

TICKET TO THE FAIR

Wherein our reporter gorges
himself on corn dogs, gapes at terrifying rides,
acquaints himself with the odor of pigs,
exchanges unpleasantries with tattooed carnies,
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 downstate Springfield. I never did go to the state fair, though—I pretty much topped out at the county-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-

David Foster Wallace is the author of The Broom of the System, a novel, and Girl With Curious Hair, a collection of short stories. A new novel, Infinite Jest, will be published by Little, Brown next year. His last contribution to Harper's Magazine, "The Awakening of My Interest in Annular Systems," a story, appeared in the September 1993 issue.

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. Locusts chirr 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 in shoptalk. 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, deeply blue-eyed. They stand together up by the dais, which has a podium and a flag and a banner reading "Give Us a Whirl"—this year's theme. Middle-management types enter. A squelch 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 ziggurat 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.

9:50 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 carnies 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-toothed

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 oozing 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 hosing 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 pecked 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 flatulent-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, troupes 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 suffixed with "-ish." Her tragic flaw is her voice, which sounds

almost heliated. 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 Mrs. 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 13, 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 pith 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 out 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

their front lawn for five dollars. We stand near the back. I gather that "Little Jim" Edgar, the governor, isn't much respected by the press. Governor Edgar is maybe fifty and greyhound-thin, with steel glasses and hair that looks carved out of feldspar. He radiates sincerity, though. After the hacks introduce him, he speaks sanely and, I think, well. He invites everybody to get in there and have a really good time and to revel in watching everybody else also having a good time—a kind of reflexive exercise in civics. The press corps seems unmoved.

But this fair, the idea and now the reality of it, does seem to have something uniquely to do with state-as-community, a grand-scale togetherness. And it is not just the claustrophobic mash of people waiting to get inside. The fair occupies space, and there's no shortage of empty space in downstate Illinois. The fairgrounds take up 300-plus acres on the north side of Springfield, a depressed capital of 109,000 where you can't spit without hitting a Lincoln-site plaque. The fair spreads itself out, and visually so. The main gate is on a rise, and through the two sagged halves of ribbon you get a specular vantage on the whole thing—virgin and sun-glittered, even the tents looking freshly painted. It seems garish and endless and aggressively special. Kids are having little epileptic fits all around us, frenzied with a need to take in everything at once. I suspect that part of the self-conscious community thing here has to do with space. Rural Midwesterners live surrounded by unpopulated land, marooned in a space whose emptiness is both physical and spiritual. It is not just people you get lonely for. You're alienated from the very space around you, for here the land is not an environment but a commodity. The land is basically a factory. You live in the same factory you work in. You spend an enormous amount of time with the land, but you're still alienated from it in some way. I theorize to Native Companion (who worked detasseling summer corn with me in high school) that the state fair's animating thesis involves some kind of structured, decorated interval of communion with both neighbor and space—the sheer fact of the land is to be celebrated here, its yields ogled and its stock groomed and paraded. A special vacation from alienation, a chance, for a moment, to love what real life out here can't let you love. Native Companion gives me a look, then rummages

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 are in their own individual stalls, with half-height doors and owners and grooms on stools by the doors, a lot of them dozing. 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 rarely 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 acrid 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 to 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 spray-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 fur! 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 under way 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 ceiling fans roar, but it is still hellish in here. Pig smell is both vomity and excremental, 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 L.L. Bean boots worn on the East Coast. Some of the standing swine commune through the bars of their pens, snouts 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 swinemens 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, a 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 pained 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 if 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 hellishly yet. Guys with ratchet wrenches are still cranking away, assembling the Ring of Fire. The Giant Gondola 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 carnies 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 con-

trol panel reading a motorcycle-and-naked-girl magazine while guys attach enormous rubber hoses to the ride's guts. We sidle over for a chat. The operator is twenty-four and from Bee Branch, Arkansas, and has an earring 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 carny game barkers 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, garbageman smell. The media guide says Happy Hollow is contracted to "one of the largest owners of amusement attractions in the country," one Blomsness-Thebault Enterprises, of Crystal Lake, Illinois, near Chicago. But the carnies 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 shots carom out from eight feet away; the straw baskets look soft, but their bottoms make a suspicious steely sound when hit.

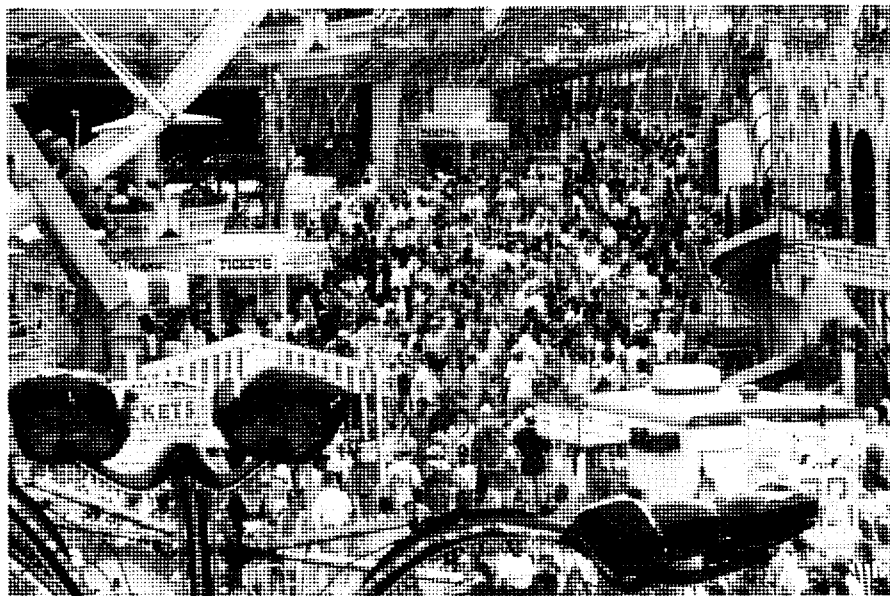
It's so hot that we move in quick vectors between areas of shade. I'm reluctant to go shirtless because there'd be no way to display my credentials. We zigzag gradually westward. One of the fully assembled rides near the Hollow's west end is something called the Zipper. It's riderless as we approach, but in furious motion, a kind of Ferris wheel on amphetamines. Individual caged cars 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 shimmying 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 burnt-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 studiously 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: carsick, airsick, heightsick) 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 carnies gazing 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, toking on a joint. There's a distended 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 deft 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 carnies 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 carnies: "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, though?"

"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 fuck'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 slip 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 eroto-political contrast the

East Coast magazine is keen for. The core value informing a kind of eroto-willed political stoicism on your part is your prototypically Midwestern appreciation of fun—"

"Buy me some pork skins, you dipshit."

"—whereas on the East Coast, eroto-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 eroto-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."

12:35 P.M.

Lunchtime. The fairgrounds are a Saint Vitus' dance of blacktop footpaths, the axons and dendrites of mass spectation, 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 maw admits us, and tightly packed slow masses move peristaltically along complex systems of branching paths, engage in complex cash-and-energy transfers at the villi alongside the paths, and are finally, both filled and depleted, expelled out of exits designed for heavy-flow expulsion. And then, of course, the food itself. There are tall Kaopectate-colored shacks that sell Illinois Dairy Council milk shakes for an off-the-scale \$2.50—though they're mind-bendingly good milk shakes, silky and so thick 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 Coppertone, 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 "storved," she says, "to daith." She puts on a parodic hick accent whenever I use a term like "peripatetic."

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

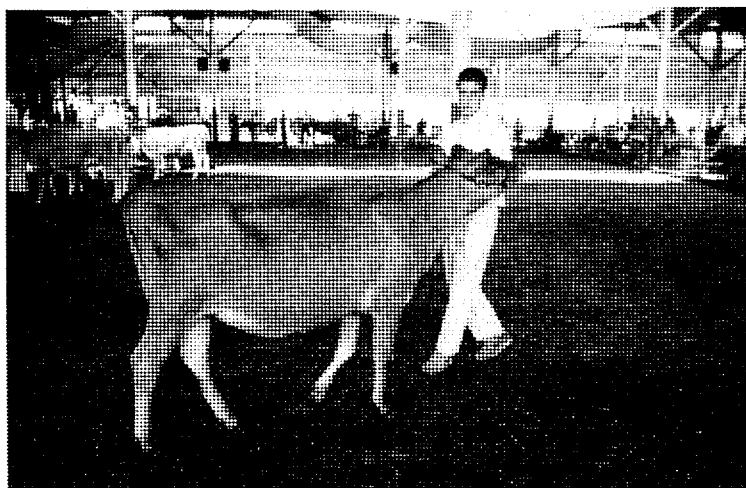
Peppers; Zorba's Gyros; shiny fried chicken; Bert's Burritos—"Big As You're [sic] Head"; hot Italian beef; hot New York City beef; Jojo's Quick Fried Doughnuts; pizza by the shingle-sized slice; and chitlins and crab Rangoon and Polish sausage. There are towering plates of "Curl Fries," which are pubic-hair-shaped and make people's fingers shine in the sun. Cheez-Dip hot dogs. Pony pups. Hot fritters. Philly steak. Ribeye BBQ Corral. Joanie's Original 1/2-lb. Burgers booth's sign says "2 Choices—Rare or Moooin'." I can't believe people eat this stuff in this kind of heat. There's the green reek of fried tomatoes. The sky is cloudless and galvanized, and the sun fairly pulses. The noise of deep fryers forms a grisly 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, fiddlesticks, hot 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 Krakkles. Angel Hair cotton candy. There are funnel cakes: cake batter quick-fried to a tornadic spiral and rolled in sugared butter. Another artery 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.

1:10 P.M.

"Here we've got as balanced in dimension a heifer as any 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 perhaps 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 tooth 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 rurally up. Straw-colored crewcuts. High number of freckles 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 dirges 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 growly 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 shampooed 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 around 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 spirit. 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, "'cause they always come in and overbid high on the champions and don't care about nothing else. Mess up the pricing." Her husband confirms they got "screwed back to front" on last year's bidding.

3:00 P.M.

We hurtle here and there. Paid attendance today is 100,000-plus. A scum of clouds cuts the heat, but I'm on my third shirt. Society horse show at Coliseum. Wheat-weaving demonstration in Hobbies, Arts & Crafts Building. Peonies like supernovas in the horticulture tent. I have no time. I'm getting a sort of visual-overload headache. Native Companion is also stressed. And we're not the only tourists with this pinched glazed hurry-up look—there are just too damn many things to experience. Arm-wrestling finals where bald men fart audibly with effort. Drum and bugle competition in Miller Beer tent. Corn-fed girls in overalls cut off at the pockets. Everyone's very excited at everything. Totty Ronald McD. is working the crowd at Club Mickey D's 3-on-3 Hoops. Three of the six basketball players are black, the first I've seen since Mrs. Edgar's hired kids. Pygmy Goat Show at Goat Barn. Native Companion has zinc oxide on her nose. I'm sure we'll miss something.

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 hunch on the bench. We're high on a ridge overlooking the carnival rides. When I was eight, at the Campaign 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 carnies way below. They mix with no one, never seem to leave Happy Hollow. Late tonight, I'll watch them drop flaps 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

States—itinerant, insular, swarthy, unclean, not to be trusted. You are in no way drawn to them. They all have the same blank hard eyes as people in the bathrooms of East Coast bus terminals. They want your money and maybe to look up your skirt; beyond that you're just blocking the view. Next week they'll dismantle and pack and haul up to the Wisconsin State Fair, where they'll never set foot off the midway they pee on.

While I'm watching from the bench, an old withered man in an Illinois Poultry Association cap careers past on one of those weird three-wheeled carts, like a turbocharged wheelchair, and runs neatly over my sneaker. This ends up being my one unassisted interview of the day, and it's brief. The man keeps revving his cart's engine like a biker. "Traish," he calls the carnie. "Lowlifes." He gestures down at the twirling rides. "Wouldn't let my own kids go off down there on a goddamn bet." He raises pullets down near Olney. He has something in his cheek. "Steal you blind. Drug-addicted and such. Swindle you nekked them games. Traish. Me, I ever year we drive up, I carry my wallet like this here." He points to his hip. His wallet's on a big steel clip attached to a wire on his belt; the whole thing looks vaguely electrified. Q: "But do they want to? Your kids? Hit the Hollow?" He spits brownly. "Hail no. We all come for the shows." He means the livestock competitions. "See some folks, talk stock. Drink a beer. Work all year round raising 'em for show birds. It's for pride. And to see folks. Shows're over Tuesday, why, we go on home." He looks like a bird himself. His face is mostly nose, his skin loose and pebbly like poultry's. His eyes are the color of denim. "Rest of this here's for city people." Spits. He means Springfield, Decatur, Normal. "Walk around, stand in line, eat junk, buy soovneers. Give their wallet to the traish. Don't even know there's folks come here to work up here." He gestures up at the barns, then spits again, leaning way out over the cart to do it. "We come up to work, see some folks. Drink a beer. Bring our own goddamn food. Mother packs a hamper. Hail, what we'd want to go on down there for? No folks we know down there." He laughs. Asks my name. "It is good to see folks," he says before leaving me and peeling out in his chair, heading for the chicken din. "We all stayin' up to the motel. Watch your wallet, boy."

AUGUST 14, 6:00 A.M.

The dawn is foggy. The sky looks like soap. It rained in brutal sheets last night, damaged tents, tore up corn near my motel. Mid-

western thunderstorms are real Old Testament temple clutchers: Richter-scale thunder, big zig-zags of cartoon lightning. Happy Hollow is a bog as I walk along the midway, passing an enfilade of snores from the booths and tents. Native Companion went home last night. My sneakers are already soaked. Someone behind the flaps of the Shoot-2D-Ducks-With-an-Air-Rifle booth is having a wicked coughing fit, punctuated with obscenities. Distant sounds of garbage Dumpsters being emptied. The Blomsness-Thebault management trailer has a blinky electric burglar alarm



on it. The goddamn roosters in the Poultry Building 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.

Sheep Barn. I am looking at legions of sleeping sheep. I am the only waking human in here. It is cool and quiet. Sheep excrement 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, Hampshires, Dorset Horns, Columbias. You could get a Ph.D. just in sheep, from the looks of it. Rambouillets, Oxfords, Suffolks, Shropshires, Cheviots, Southdowns. Outside again, undulating 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 muffinish 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 dramatics 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.

A 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 *pissoirs*, 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 ag-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 metal loudspeaker begins to emit disco, and little girls pour into the tent from all directions, gamboling 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 "varsity 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, lithe-looking women, clearly twirlers once, on the far side of their glory now and very serious-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, whistling 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 medleys" (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.

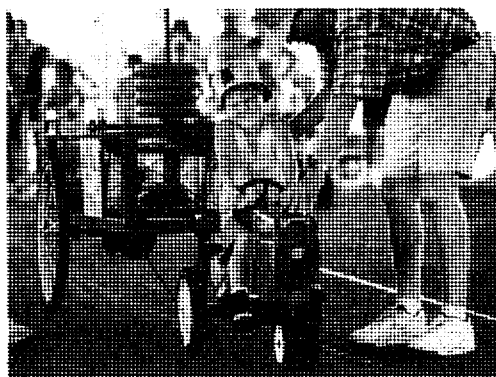
A team of ten-year-olds in the Gingersnap class have little cotton bunny tails on their costume bottoms and rigid papier-mâché ears, and they can do some serious twirling. A squad of eleven-year-olds from Towanda does an involved routine in tribute to Operation Desert Storm. To most of the acts there's either a cutesy 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 cutesy 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 tomahawking 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 halt to the action, during which I decamp. As I clear the last row of chairs yet another baton comes *wharp-wharpping* 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 slic-

ing 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 mikes 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 Body 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 photorealist paintings of Christ, John Wayne, Marilyn Monroe. There's a Computerized Posture Evaluation booth. A lot of the headsetted 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 darn 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 scam.

Booth after booth. A Xanadu of chintzola. Obscure non-stick cookware. "Eye Glasses Cleaned Free." A booth with anti-cellulite sponges. Dip-pin' Dots futuristic ice cream. A woman with Velcro straps on her sneakers gets fountain-pen ink out of a linen tablecloth with a Chapstick-looking spot remover whose banner says "As Seen on TV's 'Amazing Discoveries,'" a late-night infomercial I'm kind of a fan of. A booth that for \$9.95 will take a photo and superimpose your face on either an FBI Wanted poster or a *Penthouse* cover. An "MIA—Bring Them Home!" booth staffed by women playing Go Fish. An anti-abortion booth called Lifesavers that lures you over with little candies. Sand art. Shredded-ribbon art. A booth for "Latest Advance! Rotary Nose Hair Clippers" whose other sign reads (I kid you not), "Do Not Pull Hair From Nose, May Cause Fatal Infection." Two different booths for collectible sports-star cards, "Top Ranked Investment of the Nineties." And tucked way back on one curve of the mezzanine's ellipse—yes—black-velvet paintings, including—yes—several of Elvis in pensive poses.

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 CompuVac-ish in appearance. I go eighteen 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 microslliced 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, be-

cause 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 screwing motions. Signifying coitus? I don't say "coitus" out loud, though. "Not but one thing," she says. "The holes in Christ's palms," screwing her finger in. Except isn't it pretty well known that Roman crucifees were nailed at the wrists, since palm-flesh 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. "Looke here for a second now," she says. She has both hands around my arm. A Midwestern child of humanist academics 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 mimeoed 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 my 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 hunderd percent *sure*?" Overhead, on the mezzanine, the Thighmaster lady is still at it, smiling cross-eyed into space.

1:36 P.M.

I'm on a teetery 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 in 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 stomps. But clogging has now miscegenated 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, Rantoul, 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 midskirts 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 cheesy 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, flare, chorus-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 methedrine-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: *tatatatatatatatatata*. The variations around the basic rhythm are baroque. When they kick or spin, the two-beat absence of tap complexifies the pattern.

The audience is packed in 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 compel. The men have constant smiles, but the women look orgasmic; they're the really serious ones, transported. Their yips and whoops are involuntary, pure exclamation. They are arousing. 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

astonished aspect, like they didn't realize their race could dance like this. Three married couples from Rantoul, 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 shitty, and it sounds fantastic. Two of the dancing Rantoul 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 carny hatred 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 stomping 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 hornety engines of the U.S.A.C. 100 race. A huge plume of track dust hangs over the Grandstand. Tinny burble of excited PA announcer. The corn dog tastes strongly of soybean oil, which itself tastes like corn oil that's been strained through an old gym 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 Rat & 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 Skoal 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 headsets. 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 spoilers 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' cockpits are open and webbed in straps and roll bars; the drivers wear helmets the same color as their cars, with white masks on their face to keep out the choking dust. The cars come in all hues. Most look to be

sponsored by either Skoal or Marlboro. Pit crews in surgical white lean out into the track and flash obscure commands written on little chalkboards. The infield is clotted 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 diesely, 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 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 dirty dust 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 flails 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.

5:30 P.M.

Ten-minute line for a chocolate milk shake. Oily 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 mossily ringing—everything sounds car-phonish. 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 clothesline 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' silky footwork or Rope-a-Dope defenses here. Here human asses are thoroughly kicked in 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, flinty-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, Sullivano, from Joliet. Hall outweighs Sullivano 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 smoking a joint, I can smell. The Sixteens can 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 cutoff 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 ref

wipe a gout of blood from one kid's glove. Sullivano 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 clothesline. 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 loutish Hall catches Sullivano with an uppercut that puts him on his bottom. Sullivano 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 gloves 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-Budha's left hand reads ninety-three degrees at 6:30 P.M. 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 chirr in the grass by the tent. The ten-year-olds stand toe to toe and whale 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 recollected in tranquillity. It is kind of surreal. Vomit flies all over. Kids in the crowd go "Eeeyuuu." The sick fighter starts to cry. His scary coach and

Amid all the rotating neon and plunging machinery's roar and jagged screams and high-volume rock, the crowds seem radically happy, vivid, somehow awakened, sponges for sensuous data, feeding on stimuli

the ref wipe him down and help him from the ring, not ungently. His opponent, watching, tentatively puts up his arms.

7:30 P.M.

So the old heave-ho is the last thing I see at Golden Gloves Boxing and then the first thing I see at Happy Hollow, right at sunset. Standing on the midway looking up at the Ring of Fire—a set of flame-colored train cars sent around and around the inside of a 100-foot neon hoop, the operator stalling the train at the top and hanging the patrons upside down, jackknifed over their seat belts, with loose change and eyeglasses raining down—looking up, I witness a thick coil of vomit arc from a car; it describes a 100-foot spiral and lands with a meaty splat between two young girls, who look from the ground to each other with expressions of slapstick horror. And when the flame train finally brakes at the ramp, a mortified-looking little kid wobbles off, damp and pale, staggering over toward a Lemon Shake-Up stand.

This is my last day at the fair, and I've put off a real survey of the Near-Death Experiences until my last hour. I want to get everything catalogued before the sun sets. I've already had some distant looks at the nighttime Hollow and have an idea that being down here in the dark, amid all this rotating neon and the mechanical clowns and plunging machinery's roar and jagged screams and barkers' pitches and high-volume rock, would be like the depiction of a bum acid trip in a bad Sixties movie. It strikes me hardest in the Hollow that I'm not spiritually Midwestern anymore, and no longer young—I do not like crowds, screams, amplified noise, or heat. I'll endure them if I have to, but they're sure not my idea of a magic community-interval. The crowds in the Hollow, though—mostly high-school couples, local toughs, and kids in single-sex packs, as the demographics of the fair shift to prime time—seem radically happy, vivid, somehow awakened, sponges for sensuous data, not bombarded by the stimuli but feeding on it. It is the first time I've felt really lonely at the fair.

Nor do I understand why some people will pay money to be careened and suspended and dropped and whipped back and forth at high speeds and hung upside down until somebody vomits. It seems to me like paying to be in a traffic accident. I do not get it; never have. It's not a regional or

cultural thing. I think it's a matter of neurological makeup. The world divides into those who like the managed induction of terror and those who don't. I do not find terror exciting. I find it terrifying.

And Happy Hollow, I discover, offers nothing if not managed terror. And not one but two Tilt-a-Whirls. An experience called Wipe Out straps riders into fixed seats on a big lit disc that spins with a wobble like a coin that won't lie down. The Pirate Ship puts forty folks in a plastic galley and swings it in a pendulous arc until they're facing straight up and then down. The carny operating the Pirate Ship is made to wear an eye patch and parrot and hook, on the tip of which hook burns an impaled Marlboro. The operator of the Funhouse is slumped in a plastic control booth that reeks of sinsemilla.

The 104-foot Giant Gondola Wheel is a staid old Ferris wheel that puts you facing your seatmate in a kind of steel teacup. Its rotation is stately, but the cars at the top look like little lit thimbles, and you can hear thin female screams from up there as their dates grab the teacups' sides and joggle.

The lines are the longest for the really serious Near-Death Experiences: Ring of Fire, the Zipper, Hi Roller—which runs a high-speed train around the inside of an ellipse that is itself spinning at right angles to the train's motion. The crowds are dense and reek of bug repellent. Boys in Chicago Cubs shirts clutch their dates as they walk. There's something intensely *public* about young Midwestern couples. The girls have tall hair and bee-stung lips, and their eye makeup runs in the heat and gives them a vampirish aspect. The overt sexuality of high-school girls is not just a coastal thing. The Amour Express sends another little train at 60-plus mph around a topologically wobbled ring, half of which is enclosed in a fiberglass tunnel with neon hearts and arrows. A fallen packet of Trojans lies near the row of Lucite cubes in which slack-jawed cranes try to pick up jewelry.

It seems journalistically irresponsible to try to describe the Hollow's rides without experiencing at least one firsthand. The Kiddie Kopter is a carousel of miniature Sikorsky prototypes rotating at a sane and dignified clip. The propellers on each helicopter rotate as well. My copter is a bit snug, admittedly, even with my knees drawn up to my chest. I get kicked off the ride, though, when the whole machine's tilt reveals that I weigh quite a bit more than the maximum 100 pounds;

and I have to say that both the little kids on the ride and the carny in charge were unnecessarily snide about the whole thing. Each ride has its own PA speaker with its own discharge of adrenalizing rock; the Kiddie Kopter's speaker is playing George Michael's "I Want Your Sex." The late-day Hollow itself is an enormous sonic mash from which different sounds take turns protruding—mostly whistles, sirens, calliopes, heavy-metal tunes, human screams hard to distinguish from recorded screams.

Both the Thunderboltz and the Octopus hurl free-spinning modular cars around a topologically complex plane; the Thunderboltz's sides reveal further evidence of gastric distress. Then there's the Gravitron, basically a centrifuge—an enclosed, top-shaped structure inside which is a rubberized chamber that spins so fast you're mashed against the wall like a fly on a windshield. A small boy stands on one foot tugging the Gravitron operator's khaki sleeve, crying that he lost a shoe in there. The best description of the carnies' tan is that they're somehow *sinisterly* tanned. I notice that many of them have the low brow and prognathous jaw one associates with fetal alcohol syndrome. The carny operating the Scooter—bumper cars that are fast, savage, underinsulated, a sure trip to the chiropractor—has been slumped in the same position in the same chair every time I've seen him, staring past the frantic cars and tearing up used ride-tickets with the vacant intensity of someone on a locked ward. I lean casually against his platform's railing so that my credentials dangle and ask him in a neighborly way how he keeps from going out of his freaking mind with the boredom of his job. He turns his head very slowly, revealing a severe facial tic: "The fuck you talkin' 'bout?"

The same two carnies as before are at the Zipper's controls, in the exact same clothes, looking up into the full cars and elbowing each other. The midway smells of machine oil and fried food, smoke and Cutter repellent and mall-bought adolescent perfume and ripe trash in the bee-

swarmed cans. The very Nearest-to-Death ride looks to be the Kamikaze, way down at the western end by the Zyklon roller coaster. Its neon sign has a skull with a headband and says "Kamikaze." It is a 70-foot pillar of white-painted iron with two 50-foot hammer-shaped arms hanging down, one on either side. The cars are at the ends of the arms, twelve-seaters enclosed in clear plastic. The two arms swing ferociously around, as in 360 degrees, vertically, and in opposite directions, so that twice on every rotation it looks like your car is going to get smashed up against the other car, and you can see faces in the other car hurtling toward you, gray with fear

and squishy with G's. An eight-ticket, four-dollar waking nightmare.

Then I find the worst one. It wasn't even here yesterday. The Sky Coaster stands regally aloof at the Hollow's far western edge, just past the Uphill-Bowling-for-Dinnerware game, in a kind of grotto formed by trailers and dismantled machinery. It is a 175-foot construction crane, one of the really big mothers, with a tank's traction belts instead of wheels, a canary-yellow cab, and a long proboscis of black steel, tower-

ing, canted upward at maybe 70 degrees. This is half the Sky Coaster. The other half is a 100-foot tower assembly of cross-hatched iron that's been erected about two football fields to the north of the crane. There's a folding table in front of the clothesline cordoning off the crane, and a line of people at the table. The woman taking their money is fiftyish and a compelling advertisement for sunscreen. Behind her on a vivid blue tarp are two meaty blond guys in Sky Coaster T-shirts helping the next customer strap himself into what looks like a combination straitjacket and utility belt, bristling with hooks and clips. From here the noise of the Hollow behind is both deafening and muffled. My media guide, sweated into the shape of my butt pocket, says, "If you thought bungee jumping was a thrill, wait until you soar high above the Fairgrounds on Sky Coaster. The rider is fastened securely into a full-body harness



that hoists them [sic] onto a tower and releases them to swing in a pendulum-like motion while taking in a spectacular view of the Fairgrounds below." The signs at the folding table are more telling: "\$40.00. AMEX Visa MC. No Refunds. No Stopping Half Way Up." The two guys are leading the customer up the stairs of a rolling platform maybe ten feet high. One guy is at each elbow, and I realize they're helping hold the customer up. Who would pay \$40 for an experience requiring you to be held up as you walk toward it? There's also something off about the customer, odd. He's wearing tinted aviator glasses. No one in the rural Midwest wears aviator glasses, tinted or otherwise. Then I see what it really is. He's wearing \$400 Banfi loafers. Without socks. This guy, now lying prone on the platform below the crane, is from the East Coast. He's a ringer. I almost want to shout it. A woman is on the blue tarp, already in harness, wobbly kneed, waiting her turn. A steel cable descends from the tip of the crane's proboscis, on its end a fist-sized clip. Another cable leads from the crane's cab to the tower, up through ring-tipped pitons all up the tower's side, and over a pulley at its top, another big clip on the end. One of the guys waves the tower's cable down and brings it over to the platform. The clips of both cables are attached to the back of the East Coast guy's harness, fastened and locked. The guy is trying to look around behind him to see what-all's attached as the two big blonds leave the platform. Another blond man in the yellow cab throws a lever, and the tower's cable pulls tight in the grass and up the tower's side and down. The crane's cable stays slack as the guy is lifted into the air by the tower's cable. The harness covers his shorts and top, so he looks babe-naked as he rises. The one cable sings with tension as the East Coaster is pulled slowly to the top of the tower. He's still stomach-down, limbs wriggling. At a certain height he starts to look like livestock in a sling. You can tell he's trying to swallow until his face gets too small to see. Finally he's all the way up at the top of the tower, his ass against the pulley, trying not to writhe.

I can barely take notes. They cruelly leave him up there a while, slung, a smile of slack cable between him and the crane's tip. I am constructing a mental list of the personal violations I would undergo before I'd let anyone haul me ass-first to a great height and swing me like high-altitude beef. One of the blond guys has a bullhorn and he's playing to the crowd's suspense, calling up to the slung East Coaster: "Are. You. Ready." The East Coaster's response noises are more bovine than human. His tinted aviator glasses hang askew from just one ear; he doesn't bother to fix them. I can see what's going to happen. They're going to throw a lever and detach the tower-cable's clip, and the man in sockless Banfis will free-fall for what will

seem forever, until the slack of the crane's cable is taken up and the line goes taut behind him and swings him way out over the grounds to the south, his upward arc almost as high as the crane's tip, and then back, and then forth, the man prone at the arc's bottom and seeming to stand on either side, swinging back and forth against a rare-meat sunset. And just as the cab man reaches for his lever and everyone inhales, I lose my nerve and disappear into the crowd.

9:15 P.M.

Walking aimlessly. Seas of fairgoing flesh, plodding, elbowing, looking, still eating. They stand placidly in long lines. No East Coast games of Beat the Crowd. Midwesterners lack a certain public cunning. No one gets impatient. Don't the fairgoers mind the crowds, lines, noise? But the state fair is deliberately about the crowds and jostle, the noise and overload of sight and event. At last an overarching theory blooms inside my head: megalopolitan East Coasters' summer treats and breaks are literally "getaways," flights-from—from crowds, noise, heat, dirt, the stress of too many sensory choices. Hence the ecstatic escapes to glassy lakes, mountains, cabins, hikes in silent woods. Getting away from it all. They see more than enough stimulating people and sights Monday through Friday, thank you, stand in enough lines, elbow enough crowds. Neon skylines. Grotesques on public transport. Spectacles at every urban corner practically grab you by the lapels, commanding attention. The East Coast existential treat is escape from confines and stimuli—quiet rustic vistas that hold still, turn inward, turn away. Not so in the rural Midwest. Here you're pretty much away all the time. The land is big here—board-game flat, horizons in every direction. See how much farther apart the homes are, how broad the yards: compare with New York or Boston or Philly. Here a seat to yourself on all public transport, parks the size of airports, rush hour a three-beat pause at a stop sign. And the farms themselves are huge, silent, vacant: you can't see your neighbor. Thus the urge physically to commune, melt, become part of a crowd. To see something besides land and grass and corn and cable TV and your wife's face. Hence the sacredness out here of spectacle, public event: high-school football, Little League, parades, bingo, market day, fair. All very big deals, very deep down. Something in a Midwesterner sort of *actuates*, deep down, at a public event. The faces in the sea of faces are like the faces of children released from their rooms. Governor Edgar's state-spirit rhetoric at the ribbon-cutting rings true. The real spectacle that draws us here is us. ■