crash burn love

Photography and text by Bill Lowenburg

Some crash for money. Some crash for love. Some crash to feel what it's like to survive. Demolition derby is an Industrial Age ritual of redemption and resurrection—born, possibly, out of a drive to take things broken beyond all rational hope of repair,

and let them live again.

I've been photographing demo derbies for five years now, and on those nights, time stops for me. <<In the pit, where I hang out, camaraderie and creativity overshadow desire and destruction.>> Violence is in the air but not in the heart: Mayhem is merely the melody that allows us all to do our dance.

No one who has been to a demolition derby needs <<much of>> a description of what happens in the arena: << drivers ram old cars into one another until only one car can still move.>> The photographs I make, however, have little to do with the public side of these events. What happens at the end of the evening in front of the spectators is <<anticlimactic to me; once the main event is announced, and the pit clears and quiets, I rarely stay unless one of my buddies is involved. I learned a long time ago that the real story is backstage:>> I'm drawn into the darkness behind the scenes and to the junkyards and garages where demo cars are born, raised, repaired, and retired. The cars themselves, in all their goofy splendor, are a kind of mechanized American folk art. The slogans dashed on their sides, handpainted by the <<crews,>> reflect concerns both private and public: <<"Darlene 'N Skeeter>>, True Love. Each Crash a Kiss." "Get better soon Pop." "9/11 Heroes All. Gone but not forgotten."

<<paragraph removed – "My camera gives me…>>

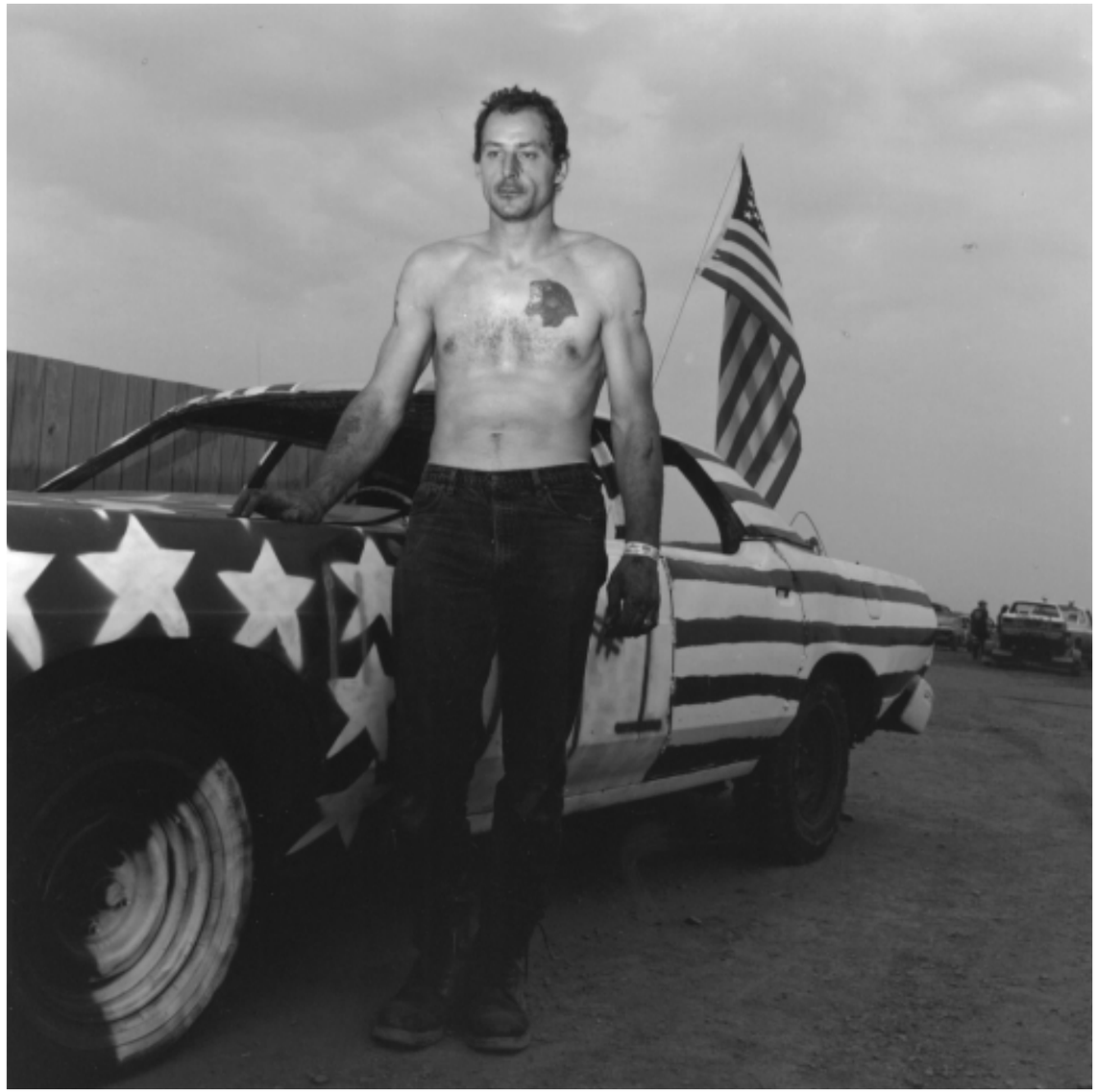
The pit in full swing, just before the feature event, is a symphony of sights, sounds, and smells foreign to most civilians. To the uninitiated, it might be frightening; it certainly was to me the first time I ventured there. Eventually I learned to open up to it, approaching slowly on the balls of my feet as a boxer might, cautious but also loose, with my radar on and ready to duck. Several times it has, in fact, been necessary to duck, and to sidestep quickly to elude flying sparks and debris, hot fluids and, once, a rolling wreck named "Bound for Glory," whose brakes had failed. I always wear safety goggles in the pit. No one else does.

Standing in the middle of the pit as the feature event approaches, I could choose to go off in any number of directions to photograph. Jets of steam hiss from overheated engines and punctured radiators, rising like geysers into the dark sky. Orders are barked: "Shine that light here, dammit.

"They went and paved this country from coast to coast, and pret' near filled it with cars. Ain't nuthin' left to do but run into one another and call it *fun*."

Here!" Hardened steel pry-bars the length of pool cues are applied to fenders and hoods, bending back wrecked metal so wheels can turn and engines can be diagnosed. Wrenches are slapped into palms like surgical instruments, and the dialogue is a call-and-response mixture of questions, laughter, and swearing. A grimy hand thrusts out from under a jacked-up chassis, followed by a gruff voice yelling, "I tole ya three times it's a 9/16ths and not a 5/8ths, dammit! Gimme the right wrench!" Men whose appearance suggests they never run <<for exercise>> go sprinting off into the darkness in heavy work boots to retrieve urgently needed tools, lubricants, fuel, and water. Other men, in groups of three and four, hold hands and jump up and down in tribal unison on bent hoods, trunks, and roofs like so many strange metal trampolines, in an attempt to improve sight lines for their driver. To <<jerry-rig>> is to live: At Kutztown I once saw a man mend his drive shaft with duct tape and go on to win the feature event that night. <<sentence cut: "In short…">> Punctuating it all is the irregular rhythm of five or six sledgehammers ringing away on fenders in different sectors of the pit. Sometimes, I have learned, the best way to fix a thing is simply to pound the hell out of it.

Late one August night on my way out of the annual crash fest at the West End Fair Grounds <<in Gilbert, Pennsylvania,>> about a mile from where I grew up, I stumbled, exhausted, behind the steaming hulk of a car being towed out of the arena after the main event. In the metal maelstrom under the spotlights half an hour earlier, all of the rubber had been stripped off the car's rear wheels, which were now gouging twin furrows in the sod parking lot. Those furrows reminded me of ruts I'd seen on the plains of Nebraska, dug more than a hundred years ago by pioneer wagons headed west. I thought of what one of the competitors said earlier that afternoon as he milled around while the sun set, joking, spitting tobacco juice, and making last minute adjustments on his car: "They went and paved this country from coast to coast, and pret'near filled it with cars. . . Ain't nuthin left to do but run into one another and call it fun."



Such comments are typical of demo derby competitors, who are, by and large, an optimistic-though-ironic lot. Better, perhaps, than the rest of us, they know the old black tow truck is idling in the shadows behind the grandstand, waiting to take us all to the big salvage yard in the sky. They figure we might as well have some fun in the meantime, while there's gas left in the tank, oil in the crankcase, and the battery can still throw a spark.

Bill Lowenburg studied photography with Larry Fink. He is the librarian at Stroudsburg High School, where he runs a documentary photography workshop for students. He also teaches graduate classes in educational technology for Wilkes University. Bill can be reached at lowenbur@epix.net.