

Demolition Derby

Gray skies and the stars and stripes
hang above this rodeo arena
two feet deep with Missouri Ozark mud.
The bombs of our latest war started falling today,
but here, station wagons and giant sedans
bellow and smoke and sling a shrapnel of mud.
We watch from lawn chairs on a rise
between the arena and a railroad line
where freights rumble past and shake the sumac
reddening along the tracks.
This is what we fight for, the announcer says,
as the last two cars face off, a dogfight,
each driver aiming to be the last one running.

The Chrysler has avoided crippling hits
in every heat and lunges through the muck
with a race engine snarl. The Number Seven car
is a yellow wreck so mangled
that the make is anybody's guess,
and soon the Chrysler plows that yellow hood
up into the driver's line of sight.
But Seven charges forward, back and forward,
throwing his heap against an opponent
who has him outmuscled and blind.

He lurches against the Chrysler, hissing
sugary coolant, crankshaft bearings knocking,
fan sparking against the radiator,
but out to show what he can do
with tools and junk, the skin of his knuckles,
a month of Sundays and a little bit of nerve.
This is what we fight for.
The spectators are up, shouting,
or shaking their heads as they would
at having to put an old bull down—
and the Chrysler deals a final running blow
that leaves the Seven car stalled and smoking.