1998

Speaking American

Matthew John Wilemski
Iowa State University

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This thesis is a collection of four short stories and four poems. The stories and poems incorporate the usual emotions, experiences and situations that humans encounter on a daily basis.
Speaking American

by

Matthew John Wilemski

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

Major: English (Creative Writing)
Major Professor: Debra Marquart

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
1998
Graduate College
Iowa State University

This is to certify that the Master’s thesis of
Matthew John Wilemski
has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

Signatures have been redacted for privacy
This Thesis is dedicated to my parents,
who taught me more in a day
than any school could teach
in a lifetime.
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THE BLUE BOMB

My cousin Jimmy offered my father a hundred bucks for the "Blue Bomb," our 1968 Pontiac Catalina station wagon.

"What are you gonna' do with it?" Dad asked. He twisted the cap off another bottle of beer. The three of us were sitting at our kitchen table, killing time before the Red Sox game came on at 7:30. Jimmy wanted to catch my father in the warm afterglow of dinner and before the Sox' poor play pissed him off.

"Demolition derby," Jimmy replied. He teetered backwards on the hind legs of the chair, his clasped hands forming angel wings behind his head. His bushy red hair and freckles made him look younger than twenty-two, plus he was born with an obnoxious smirk that was permanently etched on his face.

"Demolition derby? Fuck you! I love that car, it's family. Hell, it's better than family. It never let me down," Dad said. The Blue Bomb was the car of my family's youth, the war horse that drove the four of us to school, Little League, step-dance class, and in the glorious summers to Cape Cod. We christened it the Blue Bomb because of the terrible rumbling noise it made as it drove down our street; we expected it to blow up at any time.

"Look, Uncle Steve, I need the Blue Bomb. That thing's a fucking monster. It'll whip every other car out there. Grand prize is two thousand. I can get that motherfucker outta your garage and running for under three hundred. What do you say?"

Although my father referred to Jimmy as "that fuckhead" when he wasn't around, I always knew he secretly admired Jimmy's liveliness and spontaneity, something he knew that he himself -as well as his son- had always lacked.
"Listen, James, that's a fine automobile. Lots of years left. Just needs a carburetor. And an ignition switch. Maybe a new muffler."

"Don't forget the passenger side door doesn't open," I said. I rose and grabbed three more beers from the top shelf inside the fridge. I figured I would help Jimmy butter up my old man a little bit. Besides, I had a vested interest in Jimmy's plan. The two of us were planning a trip to Ireland, and Jimmy needed quick cash if we were going to travel in the approaching summer. Unfortunately, Jimmy believed his fortune would come in fantastic bundles instead of steady, forty-hours-a-week labor, and viewed the comatose station wagon in our garage as a winning lottery ticket waiting to be redeemed.

"But what if I ever need to move something big, like a workbench? Or a sofa? God forbid, what if I have to help my son here move out of this house into his own place? I don't see myself strappin' a dresser to the roof of your mother's Toyota," Dad continued.

Even though he mentioned it just about every day, I don't think he really minded that I had moved back home after college and had gotten a job at a local bookstore. My presence in the house retained some measure of continuity. It had been a couple of unsettling years for him when cutbacks and a forced retirement signaled his end at the phone company after thirty-five years. At first he had been enthusiastic about the sudden future and made plans to travel and take up golf, but a bum shoulder led to a new BarcaLounger, a wide-screen t.v., and a revived appreciation for whiskey. His full head of curls had turned all white. My sister, Anne, had married and moved to the west coast. My mother had a tumor scare, but everything came out fine. In the meantime she had been fixing up the entire house, painting the outside, remodeling and redecorating every single room on the inside. He knew she had her eye on selling it and moving into some place smaller, but he
never asked. As long as I was still around, and the Blue Bomb for that matter, he was convinced he wasn't going anywhere.

"Come on, Dad, the Bomb hasn't run in two years. You and Mom get along fine with the Toyota. When do you think you're going to be moving anything big anyway? You're being fucking ridiculous."

"Don't use that tone with me, Ryan. The very last thing I'll have in my own home is disrespect." He pointed his finger at me as if I was four and had just cursed for the first time.

"Alright, alright. Jesus, take it easy."

"Okay," Jimmy said. He rocked forward and tapped the front legs of the chair back onto the linoleum. "One hundred and fifty dollars. That's my final offer."

"You're loony, Jimmy. You know that?"

"Come on, Dad. A hundred and fifty bucks is a hundred and fifty bucks. The junkman will charge you fifty bucks just to come and cart it away."

"You're sure you can win, James?" My father looked Jimmy in the eye and surrendered.

Jimmy glanced at me and smiled broadly.

"No doubt about it, Uncle Steve. Money in the bank."

"Well then, what the hell. A hundred and fifty bucks it is." Dad offered Jimmy his hand and they shook.

"That's grand! Ireland here we come!" Jimmy whooped and began drumming the table with his hands. "I can taste the pints of Guinness already!"

"To the Blue Bomb!" I shouted and raised my beer bottle for a toast. "May she strike fear in the hearts of all who oppose her!"

"Hear, hear!" the other two cheered. We clinked our bottles, tipped back and guzzled.
The back door opened and my mother stepped in, carrying a small, potted fern in her arm like a baby. She had rushed out after dinner for a meeting at church. Since my father's retirement my mother had thrived, joining parish committees and book clubs and volunteering at the Red Cross. I think she knew that if my dad was coming back into the house full time she would have to start leaving, otherwise they would drive each other batty.

"Well this can't possibly be any good," she said, surveying the beer bottles on the table and the smiles on our faces. "What now?"

"We're rich, sweetheart!" my father said. "Dinner and dancing this Saturday night."

"What are you talking about?" she asked. Jimmy made room on the table and she placed the fern down. She unbuttoned her coat and hung it on one of the pegs next to the door. "I see no one could manage to dance those dishes into the dishwasher for me," she said, nodding at the pile of plates and pots in the sink and on the surrounding counter. She smoothed his skirt and reached for an apron hanging next to the oven. Because she was out in public more she began to dress up in nice skirts and matching suit coats, and even had her auburn hair cut fashionably short after years of bangs and buns.

"We were conducting men business," Dad said. He stood and went over to the sink to help with the clean-up.

"Yeah, I noticed the bottles," Mom replied, running a plate underneath the tap. "What are you boys up to?"

"Your handsome nephew James over there is going to purchase the Blue Bomb for one hundred and fifty dollars, spruce it up for a demolition derby, win two thousand dollars, and head off to Ireland with your equally handsome son,"
Dad said. He handed my mother a serving dish, which she rinsed and loaded into the dishwasher.

"Oh, I see. Simple as that. Well, they say Ireland is a little slice of Heaven, so when you get your self killed, James, you'll get to see Ireland by way of Heaven. What does your mother think?"

"Well, actually, I haven't exactly mentioned it yet," Jimmy said. He finished the final swig from his beer and rose from the table. "I was going to make sure I had the Bomb first, before I told her all the details."

"Wonderful. I'm sure she'll be thrilled. I guess I should be thrilled that someone is finally getting that rust bucket out of my garage."

"Yeah, no problem. Listen, I gotta get going. I'll get that check to you Uncle Steve, ASAP." Jimmy put on his jacket and headed out the door.

"I'll only take cash from the likes of you, James," Dad said, and handed Mom the last glass. "Well, I guess it's time to watch Roger Clemens get his ass kicked one more time." He shuffled off to the den to watch the game.

"Oh, Ryan, I've got terrific news for you," Mom said as she untied her apron. "Aunt Julia called me this afternoon and said she mailed that family stuff I was telling you about. You know, the family tree and the old letters from Ireland that Tommy put together for that school project years ago. Won't that be nice? Maybe you'll be able to track down some of your family."

I could tell my mother wanted to travel to Ireland vicariously through me. She had always been proud to be Irish, making sure I had a green sweater and green carnations to give to the nuns in my grammar school on St. Patrick's Day. But ever since she read an Edna O'Brien book in her book club she had become almost obsessive. She started listening to traditional Celtic music and Phil Coulter tapes. She even dragged my dad to see "Riverdance" when it came to Boston. And one day
when I came home from work she was taking soda bread out of the oven. I knew I was really in trouble after that.

"I really don't think I'll be able to find anyone, Ma," I said, inching my way towards the door and the freedom of the stairwell. "It's been a long time."

"Well, you never know. I've told you we're related to the Kennedys, haven't I? And an Irish king, too. James, I think his name was. Like your idiot cousin."

"Mom, I think every American of Irish decent is related to the Kennedys and an Irish king named James."

She laughed and wiped off the table.

"Except for your father's family," she said. "They're direct descendants of the devil himself."

"I heard that," my father shouted from the den, and my mother laughed even harder.

More than anything else, Jimmy wanted to see the "troubles" when we went over to Ireland. Not O'Connell Street in Dublin, or the Cliffs of Moher, or even the Dingle Peninsula, but tangible proof of a nation torn in two.

"I must witness firsthand the oppression of my brothers in the North of Ireland," he said one Saturday morning at my house while we slurped cold cereal in the kitchen.

"Jimmy, you asshole, your brother lives in New Jersey," I replied. "Besides, the only troubles you can really see over there are the aftermath of bomb explosions, and most of those happen in London."

"Look, I know this guy who smuggled out rolls of film showing patriotic graffiti covering buildings throughout Belfast and Derry. We've got to get up there
and stick our noses around, you know? Show our support for the cause and let them know we're listening."

"You want to show support for juvenile delinquency?"

"Listen, smartguy, this is serious shit. I'm talking about nine hundred years of fucking occupation. It's time to shut the Brits down, you know what I mean? Certain members of the Club are expecting me to make a full report upon our return."

Jimmy couldn't even find Ireland on a globe until Uncle Pat joined our town's Gaelic American Club when Jimmy and I were in high school. Before long Jimmy was saying "grand" a lot and sticking a "26+6=1" bumper sticker onto his hand-me-down Ford. He relished telling me how good the Guinness on tap is down at the Club, but never refused whenever I offered him a cheap domestic beer from our refrigerator.

The "members" of the Club that he referred to as some sort of secret tribunal were nothing but a pack of rosy-nosed old farts who sat around late Saturday nights intently discussing revolution and the need for a unified Ireland, and the jackass caretaker at Brooklawn who fucked up the 7th green. Jimmy had shown me a photograph displayed prominently in the billiards room of the Club with four of the larger assholes posing with Gerry Addams, snapped at some swanky dinner in Manhattan. But by the look on Gerry's face I don't think the local brigade donated much to the rebellion. In fact, Gerry probably didn't even know who the hell he was posing with.

"Well, I'm just tellin' you that when we're over there I'm heading north," Jimmy continued.
"Fine, but I'm saying you can cross into the North and not even know it. There's no real difference between the two. Besides, if you don't win that derby you ain't goin' nowhere."

"Don't you worry your pretty little head. Ol' Jimmy's got everything under control."

"I bet," I said. To be honest I was starting to worry. The derby was in a week and we were planning on leaving a week after that. I had gotten the time off from work and we had even bought the plane tickets. But if Jimmy didn't win the money I don't think even he could swing it. I would still go by myself, but I also knew it wouldn't be half as much fun without Jimmy. Even though I hated to admit it, we were like brothers, growing up only a block away from each other because his mother and my mother were sisters and wanted to be close to each other. Most people even said we looked more like brothers, which I really hated to admit.

"Don't you boys have anything better to do?" my mother asked as she passed through the kitchen carrying a laundry basket, which she placed at the door that led to the basement. "I'm sure I could find several things around this house for you to work on."

"Actually, I was just on my way out," Jimmy said. He tipped the cereal bowl up to drink the last of the milk. "I'd love to give you a hand, Aunt Kate, but I've got to put some finishing touches on the Bomb."

"When you're all done make sure you take some pictures for me so I can see how she turns out," she said, but Jimmy had already gone out the door.

"You mean you're not gonna go to the derby?" I asked.

"Are you crazy? Do you know what kind of people go to those type of things?" She opened the refrigerator and removed a small glass bottle of tea. "I wouldn't be caught dead there."
"But aren't you curious to see the fate of the Bomb?"

"To be perfectly honest," she began, took a sip of the tea, and lowered her voice to a whisper, "I always despised that car. I hope it gets smashed into a million pieces. Provided your cousin doesn't get too mangled, of course."

My father walked in carrying a second laundry basket, the dark load.

"Take both those down, will you dear?" she asked. She opened the refrigerator again and returned the bottle of tea to the side door.

"Yes master," he replied. He opened the door to the cellar, reached down, picked up both baskets simultaneously and proceeded down the stairs. Before retirement I don't even think he knew where the laundry room was.

"Hey, I saw a coupon for film in the paper this morning. Do you want me to clip it out for you? Do you have enough film?" Mom asked. She had begun to interrogate me every single day about every aspect of my trip. "I want to see lots and lots of pictures, do you hear me? Especially of family when you find them."

"I've got plenty of film. I'm not leaving for two weeks anyway."

"Good. That will give me plenty of time to write down a list of things for you to remember to pack."

"Terrific," I said.

Dad reappeared at the top of the basement stairs.

"Kathleen, the boy is twenty-two years old. I think he knows how to pack a damn suitcase," he said.

"Actually, it's a backpack, remember? You and Mom gave it to me for Christmas," I said.

"Do you have any idea how many Christmas presents your mother gives out? There are hundreds of strangers walking around this town wearing Argyle socks
and Polo shirts and Dockers thanks to the Spirit of Christmas Presents standing over there, for Christ's sake."

"Stephen, don't be an ass. Oh my God! I forgot to show you the package Aunt Julia sent! Let me go get it." She hurried out of the kitchen.

"How's your cousin coming along with my car?" Dad asked. He sat down at the table and opened the first section of the newspaper.

"Damned if I know," I replied.

"I just hope he knows what he's doing. I'm starting to have second thoughts about this whole escapade," he said, and turned a page.

Mom returned with a bulging manila envelope and joined us at the table. She removed a handful of papers from the package and spread out an old map, a colorful family tree and several yellowing envelopes with Irish stamps.

"This is what Tommy did for school," she said, unfolding the large, construction-paper tree. "My, he did do a nice job."

Tommy had literally drawn an elaborate family tree. The names of my mother's ancestors lay tucked among leafy green branches surrounded by traditional family crests in the shapes of fruit. Most of the names dated back to the generation that fled to America in the 1840's and 1850's, listing when and where they were born, married, and died. There were a couple of names at the very base of the tree from the generation before the emigrants, but the blank spaces within the trunk indicated Tommy hadn't found any information about them.

"It makes me wonder about all the people off the page, you know, the roots," my mother said, noticing what I had. "Maybe you can find out when you're over there, and fill in some of our missing family history."

"I don't know, Ma," I said. "It looks like just about everybody came over here during this twenty year span. Probably because of the famine." I pointed to the
middle of the Nineteenth Century in the bottom center of the trunk. "The chances of me finding someone look pretty slim."

"Well, gee, isn't that what I've been trying to tell you for the last month?" Dad said. "Even if you find a seventh or eighth removed cousin you think they're going to give a damn who you are?"

"Listen, Stephen, just because you have no interest in your family doesn't mean Ryan can't have some fun looking for his. Christ, you don't even know where your own brother and sister are in this country."

"I think my brother might be in California. And let me tell you, that would be a suitable place for that jackass."

"He could be dead for all you know."

"That would be okay by me," Dad said. My father's family was also from Ireland, but from the North. They had come over in the 1920's, much later than my mother's family. It would probably be much easier to find those descendants, but my father's family had never kept in touch with the people back in Ireland, and more importantly, my father didn't give a damn about his roots. He didn't have any family stories or momentos like my mother had and cherished. He was an American through and through, he liked to say, and Americans didn't have time for ghosts.

"Don't listen to your father, Ryan, look right here. She pointed to a branch on the right-hand side. "Your great-great-uncle Sean Cooney stayed over there. There in that pile is a letter to your great-great grandmother. And there are a couple more from Sean's children to your great-grandmother, and the letter-writing continued down the line until the 1940's."

"Why did it stop?" I asked.
"I don't know. It's a pity, though. If we had kept in touch you could go over there and have a place to stay without any trouble, and maybe I could have gone to visit my cousins, and certainly they would have been welcome to stay with us. It's a sad thing when families drift apart over the years, isn't it? We don't have that same sense today of sticking together as a clan. You see your brother or sister, or even your parents, once or twice a year at one of the holidays, or a wedding, or a wake, and then that's it, you go back home to your own little world."

She paused and began reading one of the letters to herself. I took one out of its envelope. It was dated 1913, and I had to check the names on the tree to see who was mentioned. It was about some of my grandmother's older cousins, one of whom had just entered Trinity College in Dublin. Patrick was very excited, the letter stated, and was headed for a bright future. His sister Margaret was recovering from the flu, but coming along nicely. It listed other odds and ends about a new chiffon and oriental rug in the parlor, but didn't really reveal any titillating family secrets like saved letters are supposed to.

Even though my father held the newspaper in front of him I could tell he was glancing at the material on the table. His head was tilted and he was trying to read one of the envelopes that was turned sideways. He had an unusually distant expression on his face, as if the letters reminded him of someplace or someone. He snapped out of it and caught me watching him.

"Ahh, it's all a bunch of malarkey," he said, and stood up from the table. "Listen, Ryan, when you get over there have the time of your life and don't worry about any of this nonsense. Live for today. See what's going on over there now, instead of what went on there then, you hear me? Leave those relics in the trash bin where they belong." He walked out of the kitchen and I heard his footsteps on the stairs.
"Your father's family wasn't exactly close," my mother said, putting a letter back into its envelope. "You listen to your mother, Ryan, and try and find these people. Everyone should know where they come from, right?"

"I guess so," I said, and suddenly felt very small again. I didn't know why this was so important to her. Jimmy and I were just planning on going over there and having some fun. Didn't we have enough family in this country?

My father snapped up his old phone company windbreaker in the early May night. It was still a little chilly, even though the sun was staying out longer. It was the night of Jimmy's demolition derby, and we were in the stands at the old minor league baseball stadium. The team had moved to a new ballpark in another city a couple of years earlier, so they used this old site for fairs, rodeos and events like this, a double-header of motorcycle racing and demolition derby. I could still feel the humming of the motocross cycles in my brain, even though they had finished the race ten minutes earlier and the crew was setting up for "Lady Dynamite," who was some sort of daredevil.

"Dad, what did you think of those motorbikes?" I asked.

"Noisy little buggers, but yeah, I enjoyed them. That was one nasty spill that little guy took."

"Yeah," I said. "Hey, I think they got some beer back in the concession stand. Do you want one?"

"No, I'm fine, Ryan. Just waitin' for Jimmy to kick some ass and collect his money so we can get the hell outta here," he said but I knew he was glad to be out of the house. One of the guards at the ticket gate had even recognized him and struck up a conversation. He had been a part-timer at the phone company a few years back, and played in the bowling league. I knew these days my father enjoyed
being remembered, and he spoke to the guard and patted him on the shoulder as if they had been the closest of friends.

It was a pretty sparse crowd scattered throughout the stadium, and we figured that all of the people in the stands were probably family and friends of the motorcycle racers and derby combatants. A bulldozer flattened the motocross hills and smoothed the dirt for the cars. All the old grass from the baseball diamond had been ripped up so the whole field was dirt. A couple of workman carried out Lady Dynamite's white wooden coffin and placed it in a dirt mound in the center of the field that had been left by the bulldozer. The announcer introduced her as the "woman with nerves of steel and looks to kill." The stadium lights dimmed and a single spotlight followed Lady Dynamite as she sauntered from the tunnel to her destiny.

"Hubba-hubba," Dad said, sitting up straight. She wore a one-piece red, white and blue outfit that exposed generous amounts of arms and legs. Most of the teenage boys and older men cheered madly, while their girlfriends or wives or sisters remained politely seated.

When Lady Dynamite reached the coffin she removed her white cape and spun around in a circle to wave regally to the entire audience. She strapped on her American flag helmet and climbed in. Two workers shut the lid and jogged off. The spotlight remained as the announcer and everyone else counted down from ten. Dad even got into it, shouting out like a cheerleader. I followed his example and covered my ears. When we reached "two" there was a flash and a loud "BOOM." The coffin launched about thirty feet in the air and landed with a thunk in a swirl of smoke and dust.

Each one of us remained nervously quiet until Lady Dynamite rolled out of the splintered debris. We howled our appreciation as she stood and raised her arms
in triumph. She wobbled a little and held her head until two workman came and draped her arms around their shoulders. She managed a few more feeble waves and we applauded even more enthusiastically. One little boy even tossed her a bouquet of roses as she entered the tunnel.

"I'll be damned," Dad said. "I've never seen anything like that, not even down in Coney Island. Do you think she's okay?"

"Come on, she's a professional."

"I'd hate to see a pretty little thing like that get blown to kingdom come," he said, genuinely concerned. Jimmy had told me that he heard that Lady Dynamite was really a small guy made up like a woman. I thought Dad might get a laugh out of that, but then thought better of it. I was way past the age of needing to tell my father everything that I heard.

The bulldozer returned and cleared away Lady Dynamite's leftover debris. Two workmen opened a gate in what had been the outfield wall and the two dozen demolition derby contestants began to drive garishly painted old relics through the opening and into a circle around the field. Most of them were beat-up old junkers held together with wooden beams, rope and metal panels. Jimmy had reinforced the rusty bottom of the Catalina with some pieces of an old iron furnace he and a friend had pilfered from the junk yard late one night.

"Where's Jimmy?" my father asked.

"There he is," I said and pointed to the Blue Bomb as Jimmy made his entrance. He had painted a white outline of a lit-fuse bomb on the giant hood with the word "KA-BOOM" underneath, as well as an anarchy "A" in a circle on the roof and the numbers "33" on the side doors.

"Sweet Jesus," Dad said. "That's the car your mother and I drove to Montreal on our honeymoon, tin cans and the whole bit."
"I remember the pictures," I said. I thought about the way Dad used to wash the Catalina every spring and summer Saturday morning. When he was finished, I would lean over the hood and look at my reflection. The image was so crisp I could discern each sharp point of my crewcut and the clouds in the sky behind me, eerie night clouds because of the navy blue paint.

"At least he had the good sense to number it after Larry Bird."

"I think that's the number they gave him," I said.

"Well, maybe it will bring him luck."

The last car, an old red Chevy named "Throttler," entered the field and they closed the gate. The PA announcer introduced the drivers and the car numbers and read the rules. The winner would be the last car moving of its own volition. Once a car stalled and could no longer move the driver would have to climb out and exit the field. The stalled cars would remain where they died, thus becoming obstacles for the continuing contestants. Drivers were permitted to ram the stalled cars into competitor's cars if they wished. Cars still active couldn't remain motionless for more than ten seconds, so that no one could play possum and wait for everyone else to stop moving. An ambulance and fire equipment were standing by.

The cars broke the circle and spread out all over the field. Each driver positioned himself at the angle he wanted, and when all had stopped moving a horn sounded, officially starting the derby. Jimmy floored it and smacked the #14 Oldsmobile in the passenger side door.

"Wow!" my father exclaimed. "Jimmy walloped him good."

Jimmy threw it into reverse, backed up forty feet and rammed the Olds again, this time in the front. He had told me his strategy beforehand: single out a car, stun it with first shot, then aim for the engine. Keep hitting the engine until the car was dead. The engine was the key: if you hit it hard enough you could rattle something
out of whack, and then the domino effect would take over and the engine would shut down. When Jimmy explained this he sounded like he honestly knew what he was talking about, until I asked him about damaging his own engine with all the frontal assaults, and he told me to never mind, I just wouldn't understand.

The sound of metal crunching metal was unbearable, like being stuck in a traffic jam on the highway near the guy with the jackhammer. I quickly glanced around the rest of the field. A half-dozen cars had been knocked out in the first volley. A couple drivers had already scrambled out and hopped over the nearest fence, but most were stuck in their cars until it was safe to come out.

Jimmy reversed and charged again. The Olds tried to reverse, but was already too slow and the Bomb nailed him. The "V" front end of the Bomb had been pushed in about three feet, but she looked like she was still running pretty good. Jimmy reversed again but the Olds didn't move this time, and Jimmy knew it was dead. He spun around to the left in a U-turn around the Olds, spotted a Plymouth named "Basher" about a hundred feet away and floored it between two more dead cars. Basher was lining up to attack a different car when Jimmy barreled perpendicularly into the driver's door.

"Jesus!" my father yelled. "Did you see that?"

I saw the head and upper torso of Basher's driver snap down to the passenger seat and out of view. Jimmy quickly backed off and we could see that Basher's door was completely crumpled. Jimmy paused and realized that Basher was finished, so he swung to the right and headed for a Ford.

"I think your cousin really knows what he's doing," Dad said.

"Yeah," I said.

A smoky haze was beginning to envelope the battlefield. About half the cars were motionless, and we could smell the gas and oil that was leaking onto the dirt.
kept my eye on Basher as Jimmy walloped the Ford, but Basher's driver had not reappeared behind the wheel.

"That number 19 is wreaking havoc on the left side of the field," Dad said. He pointed to an El Camino painted entirely in glittery gold that shimmied like a trout underneath the spotlights. "He's already knocked out four cars."

"Jimmy just finished off his third," I said. I watched Jimmy back away from the mangled Ford, which sprung a geyser of some kind of engine fluid.

"I hope that's not gas," my father said.

I suddenly remembered Basher and I peered in that direction. I was relieved to see Basher's driver finally climbing out of the passenger door. There were only five or six cars still moving at this point, including the Blue Bomb, which was the least damaged, along with the El Camino.

"Come on, James, nail that son of a bitch!" Dad shouted as Jimmy made a bee-line for Throttler. Dad had really become excited, and had abandoned all melancholy about his car of thirty years being literally driven to death. "Yeah!" he exclaimed after Jimmy connected. He pumped his air in the fist as if he had just hit a home run.

The Blue Bomb blasted Throttler one last time. There were two other cars remaining, the El Camino and a pink Mary Kaye Cadaillac named "Laverne," complete with a striking script "L" on the hood. The crowd anticipated a showdown between the Bomb and the El Camino, and I could sense that Jimmy and the driver of the El Camino knew that since they both maneuvered themselves to attack Laverne. Jimmy went first and pounded the Caddy on the driver's side. He backed off and allowed room for the El Camino to charge from the opposite angle.

"Wait a minute," my father said, concern in his voice. "What's Jimmy doing?"
"He's going to give the El Camino the next shot at Laverne," I said. "Who says sportsmanship is dead?"

Just then I saw Laverne's driver give the "thumbs up" to the El Camino, which backed up about forty feet and floored it, the front tires spinning on the slickened dirt.

"No!" my father shouted. "No! Jimmy it's a trap! Jimmy!"

He was right. Just before the El Camino struck Laverne she moved out of the way and the El Camino hit the Blue Bomb in the driver door at top speed. The crowd "Oohed!" and I could see Jimmy bouncing up and down behind the steering wheel as the Bomb reeled to the side about twenty feet. Meanwhile, Laverne swung around and smashed the Bomb's front engine on the right side, causing the hood to shoot up like a sail. The El Camino pounded the left side again, sending the rear door flying into the air. Laverne reversed and set up her next shot.

"Mother of God," my father said. It was a slow, painful death. All those years we had assumed the Blue Bomb would explode in a fantastic blaze of glory, but there she was, being ripped apart like a water buffalo in one of those nature specials about lions. I don't know which was worse, the death itself or the means. The two of us sat down and watched Jimmy climb out of where the windshield should have been when it was all over. He walked with his head down to the nearest wall and just leaned up against it. I don't even remember who won the derby. The El Camino and Laverne probably just stopped and split the money. All I remember was the expression on my father's face in that strange light; it looked almost like relief.

I returned to our table with three more pints of Guinness. My father had decided we all could use a drink on the way home, so we stopped at Al's Place, a
neighborhood bar that the college kids hadn't found yet. There was always a trend in New England for theme bars, and the most recent motif to come along had been "authentic Irish pubs," like the one they set up in Jimmy's beloved Gaelic American Club. But Al's had no theme at all- it was just authentic. Regulars would travel and bring back posters or rude bumper stickers or gaudy knick-knacks that Al would tack on the wall and leave to collect dust and spark newcomers' conversations. The beauty of Al's was its plainness.

"How ya feelin', James?" Dad asked Jimmy, who was slumped over his glass. We were on our third round of pints, and the first had included shots of whiskey, which Dad said we needed to boost our morale.

"I can't feel my head, but other than that I feel fucking grand," Jimmy said. He lifted his head and smiled. We laughed and Jimmy raised his glass. "To the Blue Bomb! May she strike terror in the hearts of all who oppose her!" he said, and we clinked glasses, tipped back and guzzled. Jimmy had won three hundred dollars for coming in third, enough to cover the costs of getting the Blue Bomb running. But it left the fate of our joint trip in jeopardy. "I have a feeling you'll be traveling to the old country on your own, young Mr. Ryan," he said, glancing in my direction.

"I wouldn't be so sure of that," my father said. He took another sip of his stout.

"Why? You know something I don't know?" Jimmy asked.

"I know a hell of a lot that you don't know, but that's beside the point. Your tight-wad old man has money saved up the yin-yang. Just ask him for a loan."

"Are you nuts? What makes you think he'll loan me money for a vacation?"

"Because he's your father, and that's what we do," Dad said. He lowered his glass down onto the coaster for emphasis. "Someday you'll understand, God willing."
"Does that mean you're going to pay for my trip?" I asked.

"Not a chance in hell," he said, and the three of us laughed.

I felt good, having never drunk in a bar with my father before. He seemed to be enjoying himself, watching the handful of people standing around the bar and humming along to a Sinatra tune that came on the jukebox. Jimmy rose to use the john, and Dad leaned close like he was going to say something, but hesitated. He leaned back, pursed his lips, and leaned forward again.

"You know, Ryan, you can always judge the quality of a bar by whether or not there is a brass foot-rest running along the bottom of the entire bar," he said. We both immediately glanced at the bar, and sure enough Al had one. "Always remember that. Seriously, though, there's something you should know. Your grandfather was an informer."

"What?" I said, uncertain I heard him correctly.

"You grandfather, my father, was an informer. You know, snitch, stoolie, squealer, back-stabber."

"I know what the word means. What are you saying?" I leaned in close to my father. I could smell the Guinness on his breath, and wondered if he could smell it on mine.

"During the civil war in Ireland, back in the '20's, my dad ratted out a group of IRA men to the Black and Tans. The men were rounded up and executed. Word got out that it was my dad who finked, and they were gonna kill him, so he had to flee to America." Dad raised his glass for another sip. I knew how difficult this was for him, and the earnestness of his voice made it almost unrecognizable.

"Why did he do it?" I asked. One Sinatra song faded and another began.

"The same reason everyone does it—money. He was young. Your age, for Christ's sake. He had a wife and two kids and couldn't find work anywhere. Times
were hard. He needed cash, quick, and saw what he thought was the only opportunity available to him."

"Wait a minute, I thought he met Grandma in the Bronx."

"He did. She was his second wife. His first wife disowned him when she found out what he did. She wouldn’t even speak to him." He took another sip.

I leaned back to let this all sink in.

"Does Mom know?" I asked.

"I don’t know. Probably, but I never mentioned it to her. Your mother has a gift for finding these things out. But she's a princess, though and would never let me know that she knew." He smiled to himself and tipped his glass in a mini toast. "I had no idea myself until after Granddad died and your Grandma told me."

"But I don’t understand," I said. "Why are you telling me this here? Now?" I spread my arms and waved them around to encompass the whole room.

"Because it's time, that's all. Maybe it's the car. Maybe it's the Guinness. My point, Ryan, is that it happened seventy years ago. Life marches on, you know. People are who they are, not what they were or who they should be. Remember that. You won’t always have your brilliant father around to tell you what to do." He smiled and finished the last swig of his beer. "Ah, here's James now. Are you ready to call it a night, Mr. Evel Knievel?"

"Yeah," Jimmy said, "Let's get the fuck out of here."

My father put his arm around Jimmy and they walked towards the door. I finished my own pint and followed. The cool night air felt refreshing on my face after the smoky heat of the bar. Dad tossed me the keys and told me to drive, he was tired. He climbed into the passenger side while Jimmy stretched out onto the back seat.
I don’t think I had driven my father in a car since I was sixteen and he was teaching me how to drive. "You’re too lethargic! Focus!" he would shout every single time. That was around the same time that my grandfather passed away, well into his nineties. I thought about him for a minute, and tried to recall some time when he may have let his secrets slip, but of course there was none. I couldn’t help but think of all that he was hiding. How could anyone live with that? Were any of his smiles genuine? I reached for the seatbelt and, snapping it in place, caught sight of my reflection in the passenger window. The car was beneath a street lamp, and there I was, clear as in a mirror, next to the image of my father who was staring out the window but in an entirely different place. There was a resemblance in our faces but a definite distinction. Luckily, I looked more like my mother he always used to say. Jimmy snored and I remembered where I was. I turned the key in the ignition, put the car in drive and brought my family home.
For true Irish Stew one begins with stones:
stone tombs,
stone walls,
stone churches,
stone forts,
stone huts (beehive),
stone towers,
tomb stones.

Place stones in iron pot. To dissolve, add:
salt-water,
wine,
whiskey,
stout,
tears,
words.

Chop:
potatoes,
leeks,
carrots,
celery,
onions,
families.

Add to pot. Dice and mix in:
lamb,
sheep,
horse,
donkey,
snake (for authentic Celtic taste),
British,
bullet,
bomb,
baby.

Stir.
Simmer.
Simmer.
Simmer.
Simmer.
Stir.
Scoop into bowl. Serve to tourists. Smile.
Our expedition was heading east toward Sandycove and the James Joyce Tower. It was about noon and the D.A.R.T., the Dublin tram, was packed full of Catholic school students on their way home for lunch. The majority of them looked presentable enough in their navy blue uniforms that had elaborate crests stitched onto the blazers of the boys and the sweaters of the girls. I, of course, was seated with a group of sweaty ruffians who had obviously just come from gym class. These boys were stripped down to white tee shirts and blue sweat pants with two white stripes down the side. I surmised they would have missed the D.A.R.T. if they had showered immediately after gym; this was the only excuse I could come up with for their offensive odor. But then I recalled the stench of the middle-aged bus driver who delivered us from the airport to our hostel the week before. Perhaps body odor was part of the "quaint Irish culture" that had been drilled into our heads by the jackass director of the study abroad center who insisted on referring to us as "representatives of America first and the University second."

There were fifteen of us on the three week tour, which in fact was a three credit course entitled "Voices From the Deep Mists of Home: The Legendary Writers of Ireland and Their Mystical Writing" or something stupid like that. Our director was Fred, one of the laid-back creative writing professors who I know must have ingested enormous quantities of narcotics back in the 'sixties and 'seventies, and no doubt kept up the tradition in the present day. All we had to do to get the credit was to read four or five books by Irish writers, keep a daily journal, and write a lengthy essay or story by the end of the trip. We were also expected to accompany Fred on these daily excursions to significant locations of the Irish literary tradition. The day before we had gone to the Dublin Writers Museum, a pathetic shack
containing nothing but glass cases full of yellowed books by Irish authors, most of which weren't even first or second editions. Even Fred had to admit his disappointment; he labeled the prestigious "museum" a sham.

He did, however, guarantee that the Joyce Tower was "something to see." It was a beautiful day, sunny and about seventy degrees. I admired the view of the blue-green sea from the window as we glided along the shore, despite the pungent Irish lads. I had noticed our car had become full of whispers and giggles. I was sure the students had recognized the sixteen Americans mingled amongst them, and were now making appropriate fun of us. One of our earlier tour guides, who come to think of it also perspired a great deal and didn't exactly smell "clean as a whistle," informed us that Ireland was a nation of young people. Half the population was under thirty, or something like that, and was growing younger every year, if that's possible. While he seemed impressed by this statistic it meant nothing to me but screaming babies in every D.A.R.T. car, movie theater, crappy museum, restaurant and street corner in the damn city of Dublin, which was starting to get a little too crowded for my enjoyment, and quite frankly, was starting to irritate me after only a week.

There was a group of four rather cute teenage girls seated directly across from me, responsible for most of the whispering and giggling. As I occasionally glanced in their direction I realized that they were checking me out. I believe it was the red-haired one who fancied me the most, since she was blushing and appeared to be taking quite a ribbing from the other girls. She was quite a beauty; a perfect example of the green eyed, freckled, fair-skinned Irish lass. I was pleased to see some curves underneath her uniform as well, and a girl can never go wrong with black stockings.
I envisioned us getting off together at the Sandycove stop. I would ditch the group and offer to walk her home. I would delight her by playing dumb and asking if she knew anything fun to do in Dublin. Since it was Friday she would be free to accompany me that night, and would be quite flattered that I had asked her. We would arrange a time for me to return and pick her up. My plan was going to work perfectly until the D.A.R.T. pulled into Sandycove. I stood up and moved towards the door, and the three other girls stood as well, but my sweetie remained seated. I quickly glanced at the rail map above the exit. There was one stop after ours; that must be where she was going. As I walked past her window we briefly made eye contact. She quickly looked down, and I knew she was as disappointed as I was. I stopped and considered jumping back on before the doors shut, but I heard Fred calling my name, and was forced to rejoin my compatriots.

It was about a twenty minute walk from the station to the tower, which we could see in the distance. We strolled along the beach, admiring an old stone church and some of the white buildings of Sandycove, the easternmost portion of Dublin.

"I bet this is what Venice looks like," I heard one of the girls say behind me. I think her name was Sherry. Or maybe Carrie. Honestly, the girls in the group were interchangeable. They all wore the same mall uniform: jeans, sneakers, and fraternity sweatshirts. There wasn't a single pair of black stockings among the nine of them.

"Have you ever been to Venice?" I asked as I turned around.

"Well, no, but I've seen movies and pictures in magazines," she replied.

"Well, I've been there, and this looks absolutely nothing like it." I was recalling an earlier trip with my family on summer vacation from high school. Venice was one of the most beautiful cities I had ever known, and to have this ignoramus compare it to a third-rate Dublin suburb truly irked me. The first couple
of days on the trip I had tried to find a companion, someone I could tolerate for the
duration of the trip. But I found myself surrounded by ignorance and naiveté, and
knew I would be spending most of my time alone. Not that this was a bad thing, of
course, but sometimes I wished I could share my observations and wit with
someone else.

"Well, it looks like Venice to me," the twit replied, and passed me in a huff.
Carrie, which I decided was her name because she resembled a Carrie, was one of
the five or six girls who had spent an enormous amount of time and money
shopping. The previous night I had had the pleasure of viewing her acquired
bounty when she showed it to some of the other girls in the hostel's common room.
In her five days in Dublin this precious thing had bought two bottles of French wine
for her parents, a can of Heineken for her brother, (she just loved the green cans), one
pound of Cadbury white chocolate for her sister, and two pairs of Swedish sandals
for herself. When I pointed out that she had not bought anything Irish and that
everything she did buy was readily available in the U.S., she replied that it was all
meaningful to her because she had purchased them in Dublin. This was the type of
mentality that I was forced to contend with.

There was no doubt about it: the James Joyce Tower was certainly a tower.
Unfortunately, the guide Fred had arranged to meet us there was nowhere to be
found. Based on our experiences with previous guides, I suggested to Fred that we
search the local drinking establishments for our man, but Fred insisted he could be
our guide and do just as good a job. I immediately grabbed one of the free
brochures describing the tower and darted into the adjoining room, which the map
indicated had been the gunpowder magazine. The Joyce Tower had been one of the
Martello Towers, one of a series of stone fortifications erected in 1804 against the
threat of an invasion by Napoleon. There had been a large cannon on top, and
British soldiers were housed in the tower until 1904, when Joyce's friend Oliver St.
John Gogarty became the first civilian tenant.

Surprise, surprise, the gunpowder room was filled with glass cases full of old
Joyce books and letters. In a taller case was Joyce's guitar and a bow-tie he had
given to Samuel Beckett. A plaster death mask of Joyce hung on the wall, and even
though his eyes were shut he looked like he was smirking, no doubt at the beeping
of the cash register in the next room. I decided to be the first one from our group to
travel up the treacherously narrow stone staircase. I stopped at the first level to peer
into the "Round Room." A velvet rope prevented me from entering more than a few
feet from the doorway. The furniture in the dark room consisted of a bed, a table
surrounded by a few meager chairs, a small writing desk, a musty, upright steamer
trunk, and a phonograph on top of a little dresser. Old, dusty brown Guinness
bottles dotted the room, which only had two tiny skylights which you couldn't even
see out of.

According to the brochure, Joyce moved into this room with his pal Gogarty
on September 9, 1904. Unfortunately, Joyce had written some unpleasant comments
about Gogarty in his most recent poem, so Gogarty received him coldly. A few days
later they were joined by another one of Gogarty's buddies, Samuel Chenevix
Trench. On the sixth night of Joyce's stay, Trench had a nightmare about a black
panther. He screamed, grabbed his gun, fired a few shots into the fireplace, and fell
back asleep. Gogarty then took the gun, shouted "Leave him to me!" and fired a
couple shots at the saucepans on the shelf above Joyce's head. Needless to say, Joyce
took the hint and departed immediately. As a matter of fact, he eloped a month later
to Europe and began a life of self-imposed exile.
Apparently, the Round Room and the top of the Tower are both described in Joyce's *Ulysses*. I wouldn't know; I've never read the book and have no intention to. I am convinced no one has ever read *Ulysses*, not even Joyce. It's one of those books morons buy and keep on their shelves to appear smarter than they actually are. Every once in a while I will encounter a pretentious asshole who will reply "Oh, I think I'll kick back and read *Ulysses*" when I ask what he's going to do over Christmas break or during summer vacation. When I hear this bullshit I immediately know he didn't even make it through *Portrait*.

Not seeing anything of real interest in the Round Room, I returned to the spiral stairwell and approached the top of the tower. I burst forth into the pleasant sunshine, stretched my arms skyward, and inhaled a deep breath of fresh sea-air.

"Get out of the way!" I heard someone shout. "You're in my shot." Julie, an annoying little nitwit from the group, was aiming her camera directly at me. I thought I had been able to beat the crowd up to the top and have it to myself for a couple of minutes, but apparently some of them had bypassed Fred's talk and the Round Room.

"Sorry," I muttered, stepping out of her line of vision. I hopped up onto one of the ledges and peered out over the thick wall. The waves rolled into the shore down below, and I spotted a few sailboats in the distance. I turned around and examined the rooftops of Sandy Cove and the hills beyond. I removed my camera from its pouch and studied the scenery again through the viewfinder. There was nothing that really caught my interest. In fact, the view was rather dull. I had learned from my previous trips to Europe that it wasn't necessary to take a snapshot of every single scene. I also knew that the scenery would be much more picturesque when we headed to Sligo on the west coast, so I put my camera away.
I noticed a gentleman sitting on the opposite side. His eyes were closed and he was leaning his head against the wall. His ruddy tan and long, flowing white hair suggested that he was a poet. I imagined he resided in Dublin and possessed relatively substantial local acclaim. He probably came out to the Joyce Tower every once in a while for inspiration and to rejuvenate his soul. I considered introducing myself but thought better of it. If I was in his position I certainly wouldn't want to be disturbed.

"Excuse me, sir, would you mind moving?" Julie suddenly addressed the man. He blinked his eyes open and sat up. "I'm taking a panorama, and you're in the way."

"Oh, sure, 'scuse me," he said in boring American as he stood up. "Would ya like me to take it for ya, so ya'll can be in it?" he asked. Disgusted, I took a last glance around and headed for the stairwell. I would have to say I was disappointed with the James Joyce Tower. He spent six days there and they slapped his name on it to make a buck. Joyce's name was splattered all over Dublin. There were statues and plaques on houses and even little oval brass markers on sidewalks outside of addresses mentioned in Dubliners and Ulysses. It was Ireland's version of "Washington Slept Here," but I'm not sure if the Irish understood the irony of celebrating a man who couldn't wait to get the hell out of his own country, and only returned for his mother's funeral.

When I reached the ground floor I noticed two of the group members trying on Joyce tee shirts in the gift shop. One was a black sketch of Joyce with an eye patch on a white background. Another was one of those god-awful Andy Warhol imitations with nine multicolored Joyce heads, also on a white background. Perfect, I thought. Those will go well with the black Guinness tee shirts that everyone on the trip had already bought. I headed for the exit, hoping I could buy a tie-dyed shirt.
with an enormous picture of a smiling George Bernard Shaw when we visited his birthplace the following day. That way I would be able to stand out from the group, and no one would know I was an American.
That night in Dingle,
by the water,
I was watching you
watching the cows
watching the sunset,

the sun slipping, slipping,
wrapping purple-pink arms
around the farthest hills,
around the homes in the town,

the cows standing, staring,
swatting their tails
along their broad backs,
chewing grass,
waiting, waiting,

the water slapping, slapping
the smooth stones,
the slight waves
lapping the sore,
stretching, straining

towards Dingle,
towards the cows
watching me
watching you
walking away.
Our bus was heading northwest, if I remember the map of Belgium correctly, toward the battlefields and cemeteries around the town of Ieper, or Ypres, in French. Every place had two names in Belgium. One, in Dutch, or to be specific, Flemish, and the other in French, or again to be specific, Walloon. They spoke Flemish in the industrial north and hated the Walloons. They spoke Walloon in the agricultural south and hated the Flemish. The benefit of this split was that both sides began teaching their schoolchildren English as soon as possible, and as a result everyone in Belgium could speak English fluently. I didn't have to waste any time learning a foreign language during my ten-month stay.

The bus passed a scenic red-shingled-roof town as Professor Voorhees, our guide, explained that the Belgian authorities still dug up about twenty-thousand unexploded World War One shells a year from the fields in Flanders, the sight of some of the bloodiest trench fighting. They would gather all the shells in one ammo dump and explode them at exactly noon and six o'clock, so the nearby townspeople could set their clocks by the boom.

Professor Voorhees taught our Shakespeare class. It was his idea to visit these war memorials, as a way for the American, British and Belgian students to all get to know one another. Voorhees was a small middle-aged man who had the face of a donkey. He had a mane of short black hair, bulging gums and round pink lips covered with tiny bubbles of spittle. He stood at the front of the bus and held up an inkwell and a clock he had made as a schoolboy out of a couple of the brass shell tips.

"Don't worry, the fuses have all been cut, so you shan't lose any limbs!" he shouted, but no one laughed. Even though he was Belgian, he spoke English with
an exaggerated British accent because he grew up listening to the BBC on a short-wave.

"My uncle was plowing a field when he hit a shell and it exploded," Mic said. Mic was my "Belgian Buddy," my assigned partner for the day.

"Really?" I asked, more startled from the fact that she spoke to me than I was from what she said.

"Oh, yes. Really. He was killed instantly." Mic was also short and she had a cute, thin mouth, but she didn't wear make-up and her greasy brown hair needed a good scrubbing.

"Did this happen recently?"

"Oh no, no. In the 1960's, before I was born." Mic was seventeen or eighteen and I could tell she was still shy talking to an American. It's one thing to speak English with Belgian classmates but something different to encounter the genuine article.

After some more small talk Mic bluntly asked why I was in Belgium. I explained to her that my college in Baltimore had a study abroad program in Leuven, or Louvain. There were thirty of us Americans living in a former convent, the Zwartzusterklooster. Mic just couldn't understand why I had come to Belgium to study English literature, and I really wasn't too sure myself. I was starting to miss my family and friends back home, and I hadn't really clicked with any of the other Americans in my group. At least I get to experience European culture, I kept reassuring myself.

"Did you know that Belgium is the only country in the world that has street lamps on the highway?" Mic asked. "Your astronauts could see them from the moon."

"That's not true," I said. "We have street lights in America."
"You do?" she said, genuinely disappointed.

"Yeah, but, uh, they're not as bright as the ones here."

Mic smiled and looked relieved. One thing I've learned in life is to tell people what they want to hear. If this little Belgian girl wanted to believe that her country's light bulbs were the brightest on the planet, who was I to correct her?

Flanders in November was a bland mix of gray clouds and brown earth. A few bare poplars stood guard over one of the deadliest battlefields of World War One.

"One-hundred-forty-thousand soldiers died on this spot alone," Stewart, one of my American classmates, told me as we stood in one of the trenches and stared out into the horizon. We had wandered away from Voorhees' lecture on trench foot, and leaned on the musty eighty-year-old sandbags that still held their ground. Since he decided to grow his red hair long and to stop shaving, Stewart looked like a vagrant, although he was the smartest one in our group, and his father was the head of our college's history department.

"Legend says that on quiet, moonless nights the locals can still hear the dying soldiers crying out for their mothers in every language: Dutch, French, English, German. They close their shutters, lock their doors and pray until dawn."

"That's bullshit," Rock said. He had snuck up behind us. "They say that so the dumbass tourists like us come all the way out here to eat in their dinky cafes and buy their fucking lace hankies." Rock was crewcut, muscle and voice. Everywhere we went, whether in Belgium, France or Germany, people stopped to examine him. "I hope we eat lunch soon."

"Has it been a half-hour since your last feeding already?" Stew asked.

"Shut-up, egghead," Rock replied. "Hey, by the way, does anyone else's Belgian Buddy smell like shit? Mine sure does."
"Yeah, I noticed that," I said. "All Europeans stink. I think they only shower once a month."

"It's a cultural thing. They don't bathe every day, or use deodorant," Stewart said.

"It's fucking gross."

"It's not gross, Rock. It's just different."

"Fuck you, asshole. I say it's disgusting and that's final."

Stewart climbed over the top of the sandbags and walked away. Rock usually had that effect on him. Professor Voorhees raised a blue European Union umbrella above his head, blew a whistle and began strolling toward the bus, which was our signal to follow.

"Voorhees is an asshole, too," Rock said, and lumbered down the trench. I turned to call Stewart, who was already some distance away. He held his hands in his pockets and I knew he was brooding about something. I gave him a minute to reflect before I shouted his name, and the two of us marched to rejoin the troops.

We stopped for lunch at a small school, available because it was Saturday. Voorhees promised us a "Brueghelian feast" provided by his brother, who owned a farm nearby. Mic and I sat at a round wooden table with Stew and his "buddy" Jan. Kristen, one of the girls from England, joined us with her partner, Riga. Voorhees' brother lit a fire in the center fireplace, giving the bland cafeteria an unusually cozy atmosphere. Voorhees crept around and poured everyone a shot of geneve, a Belgian spirit that would "chase the November gloom from our hearts." After a lengthy toast about international comradeship and all that crap we downed the booze.
Voorhees may be a jackass, but he was right about the geneve. It dripped down my throat like fiery candle wax and immediately I was feeling fine. I was especially happy that Kristen was sitting across from me. We had talked a couple times as members of larger groups back in Leuven's Old Market, the square where everyone met to drink and socialize. I remember I had called her "Krissy" all night, and later found out from another English girl that she normally detested being referred to by this nickname; however, she had thought it was rather charming coming from a drunk American.

Kristen was a member of a group of fifteen British students from one of the colleges at Oxford. Most of them despised studying in Leuven and didn't try to hide it. Nowhere on the Continent could possibly compare to the majesty and superiority of the British Isles, if you bought the manure these folks were spreading. They had attempted to ally themselves with us Americans, until one night one of them accused Americans of always trying to colonize everything, citing the fact that we had taken over the entire Zwartzuisterklooster. Rock had replied, "Well, the sun may never set on the fucking British Empire, but the moon will sure as hell rise!" and proceeded to pull down his pants.

Voorhees' brother, his brother's wife and their three daughters began bringing out trays of food from the kitchen. Voorhees explained that all the meat and cheese were from the farm, and the many types of bread had been baked that day. The bottles of beer were from a local brewery as well. I grabbed some dark brown bread off the tray on our table and placed some beef on it. I was about to slap the top on my sandwich when I noticed Mic, Jan, and Riga were using their silverware. They had spread the meat and cheese over a piece of bread and were slicing it up. I glanced over at Stew who was also holding a knife and fork. He nodded slightly, indicating I should do the same.
I did, and after a few bites I noticed Mic staring at me. She leaned toward Jan and said something in Flemish, a jumble of consonants, and gestured at me with her knife. I thought this was somewhat rude, since they knew I had no idea what they were saying. Jan whispered some more consonants back and they both giggled.

"What's the matter?" I asked and put my fork down.

"You do not eat the proper way," Mic said.

"What are you talking about?" I looked at Stew, who glanced down at his plate.

"You hold your fork in the right hand," Jan pointed out. "That is incorrect."

"What do you mean? I'm right-handed."

"That does not matter," Jan continued. "It is proper to hold the fork in the left hand, and to slice the food with the right hand. See?" He demonstrated by slicing a small portion of ham and bringing it up to his mouth with the fork in his left hand. "Like so."

"What difference does it make?"

"You were eating incorrectly," Jan said. I had never said two words to this smug jerk and here he was telling me I didn't know how to hold a fork. Some hospitality.

"It all goes to the same place, doesn't it?" I replied. I looked over at Kristen, who was smiling and holding her fork in her right hand. I knew she was on my side.

"When in Rome," Stew whispered, still staring at his plate of food.

"How do you know your way isn't the wrong way?" I asked Jan.

"Here in Belgium this is how we eat, and you currently reside in Belgium," he replied. I wished Rock had sat with us. I glanced over to his group in the corner. His elbows were firmly planted on the table top and he held a triple-decker
sandwich with both hands. The other Belgians and Britons sitting with him appeared to be very intimidated, as if Rock was their strict father forbidding them to speak during supper.

I returned to my own meal. Riga was asking Kristen where she was from and what she was studying when I noticed Mic and Jan whispering and giggling again.

"All right," I said. "What is it this time?"

"We were discussing the British and American accents," Mic said. "We had never noticed a difference before, until we heard you and Kristen speaking."

"Yes," Jan said. "She speaks British, like the television, while you speak American, like the movies."

"Really?" Stewart asked, suddenly interested in one of our conversations. "Which accent do you prefer?"

"The British," they announced simultaneously.

After lunch we rode to Ieper. The town had been entirely destroyed during the Great War, but reconstructed afterward to match what it had once been. Voorhees led us to the Cathedral of St. Bavo. Remnants of the original church lay scattered in a small, enclosed yard: a fancy cornice, a bullet-ridden column, half of a tombstone. A small cherub head whose body had been obliterated smiled eerily in the grass.

"Hey man," Rock said, grabbing my arm as we were about to enter the cathedral. "What did you have for lunch?"

"The roast beef. Why?"

"How did it taste?"

"It was a little salty, but I thought it was pretty good."
"That's nice, 'cause it wasn't roast beef. It was horse, you dumbass! Horse! You ate Mr. Ed!"

"What are you talking about? It was roast beef!" People were staring at us, wondering what we were yelling about.

"Some jerkoff at my table asked me if I liked eating horse. When I told him no fucking way, he told me not to eat the red meat. You ate horse!"

Rock walked into the cathedral laughing. I followed, really pissed off. The bastards at my college had spent so much time telling us to be sensitive to the Belgians and the other foreigners we would meet in Europe, but what about us? When were people going to treat Americans with respect? They can't even tell a guy he's about to eat some horse? What about our culture? I spotted Voorhees holding up that damn umbrella in front of an apse at the other end of the church and headed over there.

"This gorgeous triptych was painted by the anonymous Master of Ieper in the fourteenth century," began Voorhees after we dutifully gathered around. The painting was the same one we saw a hundred times in every church and every museum. In the center was a large scene of Christ rising from the tomb on Easter morning, surrounded by sleeping soldiers, with God the old man stuck in the top left corner but still looking proud nonetheless. On the left panel was a depiction of Saints Peter and John at the empty tomb listening to an angel who was telling them that Christ had split, while on the right panel Jesus walked down the street with two morons who didn't realize that the person next to them was glowing.

Voorhees went on to explain how the painting had survived six centuries of war, fire, invasion and iconoclasts. He pointed out that how the image of Christ rising from the tomb symbolized Ieper and in fact all of Flanders. Despite all the hardships down through the ages, the painting, as well as the people, had survived
and persevered. With great pride, Voorhees talked about how God watched over his flock in Flanders; he had never abandoned them and would always be with them, as exemplified by this amazing triptych. When he was finished, Voorhees asked if anyone had any questions.

"Yeah," Rock said. "What's that goose doing up there?"

"Pardon?" Voorhees asked, leaning closer to Rock.

"The goose. Up in the corner. What's it doin' there?"

"Goose?" Voorhees asked, turning toward the painting.

"That's a dove, you nimrod," Stewart shouted from the back of the crowd. "It represents the Holy Spirit."

"That's a goose! Look at its neck. You ever see a dove with a neck like that?"

"Goose?" Voorhees asked again. He appeared scared, like he had just witnessed a car wreck.

"Don't you know anything about art?" Stewart confronted Rock. This type of ignorance embarrassed Stewart. He told me sometimes he felt ashamed to be an American, especially when he traveled around in a pack.

"Let me tell you something," Rock said. "I've shot a hundred geese. I've eaten a hundred geese. I know a goose when I spot one." Rock pointed to the picture for dramatic effect. "And that is a fucking goose."

In a way I felt sorry for Professor Voorhees. All in all I think he was a pretty nice guy. He was incredibly smart and was really concerned about his students. He loved his country and was proud of its history. But I have to admit he had no business leading a group of Americans around like ducklings, especially when we knew our waterfowl.

It was nighttime as the bus rolled back to Leuven. A few quiet voices mumbled in the rear, but most people dozed. I stared out my window, but all I
could see in the darkness was myself, reflected from the reading light above my seat. I looked different, older. It's funny how you notice these things when you least expect it. I clicked off the light and disappeared into the night. Mic held her hands underneath her chin while her head curled into the groove of the headrest. I watched her small, coat-covered body flutter with each unconscious breath, and I wondered, in what language did she dream?
CHARCOAL SKETCHES

The clothes lay cast aside as if on a beach.
The boy could have scampered down into the waves
for a quick swim.
The red stains on a crumpled shirt could be catsup,
squirited lustily by a little brother jazzed on pop.

But it is blood and a stranger has been stabbed to death.
His clothes, stripped away by paramedics,
huddle in the grass like a shrine
protected by sticky yellow police tape.
I continue walking.

The papers say there was an argument in a yard,
an exchange of heated words.
Two men left and returned, one man died.
Charcoal sketches of the suspects appear on the front page.
A buddy jokes that one looks like me.

I laugh and am reminded of a bearded man with booze-breath
who sketched my sister and me along the boardwalk in Ocean City.
He charged us each a dollar and drew the exact same faces
with ridiculous round heads, bulbous noses
and the tiniest feet and hands.
I cried and cried thinking I really looked like that.
My sister held my hand and whispered
"It's only a drawing."
But I would not listen.

The suspects surrender. I recognize them.
We went to the same high school.
One of them even stole a pair of sneakers
from my gym locker.
I vowed to kill him.

I didn't, of course.
Threats are just words,
aren't they? One time
I told my ex-girlfriend I was going to kill her.
We were drunk, I was having a rough day.
I would never hurt you, I said, after,
don't you know that?
But she wouldn't stop whimpering,
like my dog when I punch her in the back.
when she won't stop barking.
Later, I read an article about serial killers
who begin by torturing animals
with lighter fluid and fire crackers.
But there's no pleasure for me, you know,
I just want her to be quiet.

It's been a week and everyone keeps talking
about the killing.
I've grown tired of it.
Everybody wants to know
why, why, why, why:
family, friends, police, teachers, preachers.
But if they listen very closely,
if they notice me
in the vestibule of the church,
at the outskirts of the press conference,
on the periphery of the mob,
and if they dare to approach me,
they will hear me,
whispering,
over and
over,
why
not?
Lauren catches herself referring to her grandmother in the past tense and I know she is tired. Her grandmother is dying and I don't know what to say. We have plenty of experience in our three years as a couple concerning family matters: her brother's and two of my cousins' weddings, her sister's divorce, the birth of my niece. But we have yet to share the death of a loved one. I know this is a crucial time for us, yet I find all my words inadequate; they won't collate to create comfort. It was difficult for me to propose as well; I stammered until she shrieked "yes" and kissed me, before I even finished the question. She is six hours away in Saginaw, her hometown. Now that I'm alone in our condo, I breathe deep every time the phone rings.

I imagine her in the hospital corridor. She leans against the white wall and twirls the metal phone cord around her index finger, biting her lower lip as I assure her my day was fine, I picked up some Chinese on the way home for dinner. She glances down the hall to see if her parents and sister are still seated in the bulky waiting room chairs; as long as they remain sitting there is no news.

"Mom's doing better than I thought," she says when I ask how everyone is holding up. "She knows. Dad is Dad. He'd rather be home watching one of the tournament games, but he stays for Mom. Ellen won't stop crying. You know how she's been since Tony split. She's a walking nerve ending."

. There is so much I want to tell her. My manager's wife found out about his mistress. There is a great article in today's paper about traveling through Bali. A deer jumped twenty feet ahead of my car on the way to work. But I know this is not the time, we must stay focused on Gram.
"They've been operating for twenty minutes. It doesn't look too good." Her voice flutters, I know she is wiping her eyes.

This funeral will be quite an inconvenience for me. Tax season is the busiest time of year, and I am already coming home at eight on weeknights and working Saturday mornings. If I have to drive to Saginaw for a couple of days it will really put me behind schedule, and since it is my fifth year with the accounting firm I am up for review.

"Well, she's been in a lot of pain," I say. "This is probably for the best." I wince as I remember her telling me that she hates it when people say that, that it reduces people to wounded pets and wild animals injured in the road.

"Maybe you're right," she says after a pause, and I know she is brushing off my stupidity. "I'll call you when we hear something."

"Okay," I reply, but she has already hung up.

The colleges playing in the basketball tournament game don't interest me, and the sitcom I try for a few minutes isn't at all funny. I get to thinking about my own grandmothers. My mother's mother died shortly after I was born. All I know of Grammy is what Dad said when he used to tease Mom about her: stories affirming Grammy's unending stinginess and her inability to cook food with any discernible flavor. Mom would tell him to hush or she would have his own mother spank him. But she never defended Grammy or told me what she was really like, so that grandmother remains forever apocryphal, a memory figure of my father's exaggeration.

My father's mother smelled like soup and flaunted biceps as big as a man's. Watching Nana balance enormous baskets of laundry on her hip and lift the end of the couch with one hand to vacuum underneath, I pretended she was a plump
super-hero with amazing powers. I bragged to my friends on the school playground that she could rip off the metal monkey bars and twist them into animal shapes as if they were balloons.

The scrapbook is more fragile than I remember as I remove it from the closet shelf and photographs and grammar school playbills flutter to my bedroom carpet. The imitation leather cracks like a peanut shell as I sit on the bed and gently pry open the cover. I finger through a collection of wake cards and newspaper obituaries: Day-Glo pictures of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, Jesus carrying the lost sheep on his shoulders, the Virgin Mary enthroned above. I recognize some family members' names and a few of my grandmother's close friends, but a handful remain known only to God. Once I asked Nana why she saved these death mementos, but she only shrugged and said she didn't know, it seemed insulting to discard them in the trash with the coffee grounds and the other unwanted refuse of the day.

Younger and varying versions of my family enjoy picnics, Christmas dinners, graduations and first communions in the pictures, smiling in their finest clothes, waving to me first in black and white, then in tentative color, finally in real life hues of sunshine and flesh. It takes me a moment to realize the white hairdo boy standing next to a sunflower is me. I am eight and I try to remember whatever happened to the red and white baseball jersey I am wearing. My mother mailed it to me for my birthday, during the long summer I lived with my grandmother, the summer I would later learn my father lay catatonic in an asylum.

My mother told me to think of it as an adventure as she rolled my tube socks into balls and tucked them into the corners of our steamer trunk. Like the boys in *Kidnapped!* and *Treasure Island*, I was going to embark on an exciting journey across the country to visit Nana. I had not seen my father in four days. Mom said he was very sick and needed lots of rest, that's why I had to go. She cried and knelt down to
hug me in the train station, and I remember thinking I was too old for her to be
doing this in front of strangers. I didn't speak to anyone on the train, not even to the
bearded man sitting next to me who read a *Playboy* and lingered on each shiny page,
I believe, for my benefit. After he finished, I turned to the window and scanned the
billowing wheat of the great plains. A rickety farmhouse floated upon a crest, and I
truly expected the boards to drop away and a pirate ship to emerge and speed
towards our train, Jolly Roger hoisted, cannons at the ready. But the house
remained itself and soon drifted off, and all that was left was the expanse of the
bobbing wheat sea.

The blanket covering my head smelled like powder detergent, and I tried to
imagine the different sorts of people who had embraced it through the years:
doctors, nuns, barbers, army drill sergeants. Bald men, mothers, grandfathers, kids
like me; all thinking or sleeping in the confines of the sleeping car. I wondered what
was wrong with my father. I hoped it wasn't as bad as cancer, an illness my mother
had attempted to explain when I had asked why Aunt Virginia didn't have any hair
when we saw her the previous Fourth of July. But what I remember most was
missing my mother's voice when she whispered goodnight and switched off the
light. The conductor had called me Sport and asked if everything was okay, but it
wasn't comforting. I tried to miss my father but he was the sick one, yet Mom had
packed the trunk and sent me away.

The *Playboy* man snored in the bunk below me, and I recalled hearing that
snoring people's hearts stopped in the split-second silence between exhales. As his
pauses grew deeper and longer, I became convinced the man was dying. What
should I do? I glanced over to the two people on the opposite side; they both
remained motionless. I envisioned a plan of action, consisting of me jumping down
and racing to find the on-duty conductor. I pulled back the blanket and peered over
the edge. I had climbed a five rung ladder to reach my bunk; in the hazy dark it seemed quite a leap. The snoring abruptly stopped, and my heart lurched. Were those cowboy boots on the floor? What if I landed on them and broke a foot? As I lifted one leg over the railing, the train jolted to a stop and I heard the man rustle and turn over. I pulled my leg back in and exhaled as the wheels creaked and the train slowly rolled forward into the night.

"The coffee here is God-awful," Lauren says between slurps. It is midnight there and her parents and sister have gone home. Gram is out of surgery but still dangerously weak. She had had another heart attack.

"Why did you stay?" I ask.

"Mom wants someone here at all times. She demanded to stay another night but I forced Dad to drag her home. I know she'll be back at five thirty. Damn, it's quiet here, Ray."

"Yeah, it's quiet here, too." I say, muting the television.

"No, I mean quiet. Like somebody just died quiet. I'm going to lose my mind here."

"It must be hard for you."

"Yeah, I guess. I think I'm going to sneak across the street to the gas station and try and get some real coffee and some magazines." I hear her yawn. "This really sucks. I miss you, Lumpy."

"I miss you too, Lauren. Hey, uh, good luck."

"Huh?"

"With the coffee. Good luck,"
"Oh, right. I thought you meant for my grandmother."

"Well yeah, that too," I say, and I know I should have just said "I miss you" and let her go.

After I ate two bowls of turkey noodle soup and two thick slices of home-baked *bapka* oozing with melted butter, Nana cleared off the kitchen table and spread open a dusty atlas in front of me. It was a map of Poland, she said, pointing to one of the red countries the key labeled "Communist." She kissed the tip of her finger and touched a dot named "Krakow." This was where she was born, and she described her village and farm south of that city, mentioning all the siblings, animals, and vegetables that abounded there. She especially loved her mother’s wondrous garden, filled with so many gorgeous flowers and aromas some of the village women thought she used witchcraft.

"When I was a little older than you I took a long train ride, also," she said, and I followed her callused finger as she slowly moved north through plains and steppes until she reached the large city of Gdansk on the coast. Her mother died when she was twelve and her father remarried. The step-mother immediately destroyed the flower garden and planted more potatoes. She hated my grandmother, and persuaded her husband that they could not afford to keep her on the farm with the new baby coming. If they sent her to America they wouldn't have to worry about her. Her father assented, and made arrangements for Nana to travel by train to Gdansk, where she would find a steamer to take her through the Baltic Sea and across the Atlantic.

"I was so scared on that train," she said. "I had never been so far away from home before. But in a car I met a nice group of girls my age, also heading to America. Some of them had cakes which they shared with the rest of us, and two
sisters even had a small bottle of wine from their grandfather's vineyard. Oh, how we laughed and sang! Folksongs everyone knew and lovesongs the sisters taught us. But every one of us was terrified, we didn't know what was in store for us. Train cars can be scary places, no?"

"I wasn't scared," I said.

"Of course not," she said, leaning close and pinching my nose. "Nana's little man."

That night, as I lay in what had been my father's bed, I tried to decipher my grandmother's words as they floated upwards from the downstairs screen porch to my open window. She was sobbing and I knew she was talking to my mother, a scene that would be repeated weekly for most of my visit. But tucked into Dad's faded New York Yankees' sheets, I heard another sound, the urgent chatter of cicadas. While putting me to bed, Nana had told me that you could tell how hot it was going to be the next day from the numbers of cicadas singing at night. The more that joined in, the hotter the weather. Connecticut was much warmer in June than San Francisco, and I missed the breezes and my kites. There was something reassuring about the cicadas, though. I imagined thousands of miniature roly-poly television weathermen sitting up in the treetops, joyfully spreading tomorrow's forecast so everyone could hear.

"Some strange guy was watching me in the quick-mart," Lauren says, and I sit up in bed. "He had a huge mustache and this filthy leather jacket. I saw his reflection in the mirror above the soda case as I poured my coffee."

"You're paranoid," I say, kidding, but I am nervous.

"No, listen. So I grab a People from the rack and go pay the old woman who's sitting behind bullet proof glass. Anyway, I head towards the door and he comes up
behind me, reaches over my shoulder and opens the door for me without a word. I was so scared I didn't even say thank-you."

"Jesus, Lauren, you had me worried."

"I'm not done. So he follows me across the street into the hospital, and I'm about to tell the security guard he's harassing me or something, when the guard says 'Good evening, Doctor Booker.' Isn't that odd?"

"You need sleep." I surf to the weather channel. An enormous raindrop smothers Saginaw. I do not want to drive six hours in a rainstorm.

"I know. It's really weird. Sometimes I forget Gram's dying a few feet away." She is whimpering again. "Ray, please come be with me. I can't do this. I don't want Gram to leave, she still has years ahead of her. Just last week she was talking about going to Hawaii with her A.A.R.P. group, and she was thinking of getting a kitten like Mrs. Miller. Oh please, Ray, please?

"Sweetheart, we talked about this, okay? I can't take the time right now. I can't."

"Fine," she says, and the phone clicks. The weatherman shifts to reveal the east coast. It will be a perfect day in Connecticut, unseasonably sunny and mild. The lilies and tulips on my grandparents' and father's graves should be budding, if the bulbs have survived the brutal winter.

Nana's garden bustled with movement: spiders, caterpillars, Japanese beetles. The closer I crouched to the dirt, the more life forms I discovered. Ladybugs munched on the undersides of leaves, while ants flitted willy-nilly over pebbles, stalks, stems and petals. When I lifted the white-painted rocks surrounding the flower sections, slugs, earthworms and centipedes all wiggled for safety. Most menacing, though, were the hairy bumblebees. They were not intimidated by arm swats or loud
screaming. Nana said the bigger the bee the less likely they would sting you, but I didn't buy it. She said the little ones like the yellow jackets and hornets were the ones to watch out for. To be safe I avoided them all.

Nana worked in her garden every day, weeding, trimming, transplanting. Sometimes she would sit for too long and have to holler for me to help her to her feet. It was the most beautiful yard I had ever seen. A large rectangle of flowers bloomed parallel to the back of the house, an amalgam of marigolds, posies, lilies and rosebushes. Perpendicular to the flower bed were the behaved vegetables, standing at attention like soldiers at reveille. Tomatoes, corn, lettuce, peppers, cabbage, carrots, celery and strawberries all tried to ignore the advancing vines of the grapes, pumpkins, squash, eggplant and cucumbers that threatened chaos. In the right corner of the yard two apple trees stood guard, while on the opposite side near the fence a dozen sunflowers scanned the sky like radar dishes. Patient grass controlled every other inch of property, but still sent scouts into each garden to try and gain more ground. Birds, chipmunks, squirrels, possums and occasional skunks and deer contributed to the struggle, not to mention neighbors' cats, dogs, and children.

One day in late August, I was patrolling the perimeter of Firebase Alpha. Reconnaissance reported the enemy was massing by the river, no doubt planning a nighttime invasion. Delta Company was busy filling sandbags, reinforcing trenches, and unspooling additional barbed wire. Everyone was on edge, especially me: I was out of candy smokes. I had finished a sweep of the apple trees when I spotted her approaching from the back porch. Nana walked beside her and pointed in my direction. I knew she was telling her about me. She was wearing a yellow sun dress with a white color and sandals. In her hair she had a matching stringy yellow bow, which looked like it belonged on a birthday present. A white purse hung from her
shoulder. I considered running for cover in the neighbor's yard, but Nana spied me among the branches in the apple tree.

"Ray, I want you to meet Samantha. She and her father have come for a little visit," Nana said.

"Hello," she said. She offered her hand for me to shake.

"Hi," I replied. I placed my rifle down and shook her hand.

"Now, Ray, I want you to play nice with Samantha for a bit while Mr. Szymanski and I have a chat. In a little while you can come in for some lemonade and cupcakes. How does that sound?"

"Okay," I said. I wondered what Grandma was up to. She used her soothing tone, as if I had skinned a knee or been stung by a wasp. "Ryan will find a fun game for you both to play," Nana said. She smiled and squeezed Samantha's shoulder. She smiled at me, too, and turned and walked toward the screen door.

"So what are you playing?" she asked, pointing to my M-16.

"War," I answered, heaving Ruth Ann over my shoulder. Dad had told me all good soldiers needed to name their rifles. I had named mine after my favorite baby-sitter, Ruth Ann McGuire. I had always loved sitting in her lap and smelling her hair as it fanned down onto my shoulders and the book she was reading me.

"War? Who wants to play that?"

"I do," I said.

"That's stupid. My Daddy says killing is wrong. He won't even let me have a water pistol."

"That's too bad for you," I said. Jimmy Reardon had told me the only worse enemy than Germans was girls. I leveled Ruth Ann for patrol and crept to the flower beds by the house. Samantha followed.

"Well, what war are you supposed to be fighting?"
"Shh! Keep it down, will you? The enemy's all around."

"How am I supposed to fight if I don't know who we're fighting?" She abruptly halted and crossed her arms.

"Vietnam, okay? We're protecting Firebase Alpha from VC attack."

"Vietnam? The one we lost?"

"Listen," I said. "Charlie's coming over that fence in two minutes. Your ass is gonna be grass unless you hump two clicks with me over to those apple trees. Got it?"

"What are you talking about? Charlie who?"

"Forget it," I said. I tossed Ruth Ann onto the grass and stomped over to the brook that divided Nana's yard from the Smiths'. I grabbed a handful of pebbles, sat down, and tried to hit a branch that had become ensnared on some of the larger stones sticking out of the water.

Samantha sat down next to me. She opened her purse and took out a compact. She studied her image in the tiny mirror, raising her lips and jutting her teeth out like a chimpanzee.

"Why are you here, anyway?" I asked.

"Daddy said I could come look at our new house."

"What new house?"

"This one. Duh," she replied. She puckered her lips, closed the compact and returned it to her purse.

"This is my grandmother's house." I could feel a strange sensation building up in my stomach.

"Not after she sells it to my daddy."

"What do you mean?"
“You are stupid, aren’t you,” she said. For the first time that afternoon she looked me directly in the eyes. Her’s were green and cold. “Your grandmother is selling this house to my parents. Then it will be my house. Understand? And right there is where we’re going to put the pool.”

She pointed and my eyes followed her finger to the garden. She stood up and ran towards the house. I watched her feet moving up and down on the grass. My stomach really hurt now, like when I eat too much at large family gatherings. I peered out into the garden and wondered how my grandmother was going to move all that stuff to wherever she was going.

The rain picks up as I turn north onto the interstate. I shiver in the chill, and switch the car heater up to max. It is always odd driving so early, the night of the morning. The headlights of oncoming cars create two expanding circles of light, circles that unify into one before enveloping me whole. Weather and traffic permitting, I should be in Saginaw by noon. I don’t know what shape Lauren will be in, whether she will be sad or despondent or furious. I pass a massive construction site full of enormous dump trucks and earthmovers that used to be a cornfield. A billboard proclaims the coming of a new mall, and I can’t help thinking about what happened to this farm’s family, and whether or not they are still together somewhere.
I listen for train whistles in the night,
among the trailing cicada trills,
and the tramp of fallen leaves
across the roadway. I lie in our giant bed,
and feel Autumn's first chill through
the open window. The air feels good
on the skin of my forearms,
the crook of my neck. One forgets
the simple pleasures of air
when a sick-room is sealed off.

How I hated you,
lying here, in the unbearable warmth
of this room. I dreaded your breath, the used air,
that damned bedpan. I could not stop sweating
as you lay on our bed, asking for a third blanket,
the green quilt from the trunk in the hallway.
I would tuck it around your form
as you once showed me how to bake a pie,
gently smoothing the dough over the apple slices,
covering each bulge, making them safe.

Headlights liven the room and flash
your watercolor above the dresser. A neighbor
pulls into the driveway next door after finishing
the night shift. He and my other friends
tell me I am still young, I should travel, see the world,
but they do not understand. I travel with
the invisible trains that sweep through our town,
night after night. It is I pulling the whistle,
signaling the towns we will never see,
warning the people we will never know.