, shiny fried chicken, Bert’s Burritos—“Big As You’re [sic] Head”; hot Italian beef; hot New York City beef; Jojo’s Quick Fried Doughnuts; pizza by the shingle-sized slice; and chilis and crab Rangoon and Polish sausage. There are towering plates of “Curl Fries,” which are pubic-hair-shaped and make people’s fingers shine in the sun. Cheer-Dip hot dogs. Pony pups. Hot fritters. Philly steak. Ribeye BBQ Corral. Joanie’s Original 1 lb burger booth’s sign says “2 Choices—Rare or Mooin.” I can’t believe people eat this stuff in this kind of heat. There’s the green rink of fried tomatoes. The sky is cloudless and galvanized, and the sun fairly pulses. The noise of deep fryers forms a grizzly sound-carpet all up and down the paths. The crowd moves at one slow pace, eating, densely packed between the rows of booths. The Original 1 lb. Butterfly Pork Chop booth has a sign: “Pork: The Other White Meat”—the only discernible arm wave to the health-conscious. This is the Midwest: no nachos, no chili, no Evian, nothing Cajun. But holy mackerel, are there sweets: fried dough, black walnut taffy, fiddletickes, hoq Crackerjack. Caramel apples for a felonious $1.50. Angel’s Breath, known also as Dentist’s Delight. There’s All-Butter Fudge, Rice Krispie—squarish, things called Krockles. Angel Hair cotton candy. There are funnel cakes: cake butler quick-fried to a tornadoic spiral and rolled in sugared butter. Another curry clogger: elephant ears, an album-sized expanse of oil-fried dough slathered with butter and cinnamon-sugar—cinnamon toast from hell. No one is in line for ears except the morbidly obese.

11:10 P.M.

Here we’ve got as balanced in dimension a heifer as you’ll see today. A high-volume heifer, but also solid on mass. Good to look at in terms of rib length to depth. Depth of forerib. Notice the depth of flank on the front quarter. We’d like to see maybe a little more muscle mass on the rear flank. Still, an outstanding heifer.

We’re in the Jr. Livestock Center. The ring of cows moves around the perimeter of the dirt circle, each led by an ag-family kid. The “Jr.” apparently refers to the owners, not the animals. Each cow’s kid holds a long poker with a right-angled rooth at its end and prods the cow into the center of the ring to move in a tighter circle. The beef-show official is dressed just like the kids in the ring—dark new stiff jeans, check shirt, bandanna around neck. On him it doesn’t look goofy. Plus he’s got a stunning white cowboy hat. While Ms. Illinois Beef Queen presides from a dais decked with flowers sent over from the horticulture show, the official stands in the arena itself, his legs apart and his thumbs in his belt, 100 percent man, radiating livestock savvy.

“Okay this next heifer, a lot of depth of rib but a little tighter in the fore flank. A bit tighter—flanked, if you will, from the standpoint of capacity.”

The owners—farm kids, deep-rural kids from back-of-beyond counties like Piatt, Moultrie, Vermilion, all here because they’re county-fair winners—are earnest, nervous, pride-puffed. Dressed ruraly up. Straw-colored crewcuts. High number of reckles per capita. Kids remarkable for a kind of classic Rockwellian USA averageness, the products of balanced diets, vigorous daily exertion, and solid GOP upbringings. The Jr. Livestock Center bleachers are half-full, and it is all ag-people, parents mostly, many with video cameras. Cowhide vests and ornate dress-boots and simply amazing hats. Illinois farmers are rural and inarticulate, but they are not poor. Just the amount of revolving credit you need to capitalize a hundred-acre operation—seed and herbicides, heavy equipment and crop insurance—makes a lot of them millionaires on paper. Media dirigis notwithstanding, banks are no more keen to foreclose
In the Poultry Building there's a thin stink. Bits of feather float. The noise is horrifying. I think this must be what insanity sounds like. No wonder madmen clutch their heads.

on Midwestern farms than they are on Third World nations; they're in that deeply. Nobody here wears sunglasses; everyone's in long pants and tanned in an earth-tone, all-business way. And if the fair's ag-pros are also stout, it is in a harder, squarer, somehow more earned way than the tourists on the paths outside. The fathers in the bleachers have bushy brows and simply enormous thumbs, I notice. Native Companion keeps making slowly throat noises about the beef official. The Jr. Livestock Center is cool and dim and spicy with livestock. The atmosphere is good-natured but serious. Nobody's eating any booth-food, and nobody's carrying the fair's complimentary "Governor Edgar" shopping bags.

"An excellent heifer from a profile standpoint."

"Here we have a low-volume heifer, but with exceptional mass in the rear quarter."

I can't tell whose cow is winning.

"Certainly the most extreme heifer out here in terms of frame to depth."

Some of the cows look drugged. Maybe they're just superbly trained. You can imagine these farm kids getting up so early they can see their breath and leading their cows in practice circles under the cold stars, then having to do their chores. I feel good in here. The cows all have colored ribbons on their tails. They are shampeeved and mild-eyed and lovely, incontinence notwithstanding. They're also assets. The ag-lady beside us says her family's operation will "realize" perhaps $2,500 for the Hereford in the Winners Auction coming up. Illinois farmers call their farms "operations," rarely "farms" and never "spreads." The lady says $2,500 is "maybe about half" what the ag-family has spent on the heifer's breeding and care. "We do this for pride," she says. This is more like it—pride, care, selfless expense. The little boy's chest puffs out as the official tips his blinding hat. Farm spirits. Oneness with crop and stock. The ag-lady says that the official is a beef buyer for a major Peoria packing plant and that the bidders in the upcoming auction (five brown suits and three string ties on the dais) are from McDonald's, Burger King, White Castle, etc. Meaning that the mild-eyed winners have been sedulously judged as meat. The ag-lady has a particular bone to pick with McDonald's, 4:05 P.M.

We're about 100 yards shy of the Poultry Building when I break down. I've been a rock about the prospect of poultry all day, but now my nerve goes. I can't go in there. Listen to the thousands of sharp squawking beaks in there, I say. Native Companion not unkindly offers to hold my hand, talk me through it. It is 100 degrees and I have pygmy goat shit on my shoe and am almost crying with fear and embarrassment. I have to sit down on a green bench to collect myself. The noise of the Poultry Building is horrifying. I think this is what insanity must sound like. No wonder madmen clutch their heads. There's a thin stink. Bits of feather float. I bunch on the bench. We're high on a ridge overlooking the carnival rides. When I was eight, at the Champagne County Fair, I was pecked without provocation, flown at and pecked by a renegade fowl, savagely, just under the right eye.

Sitting on the bench, I watch the camies way below. They mix with no one, never seem to leave Happy Hollow. Late tonight, I'll watch them drop flags to turn their booths into tents. They'll smoke cheap dope and drink peppermint schnapps and pee out onto the midway's dirt. I guess they're the gypsies of the rural United
western thunderstorms are real Old Testament
temple clutches: Richter-scale thunder, big zig-
zags of cartoon lightening. Happy Hollow is a bog
as I walk along the midway, passing an enflade
of snores from the booths and tents. Native Com-
panion went home last night. My sneakers are al-
ready soaked. Someone behind the flaps of the
Shoot-2D-Ducks-With-an-Air-Rifle booth is hav-
ing a wicked coughing fit, punctuated with ob-
scenities. Distant sounds of garbage Dumpsters
being emptied. The Blountness-Thebault man-
agement trailer has a blinky electric burglar alarm
on it. The goddamn roosters in the Poultry Build-
ing are at it already. Thunder-mutters way off
east over Indiana. The trees shudder and shed
drops in the breeze. The paths are empty, eerie,
shiny with rain.

6:20 A.M.

S

heep Barn. I am looking at legions of
sleeping sheep. I am the only waking hu-
mam in here. It is cool and quiet. Sheep ex-
crement has an evil vomity edge to it, but
olfactorily it is not too bad in here. One or
two sheep are upright but silent. No fewer than
four ag-pros are also in the pens, sleeping right
up next to their sheep, about which the less
speculation the better as far as I'm concerned.
The roof in here is leaky and most of the straw
is sopping. In here are yearling ewes, brood
ewes, ewe lambs, fall lambs. There are signs
on every pen. We've got Corriedales, Hamp-
shires, Dorset Horns, Columbians. You could
get a Ph.D. just in sheep, from the looks of it.
Ramboullers, Oxfords, Suffolks, Shropshires,
Cheviots, Southdowns. Outside again, undu-
lating ghosts of fog on the fairground paths.
Everything set up but no one about. A creepy air of hasty abandonment.

8:20 A.M.

Press room, fourth floor, Illinois Building. I'm the only credentialed member of the press without a little plywood cubbyhole for mail and press releases. Two guys from an ag. newspaper are trying to hook a fax machine up to a rotary-phone jack. A state-fair PR guy arrives for the daily press briefing. We have coffee and unidentifiable munchie things, compliments of Wal-Mart. This afternoon’s highlights: Midwest Truck and Tractor Pull, the “Bill Oldani 100” U.S.A.C. auto race. Tonight’s Grandstand show is to be the poor old doddering Beach Boys, who I suspect now must make their entire living from state fairs. The special guest is America, another poor old doddering group. The PR guy cannot give away all his free press passes to the concert. I learn that I missed some law-and-order dramas yesterday: two Zipper-riding minors were detained last night when a vial of crack fell from the pocket of one of them and direct-hit a state trooper alertly eating a Lemon Push-Up on the midway below. Also reported: a rape or date rape in Parking Lot 6, assorted buncos and D&D’s. Two reporters also vomited on from great heights in two separate incidents under two separate Near-Death-Experience rides, trying to cover the Hollow.

8:40 A.M.

Macy’s float-sized inflatable Ronald, seated and eerily Buddha-like, presides over the Club Mickey D’s tent. A family is having their picture taken in front of the inflatable Ronald, arranging their little kids in a careful pose.

8:42 A.M.

Fourth trip to the bathroom in three hours. Elimination can be a dicey undertaking here. The fair has scores of Midwest Pottyhouse-brand portable toilets—man-sized plastic huts, somewhat reminiscent of Parisian pissors, each with its own undulating shroud of flies, and your standard heavy-use no-flush outhouse smell—and I for one would rather succumb to a rupture than use a Pottyhouse, though the lines for them are long and cheery. The only real rest rooms are in the big exhibit buildings. The Coliseum’s is like a grade-school boys’ room, especially the long communal urinal, a kind of huge porcelain trough. Performance anxieties and other fears abound here, with upwards of twenty guys flanking and facing one another, each with his unit out. The highlight is watching Midwestern agg-guys struggle with suspenders and overall straps as they exit the stalls.

9:30 A.M.

I’m once again at the capacious McDonald’s tent, at the edge, the titanic inflatable clown presiding. There’s a fair-sized crowd in the basketball bleachers at one side and rows of folding chairs on another. It’s the Illinois State Jr. Baton Twirling Finals. A meat loudspeaker begins to emit disco, and little girls pour into the tent from all directions, gamoling and twirling in vivid costumes. In the stands, video cameras come out by the score, and I can tell it’s pretty much just me and a thousand parents.

The baroque classes and divisions, both team and solo, go from age three(!!) to sixteen, with epithetic signifiers—the four-year-olds compose the Sugar ‘N Spice division, and so on. I’m in a chair up front behind the competition’s judges, introduced as “variety twirlers” from (oddly) the University of Kansas. They are four frosted blondes who smile a lot and blow huge grape bubbles.

The twirler squads are all from different towns. Mount Vernon and Kankakee seem especially rich in twirlers. The twirlers’ spandex costumes, differently colored for each team, are paint-tight and brief in the legs. The coaches are grim, tan, litheness-looking women, clearly twirlers once, on the far side of their glory now and very seriously looking, each with a clipboard and whistle. The teams go into choreographed routines, each routine with a title and a designated disco or show tune, full of compulsory baton-twirling maneuvers with highly technical names. A mother next to me is tracking scores on what looks almost like an astrology chart, and is in no mood to explain anything to a novice baton watcher.

The routines are wildly complex, and the loudspeaker’s play-by-play is mostly in code. All I can determine for sure is that I’ve bumbled into what has to be the most spectator-hazardous event at the fair. Missed batons go all over, whirling wickedly. The three-, four-, and five-year-olds aren’t that dangerous, though they do spend most of their time picking up dropped batons and trying to hustle back into place—the parents of especially fumble-prone twirlers howl in fury from the stands while the coaches chew gum grimly. But the smaller girls don’t really have the arm strength to endanger anybody, although one judge takes a Sugar ‘N Spice’s baton across the bridge of the nose and has to be helped from the tent.

But when the sevens and eights hit the floor for a series of “Armed Service medals” (spandex with epaulets and officers’ caps and batons over shoulders like M16’s), errant batons start pin-wheeling into the ceiling, tent’s sides, and crowd,
The baton twirlers’ spandex costumes are paint-tight and brief in the legs. The coaches, each with a clipboard, are grim, tan, lithe-looking women, clearly twirlers once, on the far side of their glory now.

all with real force. I myself duck several times. A man just down the row takes one in the solar plexus and falls out of his metal chair with a horrid crash. The batons are embossed “Regulation Length” on the shaft and have white rubber stoppers on each end, but it is that hard dry kind of rubber, and the batons themselves aren’t light. I don’t think it’s an accident that police nightsticks are also called service batons.

Physically, even within same-age teams, there are marked incongruities in size and development. One nine-year-old is several heads taller than another, and they’re trying to do a complex back-and-forth duet thing with just one baton, which ends up taking out a bulb in one of the tent’s steel hanging lamps, showering part of the stands with glass. A lot of the younger twirlers look either anorexic or gravely ill. There are no fat baton twirlers.

A team of ten-year-olds in the Gingersnap class have little cotton bunny tails on their costume bottoms and rigid paper mâché ears, and they can do some serious twirling. A squad of eleven-year-olds from Towanda does an involved routine in tribute to Operation Desert Storm. To most of the acts there’s either a cutsey ultrafeminine aspect or a stern butch military one, with little in between. Starting with the twelve-year-olds—one team in black spandex that looks like cheesecake leotards—there is, I’m afraid, a frank sexuality that begins to get uncomfortable. Oddly, it’s the cutsey feminine performances that result in the serious audience casualties. A dad standing up near the top of the stands with a Toshiba video camera to his eye takes a томахawking baton directly in the groin and falls over on somebody eating a funnel cake, and they take out good bits of several rows below them, and there’s an extended hush to the action, during which I decamp. As I clear the last row of chairs yet another baton comes sharp-sharping cruelly right over my shoulder, caroming viciously off big Ronald’s inflated thigh.

11:05 A.M.

The Expo Building, a huge enclosed mall-like thing, AC’d down to eighty degrees, with a gray cement floor and a hardwood mezzanine overhead. Every interior inch is given over to commerce of a special and lurid sort. Just inside the big east entrance, a man with a headset mike is slicing up a block of wood and then a tomato, standing on a box in a booth that says “SharpKut,” hawking these spin-offs of Ginsu knives, “As Seen on TV.” Next door is a booth offering personalized pet-ID tags. Another for the infamous mail-order advertised Clapper, which turns on appliances automatically at the sound of two hands clapping (but also at the sound of a cough, sneeze, or sniff, I discover; caveat emptor). There’s booth after booth, each with an audience whose credulity seems sincere. A large percentage of the booths show signs of hasty assembly and say “As Seen on TV” in bright brave colors. The salesmen all stand on raised platforms; all have headset mixes and rich neutral media voices.

The Copper Kettle All-Butter Fudge booth does a brisk air-conditioned business. There’s something called a Full Immersion Bodysize Fat Analysis for $8.50. A certain CompuVac, Inc., offers a $1.50 Computerized Personality Analysis. Its booth’s computer panel is tall and full of blinking lights and reel-to-reel tapes, like an old bad sci-fi-film computer. My own Personality Analysis, a slip of paper that protrudes like a tongue from a red-lit slot, says, “Your Boldness of Nature Is Offset [sic] with the Fear of Taking Risk.” There’s a booth that offers clock faces superimposed on varnished photorealistic paintings of Christ, John Wayne, Marilyn Monroe. There’s a Computerized Posture Evaluation booth. A lot of the headsettled vendors are about my age or younger. Something overscrubbed about them suggests a Bible-college background. It is just cool enough in here for a sweat-soaked shirt to get clammy. One vendor recites a pitch for Ms. Suzanne Somers’s Thighmaster while a woman in a leotard demonstrates the product, lying on her side on the fiberboard counter. I’m in the Expo Building almost two hours, and every time I look up the poor woman’s still at it with the Thighmaster. Most of the vendors won’t answer questions and give me beady looks when I stand there making notes. But the Thighmaster lady, cheer-
The cloggers hold hands and whirl each other around and in and out, tapping like mad, their torsos upright and almost formal, as if only incidentally attached to the blur of legs below.

ful, friendly, violently cross-eyed, informs me she gets an hour off for lunch at 2:00 P.M., then goes another eight hours to closing at 11:00 P.M. I say her thighs must be pretty dam well Mastered by now, and her leg sounds like a banister when she raps her knuckle against it. We both have a laugh, until her vendor asks me to scram.


Also on display is the expo’s second economy—the populist evangelism of the rural Midwest. It is not your cash they want but to “Make a Difference in Your Life.” And they make no bones about it. A Church of God booth offers a Computerized Bible Quiz. Its computer is Computacraft in appearance. I go eighty for twenty on the quiz and am invited behind a chamois curtain for a “person-to-person faith exploration,” which no thanks. The conventional vendors get along fine with the Baptists and Jews for Jesus who operate booths right near them. They all laugh and banter back and forth. The SharpKut guy sends all the vegetables he’s microsliced over to the Lifesavers booth, where they put them out with the candy. The scariest spiritual booth is right up near the west exit, where something called Covenant Faith Triumphant Church has a big hanging banner that asks, “What Is the ONE Man Made Thing Now in Heaven?” and I stop to ponder, which with charismatics is death, because a heavy-browed woman is out around the booth’s counter like a shot and into my personal space. She says, “Give up? Give up do you?” She’s looking at me very intensely, but there’s something about her gaze; it is like she’s looking at my eyes rather than in them. “What one man-made thing?” I ask. She puts a finger to her palm and makes screeching motions. Signifying coitus? I don’t say “coitus” out loud, though. “Not but one thing,” she says, “The holes in Christ’s palms,” screeching her finger in. Except isn’t it pretty well known that Roman-cruscences were nailed at the wrists, since palm-feather won’t support weight? But now I’ve been drawn into the dialogue, going so far as to let her take my arm and pull me toward the booth’s counter. “Look see here for a second now,” she says. She has both hands around my arm. A Midwestern child of humanist academia gets trained early on to avoid these weird-eyed eager rural Christians who accost your space, to say “Not interested” at the front door and “No thanks” to mimeographed pamphlets, to look right through streetcorner missionaries like they were stemming for change. But the woman drags me toward the Covenant Faith counter, where a fine oak box rests, a sign propped on it: “Where Will YOU Be When YOU Look Like THIS?” “Take a look-see in here,” the woman says. The box has a hole in its top. I peek. Inside the box is a human skull. I’m pretty sure it’s plastic. The interior lighting is tricky, but I’m pretty sure the skull isn’t genuine. I haven’t inhaled for several minutes. The woman is looking at the side of her face. “Are you sure? Is the question,” she says. I manage to make my straightening-up motion lead right into a backing-away motion. “Are you a hundred percent sure?” Overhead, on the mezzanine, the Thighmaster lady is still at it, smiling cross-eyed into space.

1:56 P.M.

I’m on a testery stool watching the Illinois Prairie Cloggers competition in a structure called the Twilight Ballroom that’s packed with ag-folks and well over 100 degrees. I’d nipped in here only to get a bottle of soda pop on my way to the Truck and Tractor Pull. By now the pull’s got to be nearly over, and in half an hour the big U.S.A.C. dirt-track auto race starts. But I cannot tear myself away from the scene here. I’d imagined goony Jed Clampett types in tattered hats and...
hobnail boots, a-stompin' and a-whoopin', etc. I guess clogging, Scotch-Irish in origin and the dance of choice in Appalachia, did used to involve actual clogs and boots and slow stomp. But clogging has now resigned itself with square dancing and honky-tonk boogie to become a kind of intricately synchronized, absolutely kick-ass country tap dance.

There are teams from Pekin, Le Roy, Rutland, Cairo, Morton. They each do three numbers. The music is up-tempo country or dance-pop. Each team has anywhere from four to ten dancers. Few of the women are under thirty-five, fewer still under 175 pounds. They're country mothers, red-cheeked gals with bad dye jobs and big pretty legs. They wear western-wear tops and midiskirts with multiple ruffled slips underneath; and every once in a while they grab handfuls of cloth and flip the skirts up like cancan dancers. When they do this they either yip or whoop, as the spirit moves them. The men all have thinning hair and cheery rural faces, and their skinny legs are rubberized blurs. The men's western shirts have piping on the chest and shoulders. The teams are all color-coordinated—blue and white, black and red. The white shoes all the dancers wear look like golf shoes with metal taps clamped on.

Their numbers are to everything from Waylon and Tammy to Aretha, Miami Sound Machine, Neil Diamond's "America." The routines have some standard tap-dance moves—sweep, slide, chonk-line kicking. But it is fast and sustained and choreographed down to the last wrist-flick. And square dancing's genes can be seen in the upright, square-shouldered postures on the floor; and there's a kind of florally enfolding tendency to the choreography, some of which uses high-speed promenades. But it is methadone-paced and exhausting to watch because your own feet move; and it is erotic in a way that makes MTV look lame. The cloggers' feet are too fast to be seen, really, but they all tap out the exact same rhythm. A typical routine is something like: utatatatatatatatatata. The variations in the basic rhythm are baroque. When they kick or spin, the two-beat absence of tap complexes the pattern.

The audience is packed right to the edge of the portable hardwood flooring. The teams are mostly married couples. The men are either rail-thin or have big hanging guts. A couple of the men on a blue-and-white team are great fluid Astaire-like dancers, but mostly it is the women who clog. The men have constant smiles, but the women look organic; they're the really serious ones, transported. Their yips and whoops are involuntary, pure exclamation. They are surging. The audience claps savvily on the backbeat and whoops when the women do. It is almost all folks from the ag and livestock shows—the flannel shirts, khaki pants, seed caps and freckles. The spectators are soaked in sweat and extremely happy. I think this is the ag-community's special treat, a chance here to cut loose a little while their animals sleep in the heat. The transactions between cloggers and crowd seem synecdochic of the fair as a whole: a culture talking to itself, presenting credentials for its own inspection, bean farmers and herbicide brokers and 4-H sponsors and people who drive pickup trucks because they really need them. They eat non-fair food from insulated hampers and drink beer and pop and stomp in perfect time and put their hands on neighbors' shoulders to shout in their ears while the cloggers whirl and fling sweat on the crowd.

There are no black people in the Twilight Ballroom, and the awakened looks on the younger ag-kids' faces have this astonishing aspect, like they didn't realize their race could dance like this. Three married couples from Rutland, wearing full western bodysuits, the color of raw coal, weave an incredible filigree of high-speed tap around Aretha's "R-E-S-P-E-C-T," and there's no hint of racial irony in the room; the song has been made this people's own, emphatically. This Nineties version of clogging does have something sort of pugnaciously white about it, a kind of performative nose-thumbing at M.C. Hammer. There's an atmosphere in the room—not racist, but aggressively white. It's hard to describe—the atmosphere is the same at a lot of rural Midwest events. It is not like a black person who came in would be ill treated; it's more like it would just never occur to a black person to come here.

I can barely hold the tablet still to scribble journalistic impressions, the floor is rumbling under so many boots and sneakers. The record player is old-fashioned, the loudspeakers are tatty, and it sounds fantastic. Two of the dancing Rutland wives are fat, but with great legs. Who could practice this kind of tapping as much as they must and stay fat? I think maybe rural Midwestern women are just congenitally big. But these people clogging get down. And they do it as a troupe, a collective, with none of the narcissistic look-at-me grandstanding of great dancers in rock clubs. They hold hands and whirl each other around and in and out, tapping like mad, their torsos upright and almost formal, as if only incidentally attached to the blur of legs below. It
goes on and on. I'm rooted to my stool. Each team seems the best yet. In the crowd's other side across the floor I can see the old poultry farmer, he of the curly-hared and electrified wallet. He's still got his poultry cap on, making a megaphone of his hands to whoop with the women, leaning way forward in his geriatric scooter; body bobbing like he's scowling in time, while his little cowboy boots stay clamped in their stays.

4:36 P.M.

Trying to hurry to the Grandstand, eating a corn dog cooked in 100 percent soybean oil. I can hear the honkytonk engines of the U.S.A.C. 100 race. A huge plume of track dust hangs over the Grandstand. Tiny bubble of excited PA announcer. The corn dog tastes strongly of soybean oil, which itself tastes like corn oil that's been strained through an oil field towel. Tickets for the race are an obscene $13.50. Baton twirling is still under way in Club Mickey D's tent. A band called Captain Rac & the Blind Rivets is playing at Lincoln Stage, and as I pass I can see dancers in there. They look jagged and arrhythmic and blank, bored in that hip young East Coast way, facing in instead of out, not touching their partners. The people not dancing don't even look at them, and after the clogging the whole thing looks unspeakably numb and lonely.

4:45 P.M.

The official name of the race is the William "Wild Bill" Oldani Memorial 100 Sprint Car Race of the Valvoline-U.S.A.C. Silver Crown Series. The Grandstand seats 9,800 and is packed. The noise is beyond belief. The race is nearly over: the electric sign on the infield says "LAP 92." The leader is number 26, except his black-and-green Skaol car is in the middle of the pack. Apparently he's lapped people. The crowd is mostly men, very tan, smoking, 70 percent with mustaches and billed caps with automotive associations. Most of them wear earplugs; the ones in the real know wear thick airline-worker noise-filter headers. The seventeen-page program is almost impenetrable. There are either forty-nine or fifty cars, called either Pro Dirt or Silver Crown, and they're basically go-carts from hell, with a soapbox-derby chassis and huge dragster tires, gleaming tangles of pipes and spotters jutting out all over, and unabashedly phallic bulges up front. The program says these models are what they used to race at Indy in the 1950s. The cars' cockpit windows are open and webbed in straps and roll bars; the drivers wear helmets the same color as their cars, with white masks on their faces to keep out the choking dust. The cars come in all hues. Most look to be sponsored by either Skaol or Marlboro. Pit crews in surgical white lean out into the track and flash obscure commands written on little chalkboards. The infield is dotted with trailers and tow trucks and officials' stands and electric signs. Women in skimpy tops stand on some of the trailers, seeming very partisan.

I can barely take my hands off my ears long enough to turn the program's pages. The cars sound almost like jets—that insectile scream—but with a diesel, lawn-mowerish component you can feel in your skull. The seating is on just one side of the Grandstand, on the straightaway, and when the mass of cars passes it's unendurable: your very skeleton hurts from the noise, and your ears are still belling when they come around again. The cars go like mad bats on the straightaways and then shift down for the tight turns, their rear tires wobbling in the dirt. Certain cars pass other cars, and some people cheer when they do. Down at the bottom of the section a little boy is held up by his father is rigid, facing away from the track, his hands clamped over his ears so hard his elbows stick way out, and his face is a rictus of pain when they pass. The little boy and I sort of rictus at each other. A fine dusty dirt hangs in the air and coats everything, including tongues. Then all of a sudden binoculars come out and everyone stands as there's some sort of screeching slide and crash on a far turn, all the way across the infield; and firemen in slickers and hats go racing out there in full-sized fire trucks, and the PA voice's pitch goes way up but is still incomprehensible, and a man with those airline earmuffs in the officials' stand leans out and fiats at the air with a bright-yellow flag, and the go-carts throttle down to autobahn speed, and the pace car, a Trans Am, comes out and leads them around, and everybody stands, and I stand too. It is impossible to see anything but a swizzle stick of smoke above the far turn, and the engine noise is endurable and the PA silent, and the relative quiet hangs there while we all wait for news; and I look around at all the faces below the raised binoculars, but it's not at all clear what we're hoping for.

5:50 P.M.

Ten-minute line for a chocolate milk shake. Oilly blacktop stink on heated paths. I ask a little boy to describe the taste of his funnel cake, and he runs away. My ears are still mostly ringing—everything sounds car-phonic. Display of a 17.6-lb. zucchini squash outside the Agri-Industries Pavilion. One big zucchini, all right. In the Coliseum, the only historical evidence of the tractor pulls is huge ideograms of tire tracks, mounds of scored dirt, dark patches of tobacco juice, smells of burnt rubber and oil. Nearby is a
In the boxing tent, two ten-year-olds stand toe to toe, whaling the living shit out of each other. Neither has any interest in defense. They windmill away while scary dads chew gum in their corners.

bus on display from the city of Peoria’s All-Ethanol Bus System; it is painted to resemble a huge ear of corn.

6:00 P.M.

Back again at the seemingly inescapable Club Mickey D’s. The tent is now set up for Illinois Golden Gloves Boxing. Out on the floor is a square of four boxing rings. The rings are made out of clotheline and poles anchored by cement-filled tires, one ring per age division: Sixteens, Fourteens, Twelves, Tens(!). Here’s another unhyped but riveting spectacle. If you want to see genuine violence, go check out a Golden Gloves tourney. None of your adult pros’ silly footwork or Rope-a-Dope defenses here. Here human asses are ripped into what are essentially playground brawls with white-tipped gloves and brain-shaped head guards. The combatants’ tank tops say things like “Peoria Jr. Boxing” and “Elgin Fight Club.” The rings’ corners have stools for the kids to sit on and get worked over by their teams’ coaches. The coaches are clearly dads: florid, blue-jawed, bull-necked, flint-eyed men who oversee sanctioned brawls. Now a fighter’s mouth guard goes flying out of the Fourteens’ ring, end over end, trailing strings of spit, and the crowd around that ring howls. In the Sixteens’ ring is a local Springfield kid, Darrell Hall, against a slim fluid Latino, Sullivan, from Joliet. Hall outwights Sullivan by a good twenty pounds. Hall also looks like every kid who ever beat me up in high school, right down to the wispy mustache and upper lip’s cruel twist. The crowd around the Sixteens’ ring is all his friends—guys with muscle shirts and gym shorts and gelled hair, girls in cutoff overalls and complex systems of barrettes. There are repeated shouts of “Kick his ass, Darrell!” The Latino sticks and moves. Somebody in this tent is snorting a joint. I can smell. The Sixteens cap actually box. The ceiling’s lights are bare bulbs in steel cones, hanging cockeyed from a day of batons. Everybody here pours sweat. The reincarnation of every high-school cheerleader I ever pined for is in the Sixteens’ crowd. The girls cry out and frame their faces with their hands when Darrell gets hit. I do not know why cut-off overall shorts have evaded the East Coast’s fashion ken; they are devastating. The fight in Fourteens is stopped for a moment to let the referee wipe a gout of blood from one kid’s glove. Sullivan glides and jabs, orbiting Hall. Hall is implacable, a hunched and feral fighter, boring in. Air explodes through his nose when he lands a blow. He keeps trying to back the Latino against the clotheline. People cool themselves with wood-handled fans from the Democratic Party. Big hairy mosquitoes work the crowd. The refs keep slapping at their necks. The rain has been heavy, and the mosquitoes are the bad kind, field-bred and rapacious. I can also see the Tens from this vantage, a vicious free-for-all between two tiny kids whose head guards make their skulls look too big for their bodies. Neither ten-year-old has any interest in defense. Their shoes’ toes touch as they windmill at each other, scoring at will. Scary dads chew gum in their corners. One kid’s mouth guard keeps falling out. Now the Sixteens’ crowd explodes as their loudish Hall catches Sullivan with an uppercut that puts him on his bottom. Sullivan gamely rises, but his knees wobble and he won’t face the ref. Hall raises both arms and faces the crowd, disclosing a missing incisor. The girls betray their cheerleading backgrounds by clapping and jumping up and down at the same time. Hall shakes his glove at the ceiling as several girls call his name, and you can feel it in the air’s very ions; Darrell Hall is going to get laid before the night’s over.

The digital thermometer in the Ronald-Buddha’s left hand reads ninety-three degrees at 6:30 PM. Behind him, big ominous scoop-of-coffee-ice-cream clouds are massing at the western horizon, but the sun’s still above them and very much a force. People’s shadows on the paths are getting pointy. It’s the part of the day when little kids cry from what their parents naively call exhaustion. Cicadas chirp in the grass by the tent. The ten-year-olds stand toe to toe and weep the living shit out of each other. It is the sort of savage mutual beating you see in black-and-white films of old-time fights. Their ring now has the largest crowd. The fight will be all but impossible to score. But then it is over in an instant at the second intermission, when one of the little boys, sitting on his stool, being whispered to by a dad with tattooed forearms, suddenly throws up. Prodigiously. For no apparent reason. Maybe a stomach punch collected in tranquility. It is kind of surreal. Vomit flies all over. Kids in the crowd go “Beyuuu.” The sick fighter starts to cry. His scary coach and