**ILLINOIS JOURNEY by Saul Bellow**

1    The features of Illinois are not striking; they do not leap to the eye but lie flat and at first appear monotonous. The roads are wide, hard, perfect, sometimes of a shallow depth in the far distance but so nearly *level* as to make you feel that the earth really is flat. From east and west, travelers dart across these prairies into the huge horizons and through cornfields that go on forever; giant skies, giant clouds, an eternal nearly *featureless* sameness. You find it hard to travel slowly. The endless miles pressed flat by the ancient glacier seduce you into speeding. As the car eats into the distances you begin gradually to feel that you are riding upon the floor of the continent, the very bottom of it, low and flat, and an impatient spirit of movement, of overtaking and urgency passes into your heart.

2    Miles and miles of *prairie*, slowly rising and falling, sometimes give you a sense that something is in the process of becoming, or that the liberation of a great force is *imminent*, some power, like Michelangelo's slave only half released from the block of stone. *Conceivably* the mound-building Indians believed their resurrection would *coincide with* some such liberation, and built their graves in imitation of the low moraines *deposited* by the departing glaciers. But they have not yet been released and remain drowned in their waves of earth. They have left their bones, their flints and pots, their place names and tribal names and little besides except a stain, seldom vivid, on the consciousness of their white successors.

3    The soil of the Illinois prairies is fat, rich and thick. After spring *plowing* it looks oil-blackened or colored by the soft coal which occurs in great veins throughout the state. In the fields you frequently see a small tipple, or a crazy-looking device that pumps oil and nods like the neck of a horse at a quick walk.... Along the roads, with *intervals* between them as neat and even as buttons on the cuff, sit steel storage bins, in form like the tents of Mongolia. They are filled with grain. And the elevators and tanks, trucks and machines that *crawl* over the fields and *blunder* over the highways -- whatever you see is productive. It creates wealth, it stores wealth, it is wealth.

4    As you pass the fields, you see signs the farmers have *posted* telling in short code what sort of seed they have planted. The farmhouses are seldom at the roadside, but far within the fields. The solitude and silence are deep and wide. Then, when you have gone ten or twenty miles through cornfields without having seen a living thing, no cow, no dog, scarcely even a bird under the hot sky, suddenly you come upon a noisy contraption at the roadside, a system of contraptions, rather, for husking the corn and *stripping* the grain. It burns and bangs away, and the *conveyor belts rattle*...

5    When you leave, this noise and activity are cut off at one stroke: you are once more in the deaf, hot solitude of trembling air, alone in the cornfields.

6    North, south, east and west, there is no end to them. They line roads and streams and hem in the woods and surround towns, and they crowd into back yards and edge up to gas stations. An exotic stranger might assume he had come upon a race of corn worshipers who had created a corn ocean; or that he was among a people who had fallen in love with infinite repetition of the same details, like the builders of skyscrapers in New York and Chicago who have raised up bricks and windows by the thousands, and all alike. From corn you can derive notions of equality, or uniformity, massed democracy. You can, if you are given to that form of mental play, recall Joseph's brethren in the lean years, and think how famine has been conquered here and super-abundance itself become such a danger that the Government has to take measures against it.

7    The power, the monotony, the oceanic extent of the cornfields do indeed shrink up and dwarf the past. How are you to think of the small bands of Illini, Ottawas, Cahokians, Shawnee, Miamis who camped in the turkey grass, and the French Jesuits who descended the Mississippi and found them. When you force your mind to *summon* them, the Indians appear rather doll-like in the radiance of the present moment. They are covered in the corn, swamped in the oil, hidden in the coal of Franklin County, run over by the trains, turned phantom by the stockyards. There are monuments to them...throughout the state, but they are only historical *ornaments* to the pride of the present...