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David Foster Wallace's "Ticket to the Fair"

The July 1994 cover of *Harper's Magazine* featuring David Foster Wallace's essay "Ticket to the Fair" has stayed with me for over 20 years—the photo of black sky and swirling lights of a Ferris wheel and a lovely colorful gyrating ride, something that most likely induced nausea. The photo is what first attracted me to the issue when I bought it at Out of Town News in Harvard Square in Boston. At the time, I noticed Wallace was the author of the article for which the photo was featured—a bonus—and I was drawn to the initial humor of his unusually long subtitle, which is its own study in description and unexpected combinations of comparisons: "Wherein our reporter gorges himself on corn dogs, gapes at terrifying rides, savors the odor of pigs, exchange unpleasanties with tattooed carnies, and admires the loveliness of cows." The irony of pigs and corndogs in the same sentence was not lost on me. In 1994, I had just finished Wallace's short story collection, *Girl with Curious Hair*, and was surprised to see him featured in *Harper's*. In my early 20s, I was a genre-snob—literary fiction or bust.

My romantic memory of the cover photo, the essay, and of Wallace's writing had replaced the actual tone and content of the piece. I did not reread the essay before I packed my pockets with cash and lip gloss and went to my own Coconino County Fair this year, instead running on my illusions (or delusions) of taking photos of adorable animals, piles of fried food, the lights of the rides and food stands against the backdrop of evening sky, and perhaps writing my own type of photo essay about the fair. Dust coated the toes of my shoes as I walked from the parking lot to the fairgrounds. The fairgrounds were actually at Fort Tuthill, a historic Army facility comprised of dirt paths, small white barrack-type buildings converted to agricultural showplaces, and a series of connected livestock pens

situated among what I still think of as a Ponderosa pine forest—even though most of the pine trees have been removed for a traffic round-about for the nonexistent traffic we have on the outskirts of Flagstaff, Arizona.

After paying admission, I wondered if I had come too early or too late—crowds of people undulated around me slow-walking while eating, yelling, crying, burping, laughing. I smelled caramel, mixed with something earthier, along with the smell of stale beer spilled and long-warmed by the sun. I began taking photos of the fairway, spending more time photographing odd things: the particular way that stuffed animals were hung and displayed at carnival games, all of the homemade posters made by the local 4H students, hundreds of chickens on rotisseries causing billows of charbroiled smoke, and all of the food stall graphic interpretations of funnel cakes and corndogs. I was perhaps a little too enthusiastic with my picture-taking, not paying attention to all of the slow-moving people around me. More than one fatherly-type asked what I was taking photos of, but didn't have the same sense of humor as me about my photos when I showed them. I acknowledge that it can be difficult to understand the hilarity and artistic value of a plastic saluting corndog neon-lit in the dusk carnival sky.

This year was also the first time I went to the fair alone and experienced that particular kind of loneliness that is felt in a crowd. I was jostled, bumped, and generally in the way of groups of friends and families. I felt the embarrassment of my rotund figure as I shifted my weight from hip to hip standing in line waiting for a funnel cake, but I couldn't tear myself away from the smell of sugar-fried grease. Even the rides were limiting and caused a further sense of loneliness—after making it to the front of a 45-minute long line for the Ferris wheel, the operator pointed to a small sign that he had blocked by standing in front of it, arms crossed, that read “No Single Rides.” I almost started to cry. Fortunately, two tweens took pity on me and invited me to ride with them.

This feeling I had of isolation and loneliness was more like Wallace's experience than I realized. When I re-read the essay this time, I initially saw it functioning as a kind of “you really can't go home” meditation. While everything at the fair is recognizable to Wallace, being raised in the Midwest, his

previous associations could not fix him in this place. The more I reflect and re-read, the more I appreciate Wallace's talent for articulating otherness. Coupled with the current political climate in our country, I maintain that reading "Ticket to the Fair" is relevant now as part of an ongoing study of our own deepening sense of alienation. Wallace describes two types of alienation in his essay: first from the land we used to be closer to through farming, and then from each other, whom we used to be closer to in communities.

It is easy to not expect anything other than event or feature reporting when we come across this essay cold. Much as "Consider the Lobster" begins under the auspices of attending and reporting on an annual event, Ticket to the Fair sets the reader on a similar path. The title leads us to expect a hilarious account of his fair attendance—after all, who associates "savor" with "odor of pigs" unless it is the odor of bacon? But he quickly sets himself as an outsider to the proceedings, first by not embracing his role as "press" (including his disappointment of a non-materializing fedora with a "press" label and not bringing a notebook with him on the first day of the fair), and then explaining his proposed reason for being there: "I suspect 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" (35). This observation sounds as familiar to us now as our own post-election analyses of 2016, complete with anthropological reporting of "real" voters in the heartland in our case. Even though Wallace is from the Midwest, he explains he had lived on the East Coast for some time, positioning himself here as "other" and asking a friend, his former prom date (referring to her as Native Companion in the essay), to be his guide in exchange for free admission and corn dogs.

Throughout his essay, Wallace questions and confronts his role as other. There is a particular flavor of alienation we experience in familiar places, especially when we return to where we grew up. In my own work, I have moments where I consider that I am from a place but no longer of a place. Wallace

gets the writing gig precisely because he is from the Midwest, but he is no longer of the Midwest. He confesses to us within the first 200 words that he “tapped out” at the county fair level, this being his first state fair. Being from the Midwest did not give him a sense of belonging while he lived there and certainly not when he returned.

He moves quickly from personal feelings of alienation—returning to the Midwest feeling like an outsider—to describing his sense of how Midwesterners, and by extension, we, have become alienated from the land: “Rural Midwesterners live surrounded by unpopulated land, marooned in a space whose emptiness is both physical and spiritual. It is not just the 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” (38). Wallace notes that even though people are living on and working the land, the land has become “big business,” with fewer people (and less so people than businesses) owning or managing more farm land. I can’t help but think of the sad vegetables at our own county fair, displayed on paper plates in the hot barracks-like buildings for several days, all wilted and imperfect: kernels missing from ears of corn, misshapen carrots with dirt still clinging to the skin, and discolored, lumpy, split-skinned tomatoes. In other words, real vegetables grown on someone’s land instead of the hybridized, modified, waxed, and polished vegetables I select at our local grocery store. I can remember what a real tomato from my grandmother’s garden smelled like: hot and green and sweet. We do not know these tomatoes anymore unless we have a garden—or a friend with one.

Wallace writes that it’s not just the land we are alienated from, but also animals. As I walk from stall to stall at the county fair, it’s hard not to notice that some animals are more equal than others. There are animals called their proper names, such as “goats” and “rabbits,” and others that are called their food names: “pork” and “beef.” The livestock auction was happening but I could barely make out the auctioneer’s words over the muffled address system—something like the teacher’s voice in a Charlie Brown cartoon, but masculine. I couldn’t get in because I wasn’t a buyer, so I circled back to the “beef ” area. Two young men in pressed white shirts, crisp blue jeans, and white cowboy hats drank Coca-Cola

from plastic bottles and tried not to laugh at my awe of being so close to one of the cows. They smiled but didn't shoo me away when I asked to take pictures. Eventually, they turned their backs and headed toward the auction, leaving me to take photos of docile cows. I wanted unattainable perfection for my photos—a cow without flies on his nose or in the corners of his eyes, or one who had a pristine coat of white hair. I tried to hold my breath against pungent smells of grassy hay mixed with hot excrement. Even though I grew up in upstate New York, animal odors from local farms were something we drove past. Quickly. Walking among the stalls felt too personal to me. I followed the signs and the dirt path to the pigs. I stopped, laughed, and took a photo of a poster on the “pork” barn—a seemingly smiling pig with a meme-like caption: “I turn vegetables into bacon...what's your superpower?” These fair pigs didn't smile, however. Instead, they were partially covered in mud trying to catch some sleep before the next round of children with sticky hands grabbed at them. Later, I can only finish half of my funnel cake with maple syrup and bacon, remembering the pigs—their muddy coats and moist noses. To this, Wallace writes: “[...] our meat simply materializes at the corn-dog stand, allowing us to separate our health appetites from fur and screams and rolling eyes. We tourists get to indulge our tender animal-rights feelings with our tummies full of bacon” (40). Tummy (partially) full of bacon. Check. My mind turned toward the variety of meat and poultry offered at the food stands. There were simply too many bacon funnel cakes and corndogs and hotdogs and sausages and hamburgers and Philly cheesesteaks and turkey legs and rotisserie chickens and chicken drumsticks to wonder if any of this meat was locally raised in northern Arizona. This alienation from animals is so thorough that it was only several hours later I realized with some horror that I spent over an hour taking photos of cows and pigs and then walked just a few steps down the fairway to order a bacon-laden funnel cake.

Wallace also weaves his (and our) sense of personal alienation throughout the essay. He tries several times at various fair events and attractions to relate to others with almost no success. The only connection I had at the fair was when I attempted to thank the mother of one of the tweens for allowing

me to ride with them on the Ferris wheel. She put her arm around her daughter and steered her away from me, smiling vacantly, somewhat worriedly. Wallace has a poignant moment of sharing an observation with Native Companion, where he realizes the fair is a “special vacation from alienation” (38). While he looks for sympathy or agreement from her, he finds her distracted looking for a cigarette lighter in her purse. Later in the essay, he becomes angry when two ride operators objectify her and even more upset perhaps that he cannot get her to see the overt sexual-harassment displayed. And still another time, he notices that she “puts on a periodic hick accent whenever I use a term like ‘peripatetic’” (42). One of the most startling moments in the essay is when Wallace tries to manage a sympathetic exchange with a ride operator— assuming that his job is dull and asking him how he copes—who winds up cursing at him. The only laugh he seems to share is with the woman demonstrating a Thighmaster who reveals her wooden leg to him, further emphasizing the hollowness of the connections he is able to make.

His inability to relate to the people he meets at the fair can sometimes read as Wallace holding himself above the subjects he describes. While relating his exchanges, everyone else is too fat, or too “swarthy,” or described as low-life “carnies,” or emblematic of someone who abused him or rejected him in the past, whether baton twirlers or teen boxers. This Wallace is the narrator we have been warned not to be as writers. There are moments of self-pity and above-ness that I can’t relate to, and in fact am reminded of Phillip Lopate’s advice of making ourselves characters and viewing ourselves from some distance when writing personal essays. But this isn’t a personal essay, is it? I’ve gone back and forth about this and think it is a kind of memoir-in-scene. This is the type of memoir that can only be written when we set out to write another essay altogether, but we experience an event that unexpectedly turns our views of others and ourselves into a contemplation. We still write through our original idea, in this case, the fair for Wallace, but every thought is now filtered through this new, personal, lens. As such, the fair is the backdrop that allows Wallace to recognize and write his alienation. Wallace is alternately fascinated, aroused, disgusted, and nauseated by others. Yet, this Wallace is writing for me and to me. Every time I

think, “what an ass!”, he redeems himself in the next paragraph by bringing me into his secret world of embarrassment and bodily fluids and fear. Every time I dislike his judgmental narrator, he offers personal asides about his sweat, his evacuations after too many corn dogs, and even his inability to watch someone he loathes on principal on the terrifying Sky Coaster attraction because he is afraid of heights. This last encounter with a fellow fair goer is particularly revealing. Wallace identifies the rider as a “ringer” from the East Coast, which makes him want to reveal this fact to his fellow Midwesterners. Even in recognizing his role as outsider, that moment of him still wanting to belong is painful because I recognize this in myself. I admire him for sharing his misplaced longing with us. It is this same kind of longing I felt when I wanted someone to claim me as “friend” for the Ferris wheel so that I wouldn’t be turned away, ashamed and alone, a middle-aged woman at the fair with a ride token, a camera, a maple syrup smear on her cheek, and no friends in sight. Eventually, Wallace has to turn away from the ride because he is frightened of that type of attraction. Where most narrators would not choose to reveal this fear, and, alternately, this almost desperate desire for belonging, it is another confession in a series of confessions that cements not only his alienation, but also his continued desire to connect, if not with the people at the fair, with his readers.

Standing alone in long ride lines and eventually finding myself listening to a Journey cover band only heightened my sense of alienation at our county fair. I decided to leave and walked around the unlit dirt parking lot while looking at the sky, feeling alone and small in this universe, even in this miniscule spot of the universe, and then grateful for the enclosure of my sun-warmed car retaining its heat despite the evening chill. I went to the fair with the memory of an essay I didn’t really understand or remember, tinged with romantic notions—that I would fall in love with a sweet baby goat and capture a nighttime midway photo of lights and color in an artistic blur. The reality of the fair that Wallace writes of is what I saw, and felt, this time. “Ticket to the Fair” reminds us exactly how alienated we continue to be from the land and, ever increasingly, from each other. It also reminds us of our ongoing struggle to find someone else to talk with about these feelings.

Works Cited

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