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A DEMOLITION
BY PETER KORCHNAK
**Fifteenth Annual Northwest Perspectives Essay Contest Winners Judged by Jonathan Evison**

**Open Category**
- **First Place:** “A Demolition” by Peter Korchnak
- **Second Place:** “Road Apples” by Lynn Larsen
- **Third Place:** “Day One” by Gabriel Karaponsdo

**Student Category**
- **First Place:** “South-West” by Scott Latta
- **Second Place:** “Know Home” by Heather Durham
- **Third Place:** “An Improbably Aspiration” by Missy Anne Peterson

**Web Extra:** Visit OregonQuarterly.com to read essays by this year’s winners and finalists. Please join us for a reading of the winning essays on Thursday, May 29, at Gerlinger Hall. Details at OregonQuarterly.com/Essay
7:41 A.M.

I park Sam’s old Ford pickup on the near side of the driveway leading to a 1970s single-wide mobile home with smashed windows, and put on my work gloves. On the breeze that’s scattering the remnants of dawn into a cloudless October Tuesday, I catch a whiff of wood dust from the Weyerhaeuser plywood mill off Highway 126.

Sam clammers down from the green cab of his International dump truck, marked with years of heavy duty and “Sam Wood Construction, Inc.” in white Gothic script. “Let’s go take a gander at her. I sure hope Mike wasn’t blowing smoke up my ass and we can pack ‘er up by sundown.”

He skirts the tilt trailer hauling a faded-orange Hitachi excavator and flashes a thumbs-up at the 40-yard drop box by the curb. The knee-high grass rustles as he wades through it in his white double-XL tee, denim dungarees that could fit two of me, and giant sneakers.

The story’s the same as on the previous jobs: the last tenants abandoned the trailer after the park landlord raised the rent. Except I don’t like the looks of this one.

The carport is bulging with towers of phone books, banana boxes, and big, black trash bags, one of which is spewing bundled-up diapers. The wind turns, and a stench of decomposing shit hits me. Both of us gag; my heart sinks when I hear Sam say, “Haul these to the box after I get started.”

7:56 A.M.

The stairs creak. The door has been ripped off its hinges, and Sam sends it—and the letters “UCKER” sprayed across it—crashing to the ground. He steps into the trailer, says, “Grab anything you want,” and comes to such a sudden halt I almost run into him. The den reeks of stale beer, unwashed laundry, and rotting wood beneath the floor. We step over piles of clothes and broken liquor bottles, kick aside pieces of demolished furniture and beer cans. The wall by the entrance says “MOTHERF” in red spray. On the kitchen counter, pizza boxes battle with empty cups of instant noodles, pop cans, and fast-food wrappers. A mountain of trash piles around the floor forms a maze of strings snaking into itself, beams break, glass shatter, garments hang from the walls tumble and disintegrate, the aluminum roof fold crunch, drop, tear, crunch, drop—mesmerizes me. I watch the machine revs into life. The boom raised, the cab swivels, the equipment grabs one morsel of the trailer after another, reducing the structure into chunks heaped around the equipment. “Lock ‘n’ load,” Sam proclaims from the excavator’s cab, and the machine revs into life. The boom raised, the cab swivels, the steel tracks clatter toward the far end of the property. Once in position, the bucket joins the thumb like a steel hand to grasp a piece of the roof and siding, which it then rips up and deposits inside the home. When pink insulation that reminds me of cotton candy begins to fly, I put on my dust mask. The equipment grabs one morsel of the trailer after another, reducing the structure into chunks heaped around the wreckage, then crunches the rubble into smaller fragments and carries them out to the drop box. The rhythm—tear, crunch, drop, tear, crunch, drop—mesmerizes me. I watch the walls tumble and disintegrate, the aluminum roof fold into itself, beams break, glass shatter, garments hang from the bucket like seaweed.

Aside from avoiding getting hit by anything, my job now is to toss runaway debris onto piles, snag split-face cement blocks from beneath the frame and stack them on a pallet in the pickup bed, and hose down the site as needed to keep the dust down. I watch my motions, mindless, as if I, too, were a machine following commands. I start to make up a story about the people who lived in this thing that’s being crunched up into a big metal box, but find my imagination blank, wiped clean by the revulsion I felt earlier. Then I scold myself: Who am I to judge? Two master’s degrees from respectable European universities, and here I am, shoveling dirty sex toys and soiled diapers.

8:19 A.M.

Using a crowbar, I peel a section of skirting under the bathroom to find the sewer line cut and capped. Smiling, Sam points above the meter box; the cable snaps between the bolt-cutter blades as if I severed a feeding tube. I rip the rest of the skirting off and enjoy a sweep of relief when I spot no dead opossums or gas tanks below the home.

Sam heads to the rig. “Let’s double up on the hustle. We’re burning daylight and I don’t wanna come back tomorrow.”

8:51 A.M.

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11:53 A.M.
Sam checks his watch, lowers the boom, and makes an eating gesture. I bet on Carl’s Jr., but he suggests Wendy’s—closer on Mohawk anyhow.

Seated inside the pickup with windows rolled down, we inhale soggy burgers and fries. Teenagers and dudes in flannel shirts, sporty sunglasses, and tribal tattoos walk in and out of a trailer across the road and doors over. From behind the wheel, Sam tells a story of a drug house he tore down a while back, of a meth lab he once saw go up in flames, of another drug house that got busted while he was excavating a foundation next door. There are times, growing in frequency the longer I’ve worked for him, when I let his free associations go right through me. Now I am thankful for the distraction. Like support beams, the stories hold up the hollow place inside me and prevent me from caving into the nothingness that is expanding with each vacant lot we create. I hope Sam suspects nothing while dipping into the warehouse of his anecdotes so he can annihilate the silence that threatens to sit between us.

2:34 P.M.
Mike’s gleaming Dodge Ram pickup pulls up behind the tilt trailer. He’s the guy who gets Sam the demo jobs through his connections among the manufactured-home park owners. I gesture to Sam, who rolls his eyes.

“See if you can fill some of the holes in the box while I talk to the man.”

Inside the drop box I rearrange the detritus of other people’s existence and calculate that the crushed fragments of my life would barely fill a medicine cabinet. Anger wells up inside me with every piece of debris I break into smaller bits. I want to run away, to keep out of sight as much as possible. I want no one to see me, to know what’s happened to me in this country. No one must know this is the first time I’ve made a sacrifice for someone I love.

4:47 P.M.
With the home finally stuffed inside the drop box, the rusting frame drops onto the gravel. Sam contemplates the view from the silenced excavator.

“WE CAN PROLLY SQUEEZE THIS IN ON TOP OF THE BOX . . .?”
“I THINK SO, YOU’LL JUST NEED TO PUSH EVERYTHING DOWN WELL.”

5:52 P.M.
I rake the gravel for her. For her I make piles of insulation, glass shards, wood splinters, and scraps of aluminum. And at the end I shovel it all into the drop box for her like a period after a sonnet.

At last only the electric-meter box, the gravel, the driveway, and the drop box remain. There was nothing here and the people who lived here no longer exist, if they ever did, and no one will live in a trailer on this lot again.

I climb in and out of the drop box to make sure nothing sticks out above the rim. I sweep the driveway, the road, and the bed of the tilt trailer around the excavator Sam’s done tying down. I toss the broom and the shovel in the back of the pickup, close the gate, and glance at the site one last time. “We did good.”

Sam gives me a thumbs-up and climbs into the dump truck. “Tickles me pink. Now let’s get outta here.”

The sun sets into the pickup’s rearview mirror when I readjust it. We crawl past old trailers and several vacant lots, the most I’ve seen in a park, and I can almost hear Sam exclaim, “This place is goin’ to hell in a hand basket.” As we pass an ancient 10-foot-wide whose front window boasts a faded sticker of the flag fluttering above the motto These Colors Don’t Bleed, I realize that someday soon this entire park will be gone and the subdivision will spill over from next door. And no one will think of the trailers or the people who lived here, of the excavators that crunched them all up into boxes, of me.

I was never here.

Peter Korchnak examines experiences of immigration at American Robotnik and cowrites, with his wife Lindsay, the travel blog Where Is Your Toothbrush? His work has been published in several magazines in the United States and Europe, and he is the author of Guerilla Yardwork: The First-Time Home Owner’s Handbook.