

THE VAGABOND
and
A HORSEMAN OUT OF WORK

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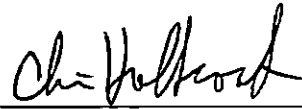
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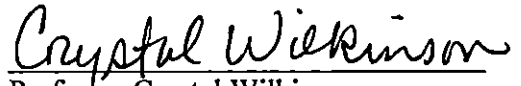
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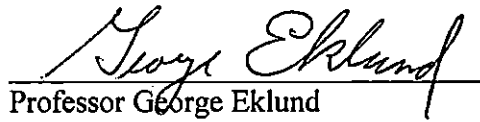
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Professor Chris Holbrook
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A Brief Look at the 'The Vagabond' and
'A Horseman Out of Work'

My thesis project is composed of two fiction short stories which focus on and examine themes including; solitude, humanity versus nature and the internal struggles of humanity versus self, longing, fear, sadness, and characters that exist as pariahs in society. I have attempted to present these themes in a new light, with new elements that act upon the foundation of old themes in an attempt to make these themes my own. The two stories included in my thesis are part of a much larger work tentatively entitled "Ash Clouds," which is composed of twenty short stories examining the afore mentioned themes interwoven with common threads of apocalypse, the destruction and collapse of society and self, individual misunderstandings of society and self, insanity, violence, struggle, bigotry, and the human condition stretched to extremes and placed under the tremendous encumbrance of various and often bizarre circumstances. The overall work is designed to evoke feelings of loss, hopelessness, anxiety, betrayal, and panic in the reader in order to exemplify single, ephemeral moments of beauty. It is also meant to act as a catalyst, to force introspection and wonder in the reader, to analyze society and the failings of our culture and ourselves. While there are moments of hope (for example, when Gheorge Bogdanescu speaks his own name at the end of "The Vagabond"), they are few and they are meant to be tiny beacons of light in a dystopian world that teeters on the brink of destruction, a world that is populated by lives that teeter on the edge of the physical and mental abyss.

These two stories, "A Horseman Out of Work" and "The Vagabond," each serve to create a personal discharge of fantasy, fetish, nihilism, exploration of the finite and the flawed, as well as my own commentary on the shortcomings of our 21st century culture, limited mindsets, impeded perspectives, and misunderstanding of the world. These stories are literary incarnations of my own mental masturbations, narratives that have setup within my brain, distilled and

fermented over time. They are meant as seriously playful mechanisms which aid me in my perception of the universe. These stories, while fiction, are mirrors of my own internal world. These stories are examinations of my own flaws, my own shortcomings and failures in life. These stories are displays of my own hopes.

These two stories are influenced directly by my own personal experiences in Romania during a two year period. The characters, the settings, the hopelessness, the solitude, these are all things that I witnessed and became while in a foreign country. Not only are these stories my own feelings and experiences, they are also my perceptions of the gray wastes that covered so much of Eastern Europe in the early 2000s.

While my own travel experience is the basis of these stories, it is not experience placed within a vacuum, but rather experience fed creatively through a plethora of outside influences that continue to drive me in my efforts to construct narrative and understand the world. I have a deep love and passion for the artists of the Northern Renaissance, Bosch and Brueghel the Elder to be specific. I love the detail, the minuscule efforts put into the paintings, the mystery of the works and their secondary and tertiary meanings. Paintings such as Bosch's "Garden of Earthly Delights" and Brueghel's "The Tower of Babel" and "The Triumph of Death" have been burned into my brain. The surreal landscapes of death, despair, chaos and the bizarre have become voices that I have tried to translate into my own work. Other, more contemporary artists, such as Salvador Dali and Max Ernst, have also influenced my sense of the surreal, my sense of storytelling in that the mind must become something more than the sum of its outward senses. Essentially, all of these artists have created images which I have folded over and over in my brain. Their works have become my own mental experiences which I have used as a basis to create my own internal universe of prose and poetry. In essence, I have tried to create works that

use content to evoke tactile and physical sensory while relying on unspoken, contemplative qualities that extract subconscious emotion in the reader. The images I choose are meant to remain in the mind of the reader, to become actual memories that are carried, to become pieces in the reader in some form or another. I want to create images in words as Bosch and Dali have created images in paint. I have experienced the beauty of a creative image burned into the mind and I wish to somehow relay that same experience to others in my own work. To be more precise, I believe that through literature we are able to create in the reader a new world so that our voice and thoughts manifest and conglomerate with the voice and thoughts of the reader, to become something new, something more whole. It is through literature (as well as other forms of art) that we move more toward the divine, more toward some unattainable artistic perfection, some singularity of human creativity. The beauty of all of this is in the journey presented, not in the goal to be attained.

Within the journey, while exploring, I have come upon artists and writers who I have allowed my mind to be open to. These are the ways in which I am influenced through literature. I am simply drawn to certain pieces, certain authors, certain lines. I am drawn to works that examine language through the use of narrative. I don't feel that I need an essay to explain to me the concept of beautiful language just as I don't need a mountaineer to explain the thrill of standing on the summit. What I need is to experience the summit of language for myself. Lately, I have tried to experience this summit through writers like Cormac McCarthy, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Flannery O'Connor, and H.P. Lovecraft. They are four very different writers each writing in very different genres with very different voices, but they all appeal to me because of language and narrative specific elements. Their works allow me to form internal dialogues and contemplations. They enable and open my mind to new understandings. Their voices and

thoughts are added to the amalgamation of ideas and creativities that exist within me. I enjoy the creative aspect of these writers, their ability to pull me along in their works. I enjoy the curiosity they build in me. Marquez and O'Connor are these surreal monuments (literary equivalents of Bosch and Dali perhaps) hewn into my literary bedrock. I am fascinated by their short stories; O'Connor for the crippled souls and bodies that populate her worlds, for her twisting, bizarre, often harsh voice; Marquez for his surreal, southern hemisphere tinted human commentary buried beneath layers of mystic beauty and simplicity; McCarthy for his terrible landscapes, his realistic dialogue, his misshapen characters, his beautiful language that accompanies the reader's descent into the most deplorable of scenes; Lovecraft for his mind-bending terrors, the atmosphere of impending doom which he invokes in his language, the feeling of never knowing. I am drawn to these writers and their examinations of human frailties and desires. I am drawn to the fringe aspects of their works, their outlooks and commentaries on life and death and struggle.

In my thesis, and in all of my work, I too am interested in life and struggle and death. I view the hyphen between our birth and death dates as being a line of struggle with self, struggle with the world and society, struggle with emotion, struggle with being human. I want to write about struggle and death because these two things make everything else we experience that much sweeter. Within the struggle is the brief rest, the low-hum white noise momentary pause. This is the feeling of sitting down on a comfortable chair after a hard day of work. This is the feeling of being loved and feeling that love for a single moment. It is the feeling of desire, of imagination, of a single thought entering the mind from nowhere and the creative impulse running with that thought until it all snowballs and gets blown out in type or scrawl or drunken rambling. The things that are the shittiest in life create the reasons for why life itself is majesty. By examining

the miseries of existence, I try to pay homage to the beauty that flickers momentarily during the string of life's desolations.

My goal in life is to write, to create, to birth thought, to birth dialogue, to try and understand the world through words and images and voices and at this stage in my literary life, as a man of 33 years, I write about struggle and death because everything else seems trivial, everything else seems momentary. Perhaps this will change as I mature. Perhaps as I learn more about the world, more about myself and others, I will begin new roads of exploration. I know this will happen because it has happened in the past. Things that once concerned me no longer do. Ideas that once governed my pen are now silent or evolved. I expect that as long as I continue to read and write, I will continue to grow. I will progress and learn and evolve. The subjects of my works are inconsequential because the journey is what is truly important. I am in search of momentary flickers of perfection in life and in my work. To find them, I feel I must wade through worlds of desolation.

The Vagabond

The fire in the can had long since died away, sometime before dawn when the sky was still black and the town was still asleep. A thin trickle of smoke crept up from the dead fire and vanished somewhere between the line of yellowish-grey sky and the soot covered bridge bottom above. It was a cold morning. It was the kind of morning that leaves the entire body feeling as though it were engulfed in whiskey the night before, swallowed, thrown up and left to lie about in sprawling, uncomfortable mess.

The Vagabond was up. He stretched and felt old and looked out from under his bridge onto the town. Drab. The remains of communist Romania, the grey and beige buildings built for utilitarian purposes only, they sat like duplicated monoliths beneath a haze of grey smoke and clouds that lived eternal and unmoving in the city sky. The dew was still upon the grass and the scent of exhaust, grime and urine was continuing the process of distillation in the Vagabond's nose.

He made his way up a small dirt path; slowly he went, there was no hurry. He noticed the same cracked concrete he had noticed every morning a thousand mornings before, the same concrete he had noted noticing a thousand times before. Near the top of the path, he looked out onto his bridge. The autos were few, mostly maxi taxis, taxi cabs and the occasional smoke belching bus. In an hour or so the street would be roaring with motorists. It was as if everyone was always late he thought. The world was late.

In the last few years the city had become utter madness. As more and more people left the country to seek work, and more people returned from working in foreign places, more money had come in and with it the extravagances that all humans enjoy; new clothes, new cars, TVs, cell phones, and all other manner of new toys. Things had changed a great deal in just a little

time, communism was dead, the west western ideas of democracy and capitalism had infiltrated. The world was moving forward, at least part of it. The Vagabond had never felt part of this movement. After communism collapsed, he had been unable to keep a job, domestic stress and drinking had encumbered him until his will was broken and the street became his fate. Youth had left him and the world was moving on.

The Vagabond stood on the curb as still and stoic as the communist apartment blocks that surrounded him. He had done this same routine for years now. Wake up, stretch, climb the hill, notice the cracked concrete, stand on the corner, cross the street and take his place there in the park, in *Podu Ros*.¹

The park was as empty and dull as the city around it. Dew still covered the grass and what leaves remained on the bushes. The benches were vacant except for two small dogs which sniffed about, under the legs. The doughnut stands and pastry shops were just opening.

The autumn smell of wood fires floated in the still air. The Vagabond sat staring at a pastry shop called "Patty France." Inside, two ladies milled about preparing doughnuts and pastries and gogosi² for the morning work crowd. Pink and blue writing which carried the name of the shop. How out of place he thought. What bright and happy colors against such a backdrop as this city.

Within fifteen minutes of the Vagabond taking his usual place, the doughnut and pastry shops were bustling, the park was filling with people who were on their way to work or school or just coming home from some hellish night shift. The Vagabond watched as the people did the same thing they did every morning; take a pastry, perhaps a coffee, wait for the bus or maxi taxi, sit on a bench and hurriedly eat. For the Vagabond, the days of those people appeared just as

¹ Podu Ros literally means Red Bridge.

² Gogosi is a type of pastry often filled with fruit, chocolate, or cheese.

repetitive and hard and toilsome as his days. He felt his life was an exhausting trance, a never-ending climb and everyone was together in this thing.

For the next several hours the Vagabond sat on that bench with his greasy leather hat at his feet. Occasionally he would ask someone passing by for some money. Occasionally they would drop him a coin, occasionally they would curse him. Usually he sat there, sometimes lifting his hat to someone as they passed. There was a certain art to begging that the Vagabond had never seemed to master it. By noon though, even with his lack of skill, the Vagabond had accumulated a bit of money, enough for the day. He placed his hat on his head and walked away.

Prometeu³

He made his way from the park and across the big bridge of Podu Ros which was probably five or six times larger than his own bridge. He turned left immediately after the bridge and found his way into a small grocery shop called Prometeu. He opened the door and went in where he was met immediately with a screeching voice.

“You have money?” yelled the fat, middle aged woman behind the counter. Everyone in the store turned to see to whom she was speaking. The Vagabond knew the normal routine and did not expect this. The fat lady was unfamiliar, new to the shop. For a moment he stood confused and felt the stares of the crowd in line. A customer at the counter was impatient and the fat lady yelled again. “Get out. We don’t want you in here. This is a place for people who buy things.”

The crowd was still staring. The Vagabond, fumbling, hands in pockets, was still trying to remove the coins he had cadged.

“Out!” The lady shouted even more loudly now. The impatient customer, an ugly man

³ Prometeu is the name of a small grocery shop. The Romanian for Prometheus implies a degree of torment here.

with a creased forehead, turned and said something vulgar. A young girl in the line snickered and nudged the rib of her friend. The Vagabond felt heat rush into his face. In his mind he cursed, but when he went to speak he could only stammer stupidly. He felt spit on his lip and wiped it away, forgetting about the coins. The face of the snickering young girl took on a look of disgust as she turned her head.

Outside the store the Vagabond felt tears well up inside him. He was familiar with the store and the lady that used to work there had always treated him kindly. An instant feeling of deep loss - the store, the unknown lady, the routine - all swept over him. Something else had been taken from him. He felt poor.

MeliMelo

It took the Vagabond some time to come up with an idea of where to go. The shops made him nervous and so did crowds, at least crowds with which he was unfamiliar. Eventually he decided that he would pick a shop at random, his money would be in hand upon entering and he would show it to the store keeper immediately. He walked for sometime, nearly an hour as he built the courage to enter the next shop. All this time, some tiny distant tune played in his head. Far away and faint was the music. It was both strange and familiar and it brought him a sense of comfort as he walked.

The second shop was called MeliMelo and it was a little larger than Prometeu, but there were fewer people. The young girl at the counter said nothing as he entered. He took his place in line and stared down at the ground. He shuffled his feet twice and found he was at the counter looking the young girl in the eye.

“I’ll have 4 cigarettes and a bread,” said the Vagabond.

The young girl quickly got the items and placed them on the counter.

“100 grams of ham.”

The young girl retrieved it, wrapped it in a small piece of wax paper and placed it on the counter next to the bread and cigarettes.

“Vodka. Sanuita. A small one.”

The girl fetched the vodka.

“That’s all,” he said.

Hingerii⁴

A monumental sense of accomplishment had come upon the Vagabond. He had forgotten all about his encounter with the fat woman in Prometeu. To celebrate, he pulled a large chunk from the warm loaf of bread he had purchased and crammed the entire piece into his mouth. He had not realized his hunger. He walked through a couple of alleys chomping loud and without any thought. Several dogs barked at him from over a fence but he paid no attention. The warmth and the taste of the bread, his accomplishment in MeliMelo had helped diminish his fear. The faint song still played in his head, ever so distant and calm.

The Vagabond came upon a park in an area of town called C.U.G. which used to be an industrial area consisting of many factories and warehouses, most of which had long been abandoned. The park was bordered on its edges by several apartment blocks that looked like every other apartment blocks. Toward the rear of the park, a small Eastern Orthodox Church was under renovation. Several men were near the church talking and pointing. In the center of the park were several children. Two women in their thirties sat on a bench toward the edge of the park. The women were talking, their voices rising in volume every second.

⁴ Hingerii means The Dog Catchers

The Vagabond made his way to a bench and sat down. He removed the ham from his pocket and took it gently from the wax paper. He set it beside him. He tore another piece from the loaf of bread which had now lost its warmth. He popped a small piece of the bread into his mouth and chewed for a moment before biting into the ham. His mouth full, he sat back comfortably against the dark green bench. The construction workers were still talking and pointing, the children were still playing, the two women were still talking. One of the women was standing now. It all seemed very normal to the Vagabond and he felt as if he were a part of each scene he watched, and that the people he watched were as well part of the scene that was specific to his life and doings.

The rustling of dry branches caught his ear and he turned to see a disheveled and tragic-looking man appear from the overgrown bushes to the right of the park. He knew the man although he could not place his name.

Quickly, the Vagabond placed the ham back into the wax paper and then into his pocket. He looked back at the approaching man and secured his bread as well placing it beneath his tattered coat.

“Salut,” said the man.

“Salut.”

“I need some money. I have not eaten in some time,” said the man.

The Vagabond noticed the face of the man and his memory clicked. His name was Bosei. The Vagabond had first met Bosei almost a year ago in the park at Podu Ros. He could not help but think that Bosei looked rough now, much older than a year ago. He noticed welts, big and red like cherry tomatoes upon Bosei’s crumpled face. He noticed Bosei’s missing teeth and ran his tongue over his own feeling the spaces in his own mouth. Bosei’s hair was matted, oily and

looked like strips of rags.

“I have no money for you,” said the Vagabond.

“I saw you eating food there.” Bosea was feral in his movement. “Let me have some.”

The Vagabond sat still for a second and looked at Bosei. The young man was beyond rough. His clothes were totally filthy and he was wearing no shoes. He looked like a man covered in all of the dirt and grime and grease and filth of the entire world.

“Here.” said the Vagabond handing Bosei a piece of bread.

“I saw you eating meat,” said Bosei.

“I have no meat,” replied the Vagabond. “All I have is this bread.”

Bosei jammed the bread into his mouth. He chewed frantically, breathing in only in muffled breaths.

“I need some money,” said Bosei.

“I have no money for you,” replied the Vagabond. “Go away from me.”

Bosei smacked the Vagabond hard upon the back of his head. Instantly the Vagabond felt heat well up in him. He remembered the store where he had been embarrassed only a short time ago. His heart fluttered and he stood up.

“What? Look at that!” exclaimed Bosei pointing to a small blue truck that had just arrived.

The Vagabond watched Bosei for a second and then looked at the truck which had pulled up to the far side of the park.

“Dog Catchers,” laughed Bosei as a half chewed chunk of bread spewed from between his missing teeth.

The Vagabond did not reply but watched the truck as two men got out and went to the

back of the vehicle. They opened the door and one man removed a rifle. The second man carried a long stick with a rope at the end which had been tied in a loop.

“Watch this! They shoot those dogs with drugs,” said Bosei still laughing pointing to several dogs which were sniffing about the park. The Vagabond had noticed no dogs since he had been there, not until the truck had arrived. The idea of dog catchers created a tiny sense of joy in him as the memory of the slap to his head faded.

For several minutes the two men from the truck readied their equipment. The man with the gun held a small bag and removed something from it walking slowly toward one of the dogs.

Bosei laughed hard. “Stupid bastard dogs, he tricks them with meat!”

The man tossed the meat from the bag toward the dog and aimed his gun. Incredulously the dog sniffed the meat for a second. The man fired the gun which made no more sound than rushing air. A yellow feathered needle struck the dog deep in its neck. The animal collapsed.

“Got him!” yelled Bosei with his stupid toothless grin. “Got that bastard dog. That’s how they do that!”

The Vagabond made no reply as he watched. He sat back down keeping his eyes fixed on the man with the gun who was now reloading the weapon. The second man, the one with the stick, came to the fallen dog and wrapped the animal in a pale blue blanket which seemed to be stained with something dark blotted about in spots. He then lifted the animal and took it to the truck.

For an hour and a half, Bosea and the Vagabond watched the two dog catchers put down a total of five dogs in the park. Each time a dog went down Bosei seemed to lose his mind with excitement and curses. “That’s how they do it!” he would shout. Everything the dog catchers did was followed by a most obvious comment from Bosei.

“Dogs in heaven now!”

“Bastard dogs!”

“Look, that dog tried to trick him!”

“Dogs think they so smart.”

“Dogs in heaven now!”

“He got him. Look!”

The Vagabond never spoke but inside he enjoyed the spectacle immensely. The commentary from Bosei was annoying at first but the repetition and ridiculous obviousness of his comments somehow added to the event. Sometimes Bosei would laugh so hard or talk so fast he would spit everywhere. Other times he would laugh so hard he would cough and then that cough would persist for several minutes on and off while he continued his commentary. It was at these times that the Vagabond felt a pity for the young man. The Vagabond knew it was unlikely that with such a cough he would last another winter. Coughs were a prophetic device of the body for people like Bosei, subtle harbingers of doom. Every now and then Bosea would ask the Vagabond for some money and every time the Vagabond answered by saying he had no money for him. He thought about this, hearing the prophecy of Bosei’s cough and how it would most likely mean that Bosei faded during the horrid winter. Money wouldn’t help him though.

After putting the last dog into the blue truck, the two men loaded up the gun and drove away. Bosei made a few nonsense comments related to nothing, asked for some more money and upon being refused yet again, walked off mumbling and vanished between two buildings.

Silence. The park was empty. It was late afternoon now, around four. The Vagabond took a cigarette from his pocket and lit it with a match. He inhaled and held the smoke inside. He closed his eyes and exhaled, slow and methodical in his action. The gentle tune in his head

mixed with the smoke and the brisk air and the day became almost perfect. There was perfection in the air at that moment, a single pause between action and movement and life and the Vagabond spent as much time as he could absorbing it.

Cainii

The sun had set behind the monoliths and the grays and beiges of the familiar city had become muted and flat. Shadows spilled down the faces of the great communist giants like blocky rivers of black ink. The entire world appeared monochrome except for the occasional small slit of a window from which cozy warm orange glowed. A feeling of longing had somehow found its way into the heart of the weary Vagabond as he made his way back to his bridge. The warmth of the orange glow from the faceless blocks around him had rekindled a memory of childhood, a late arrival at his own home where his mother waited for him with warm tea. The memory was as distant and faded now as the square, monochromatic mountains which engulfed him.

It was still a good two kilometers back to the bridge. The walk wound through the labyrinth of apartment blocks and alleys. The Vagabond passed through several sections of blocks without seeing a person. He passed courtyards where children had played during communism but that now were vacant, overgrown with thorns and thicket. Rusted playground equipment stood like crippled skeletons, skinless giants twisted and bent. Discarded crates and pallets lay busted, already rummaged for anything of value. He stopped and took several pieces of broken wood, looking over his shoulder at least three times as if he were stealing. After all, it wasn't his. Nothing was.

He placed the smaller pieces into his plastic bag. He tried several times with a larger piece of wood but found that fitting it into the bag would be impossible. He discarded it and began to leave when something from behind him caught his ear.

As he turned, he had almost begun to apologize thinking the sound had come from the owner of wood when he noticed, not a man standing behind him but a dog. There were two more, several meters to the foremost dog's rear. All were emaciated, bony and thin. They looked as though the apocalypse had been loosed upon them. The Vagabond had seen this look before. It was a look of nothing to lose, a look of one final gamble which begat all or nothing. It was a look that seemingly transferred from the eyes of all three animals to the eyes of the Vagabond and within his mind he had no choice but to accept the bet. He had seen men with this same look in their eyes. They had been desperate men.

The lead dog barked. Flashing white teeth streaked the darkness. The two rear dogs followed suit. In their snapping was something mean, anger contrived from a lifetime of suffering and pain, a lifetime of torment and desperation.

The Vagabond winced and dropped his plastic bag of broken wood. His stance became rigid and he felt his heart pulse. Sweat formed on his brow and a cold chill spilled over him. Without taking his eyes from the lead dog he bent his knees and searched for the big piece of wood he had set down. His fingers scrambled in the warm dirt. The smell of wood fire mixed with freshly cooked sarmale⁵ filled the air.

The lead dog lunged forward, flying up from the ground and through the air. The Vagabond panicked, forgot about his search and went to step back. His knees and reflexes failed him simultaneously and by the time he could react, the lead dog was upon him.

⁵ Sarmale is a rice and meat mixture generally wrapped in grape leaves or cabbage. The rolled composition is then baked.

In a chaotic blitz of black nothingness and white flashes of teeth, devilish eyes, the growling and the snapping of the dog's jaws, the Vagabond had somehow been able to get his arm up, as a sort of shield. He felt the teeth, tiny needles, stingy pain on the bone. Cacophonies of growling anger surrounded him and he realized one of the other beasts had begun to pull at his pant leg.

Another white snap at his face. He managed to keep the snapping head from his face.

More growling, raging drums, a snapping black bark.

The music that had once been so faint and distant was now pounding with heavy drums and deep melodies, imposing structures arose from the sound, tombstone like monoliths grew in the mind.

The Vagabond imagined looking down upon the situation. How he scuffled in the dirt in that bizarre vision as three beasts turned upon him. How weak and thin he looked. He noticed his thin pants and his stupid dirty shoes, his all-purpose shirt and the bag of wood pieces that he would have used for fire. For a moment he felt a tear in his eye as he realized what was happening. He had come upon death and he was to meet his fate in the same way as if he had lived 10,000 years ago. He was to be some lowly beasts' dinner.

Reality overtook the vision as the dog's teeth ripped through his shirt sleeve and pierced his forearm. His free arm searched mechanically for the big piece of wood which was hidden somewhere in the night.

As the third dog joined in the scene the Vagabond discovered his bag of wood. His creature of a hand scuttled through the dirt to find the opening. More needles. More pain. More white snapping. The air felt thick.

His hand searched maniacally. The Vagabond could hear his own breathing and the world

slowed. The drums pounded in his mind. His head jerked backward. Orange streamers of light from the distant windows passed by in elongated forms, violent streaks. The white of the teeth were paused and stretched. The pain in his arm was infinite.

His hand gripped a dagger of wood. With all his might the Vagabond rammed the pointed end directly into the neck of the dog on his arm. The beast shrieked and released its grip. Blood, warm and wet, splattered the Vagabond's face.

One of the dogs on his legs had released as its leader fell to the side. The other was unaware of the danger until the Vagabond sat up and jammed the wooden dagger into the beast's ear. It yelped in pain and jumped to the side. Then its front legs gave out and the dog fell upon its face, its ass in the air, its stomach heaving.

The Vagabond jumped to his feet. His nerves were frayed and he was manic with adrenaline. The uninjured dog had taken several steps back now. The leader was yelping in agony on its side, kicking in the black dirt. The dog with its ass in the air had stopped breathing and was hunched over as if in heat.

Warm pain shot through the Vagabond's arm and into his shoulder. Bending over, cradling his wounded arm, he picked up the sought after large piece of wood. He yelled something unintelligible at the dog as it backed up farther. In a mocking motion, the Vagabond swung the piece of wood wildly and the dog retreated even more.

When the dog was a safe distance, the Vagabond walked to the yelping dog on its side. Raising the wood into the air with one arm he brought it down five times, until the brains and the skull and the blood of his attacker were bashed out and spread across the battleground in like shadows.

Death was warm and black, a bizarre shadow, oily and strange. It was a disturbing image

one he associated with chaos and adrenaline and rage, million year old instincts and heart pounding fear. The Vagabond clambered around in a fog of drums, pounding heartbeats, the smell of wet dog and fresh baked sarmale. His head reeled and he collapsed to his knees vomiting.

By the time he returned to his bridge, the Vagabond was exhausted by pain and faint with emotion. His heart was racing and the image of the shadowy beasts, the snapping white teeth and hunger driven eyes were all fresh in his mind. He took the wood from the plastic bag and emptied his pockets. His identification card fell on the ground and moonlight gleamed from the laminated face.

“Gheorge Bogdanescu.”

He read his name aloud. It was a name rarely spoken and when he heard his own voice, he felt a certain comfort. He stared at the card for a moment. He remembered his mother, the orange glow of lights on his block, the smell of wood fires, Christmas and sarmale. He rinsed his arm off with some vodka and wrapped the wound in a bundle of rags. The song in the back of his mind continued playing as he lay still on his blanket. The punctures were painful to the touch, they burned. The idea of disease traced a fine and instantaneous line through his mind before he quickly put it aside. Worrying about such things was useless. He downed the remaining vodka and felt the pain and the dogs and the day drizzle away as he lay motionless under the bridge. Before he knew it, the vodka led him to sleep.

What time had passed since sleep had taken him, Gheorge did not know. Throughout his dreams the song continued its slow and distant rhythm. Sometime in the night, that distant

rhythm grew in volume until it pounded in Gheorge's head. Violent dreams of snapping dogs and Bosei laughing and wicked fat store ladies accompanied the music. When he could take no more, when the effects of the vodka could no longer subdue the subconscious madness, Gheorge awoke in a fit of violent thrashing to find that he was encased in something warm and wet and hellacious foul. A smell like rotting fish, warm vomit and garbage surrounded him. He was no longer under his bridge. It was pitch black except for a muddy light which seemed to be emanating from outside some skin-like membrane. Gheorge realized that he was inside the membrane, cuddled up in a fetal position like a disgusting baby. He gasped for air but only foulness filled his lungs. Fetid liquid was in his mouth and eyes and ears, all warm and dark and writhing. The dog bites on his arm seared in pain. Then, a most horrid sound came, some type of engine, roaring loud and very close, right outside the membrane.

The flaccid outer skin of the thing which surrounded Gheorge pulsed and then began to open, spilling in sickening white light and suffocating heat. His eyes burned with the liquid and the light. A chainsaw blade nearly hit his face before the splitting membrane tore completely apart. The saw blade vanished back into the white light and the membrane spilled Gheorge bewildered and choking out and onto burning hot sand.

A Horseman Out of Work

The pickup had died nearly ten miles back, just before it had started to rain. The man walked slow and stiff, an umbrella in one hand, his other hand hidden beneath his coat holding a pistol. He whistled a faint tune as he walked. He avoided the pooled water and the occasional fallen tree branch and every other obstacle that lay in the road.

The rain drizzled a mist that was impossible to avoid, like walking inside a cloud. The umbrella did little to prevent the build up of droplets and finally the man gave up and put the umbrella in the red backpack he carried over one shoulder. He raised the collar of his olive green coat and hunkered his head. He adjusted his hand on the pistol and moved along.

The road wound in and out of the hills like an infinite black snake. Up and down, through clearings and under crippled finger-like tree branches. It was autumn, the leaves were gone and the whole place looked dead and brown. Along the road were cars, trucks, all with flat tires, some with bullet-holes, some damaged or wrecked, a few with people still inside. Skeletons wearing clothing. The man searched the cars as he passed. He rummaged through the glove boxes and under the seats and turned keys in ignitions and took keys from ignitions and opened trunks. He found a cooler in one trunk, dragged it a hundred yards and abandoned it in the middle of the road. In another trunk he found a Hustler magazine. He flipped through the pages and tossed it to the ground. He found a jack and a tire iron. He put the tire iron under his belt. Some doors were difficult to open, glued shut by time and the elements. Sometimes bones and bodies fell out. Sometimes nested rats scurried out and under the vehicles or over the man's shoes. The man delighted in the rats and their quick movements. Often he thought about how the little beasts had done so well at surviving. Sometimes he would commend them for their bravery. Sometimes he would think about their tiny brains. He often compared the rat brain to the human brain and he had found that brain size was meaningless. The rats still existed.

Looking through the remains of people's past lives was an amusement for the man. Somehow it was a peek into the private lives of dead motorists and he cherished rummaging through their things. The things people carried on their final trips, the things they tried to hide. He had amassed a collection of trinkets during the last two years; a picture of a family, a Smurf figurine with the face scuffed off, a glass eye he had taken from a skull, a copy of *The Catcher in the Rye* with a bullet hole right in the center, the ankle joint from a prosthetic leg.

In one car there was a child's seat. He stood and stared and looked at the leaves and the acorn in the seat. He recalled the early days of the chaos and how he had felt an anxious wonderment as if a thunderstorm was approaching. He stared at the seat and thought of the plagues that swept the world, the bloody rains and the earthquakes, the famine that had precluded all of the other horrors, the eventual panic that had engulfed humanity. The riots and the madness seemed so long ago, memories in a quiet world. He stared into the child's seat, at the weathered grey plastic and the frayed and torn material. A blanket was on the floor boards of the car with what looked to be little moons as a pattern. He stared and thought about the starving masses, the images of scrambling herds of panic driven people on the news channels before TV and electricity had gone extinct. He remembered the day the military lost control, the fires that engulfed the cities, the floods that engulfed the shores. The child's seat was empty and he was glad.

Birds chirped. For the birds the world was the same as it had always been. The man took note of this as he adjusted the tire iron for a more comfortable fit. He thought about the birds and the deer and the cats, things that were. He thought about farms and construction sites and ice cream and people, things that were no more. He loved the new world for he was one of the creators, a tiny, bipedal god who had helped bring about the apocalypse, the end of all mankind.

He was Hitler and Stalin and Alexander rolled into one. His name was Napoleon and as far as he knew, he was the last person on Earth.

He was hungry.

He could have stopped anywhere along his walk as there were plenty of houses, but he didn't like being in houses, at least not sleeping in houses. There were always sounds, he heard things; whispers and footsteps and groans, kids laughing and balls bouncing and babies crying. Houses were full of sick old memories that he wished had died along with everyone else. The world was no place for families and babies and laughing and bouncing balls. The world was no place for ice cream and sleeping in houses. Those things, like all things, had their time. Apocalypse had come and gone and so had his purpose. Now, he was out of work and all that was left was an empty world.

The world around him was no surprise. It did not feel strange or wrong or out of place. It felt natural, like something he had always prepared for. When he was in high school he used to imagine everyone dead, the cars still, and the cities dark. He would imagine going into a model train store and finding the owner dead behind the glass counter. He wanted to take all of the trains and the miniature buildings and landscape building materials and find a quiet basement where he could set up his train, where he could build a tiny world.

He sat against the bumper of a 1976 Champion. He smoked an almost perfect cigarette, one from a pack he had scavenged the day before. He thought about the town where he had found the cigarette machine, the cliché little town that looked like every other little town. He turned and looked over his shoulder. He squinted to see through the trees but he could see

nothing. He thought about the pillar of smoke that he left behind. He inhaled the smoke from his perfect cigarette, exhaled a white cloud and thought about the idea of the perfect cigarette. He thought that it had been a long time since he had a cigarette and perhaps the cigarette he was smoking wasn't perfect at all. Perhaps it was stale, old, maybe it was moldy inside. He inhaled again and looked at the thing between his fingers.

Napoleon spilled out of the woods and the hills into a valley where buildings became more frequent. The cloud of mist dissipated. In the bowl of the valley stood a drive-in theatre where kudzu was growing over the screen. In the center, in the place where the kudzu had yet to grow, someone had written *Revelation 6:8* in black spray paint. Some birds flew up from the kudzu. They flew toward the hills and vanished amongst the dead colors of autumn. The concession stand in the middle of the drive-in lot had been burned to the ground. Black streaks spread from the center as if a bomb had gone off. The man smiled and whistled and adjusted his backpack.

He rounded a corner of woods that edged a small field. In the center of the road lay a gasoline tanker on its side. Several other cars were positioned around the truck and everything was black and burned. More skeletons lay in the refuse, in the twisted steel and debris. The tank was split open on the other side, a gaping wound charred as if some giant had burst from within. Napoleon looked inside the opening. Water had pooled and mosquitoes had gathered. He looked around the truck and turned his eyes upon the small town in the distance. He lit another cigarette and spit into a puddle of water. The cigarette was perfect.

The street that led into town was littered with sporadic debris; soggy papers dampened by endless mist, two cars, one of which was on its roof, broken glass, broken crates from an overturned farm truck, a tire, a shoe, a rusted metal frame of what looked like a wheelchair was in a ditch. Grass had grown up in the cracks of pavement. Water was puddled in dull and misty reflections. There was a fresh smell in the air, the smell of ozone, the smell of grass after rain. A house to the side of the road sat burned and black, its chimney still standing strong amongst the relic of skeletal structure. The yard was completely overgrown and a bicycle lay propped against the porch. The scene reminded the man of a baby doll he had once seen in the bottom of a well. It was all empty, abandoned. Up ahead was another mess of cars.

A ragged dog stepped from behind a blue Volkswagen Beetle. The animal was sickly, skin stretched over a sad frame. Mangy hair covered the thing. It didn't notice the man at first and when at last it did, it snarled with grey teeth exposed. Hunger seemed to grow in the dog's eyes and it stood with its head near the ground, a growl rising against the buildings and the loneliness of the street. The man gazed into the dog's eyes and for the briefest of moments they shared the same hunger, the same solitude, the same desolation. The man snarled mockingly as he pointed the pistol toward the dog. He pulled the trigger.

He built a tiny fire in front of a furniture store that no longer had windows. The place looked like a cave, a gaping mouth full of darkness. He collected some cinderblocks and some smaller stones and made a small pit to protect against the wind, but there was no wind. The fire was small, controlled, purposefully made with modesty. He watched the tiny flames and felt a fascination kindled in his brain. He added some wood and the fire popped a bit. He found it an

effort to pull himself away from the burning spectacle. He gutted the dog and tossed the innards into a garbage can near a lamp post. He washed his hands in a dirty pool of standing water. What little hair remained on the mangy animal was then singed off in the fire. Then he roasted the meat on a makeshift spit, a piece of rebar with which he impaled the thing. Once in a while he would turn the meat. It was the first meat he had eaten in days. It was the first meat that hadn't come out of a can in weeks, maybe months. He thought about time and how summer had come and gone and how he no longer knew the day but only the season. He thought about the grey days and the autumn trees and the more frequent cold rains. Maybe it was October, maybe November. He thought about how days were marked by night and the year marked by the seasons. How the seasons seemed one long day. He listened to the birds. He remembered punching the time card at work so long ago. He remembered alarm clocks and red lights and bus schedules, a girl he thought he loved but was sure she never loved him. Doris was her name. She was dead now, just like everyone else. He thought of a dog he had owned when he was a little boy and the weekend he had gone away with his mother to visit his aunt. When he returned home, he found out that his mother's boyfriend had shot the animal for tearing up a shoe. The boyfriend was drunk and had left the dog on the back patio in a dried blood stain. The stain looked black in his memory.

The meat was great. He smoked.

After eating, Napoleon placed the remaining meat in his bag. He wrapped it in a newspaper he had taken from a newspaper stand. The paper's headline read "Global Panic." He didn't care. That was nearly two years ago. Back when there were people to read things. He put

out the fire and walked into the furniture store with the bag of meat. Near the back of the showroom he found an art deco green couch slightly mildewed and rich in the aroma mold. Testing the couch as if to buy it, the man found it was soft and dry. He lay on the couch, the pistol to his side, the meat on the floor. He looked at the paneled ceiling, the disarray of the place as if big hands had shuffled the panels and the furniture. He closed his eyes. No more bars. No cold beer. He remembered buying a couch several years ago. Then he remembered that he had bought the couch to make Doris happy. She had said that she needed comfort and that it would make his place more inviting. Her name was Doris. Her name echoed in his mind for a moment. He missed cold beer.

Sleep took Napoleon. All of his aches and pains departed as he sank deep into a steady snore. He stopped breathing, for nearly a minute, and then he choked himself back into the rhythm of unconsciousness. This happened repeatedly until he rolled onto his side and curled his knees. And in the silence of the showroom, Doris slid into his brain.

She stood with her back against the door frame. She looked bent and awkward. Her long, thin body looked borrowed, somehow forced. She exhaled a cloud of thick smoke that swirled into the other room. She looked at Napoleon.

“It’s not my fault I can’t have children,” she said.

Napoleon didn’t respond. He just looked at his work boots next to the bed.

“Well, it’s not my fault either.”

“I know it’s not your fault. Every time I mention it’s not my fault, you have to say it’s not your fault either.”

Doris was crying now. Her usually pale cheeks were flushed rosy. She exhaled more smoke.

“You don’t know what it’s like. You don’t know. You men. You stupid men.” Her usual gravel like voice had broken mid sentence and become a high pitched flail, like an exploded rocket spiraling smoke on its way to earth.

Napoleon shifted uncomfortably on the bed. His mind wandered to his work, to the air conditioning unit he had repaired earlier in the day and the thin woman with big eyes who had thanked him. Then, back to the previous week, the last time he and Doris had made love and how afterward she was uncomfortable and refused to stay. She had said something about not knowing what to do, about not knowing how to commit. He had tried to explain to her how he felt, one of those frantic conversations that take place as one person is putting on a coat while the other person is trying to get them to stop. Doris didn’t stop.

Doris lit another cigarette. Napoleon lit one as well. Light streamed in through the dusty window. Everything in the room looked orange. The air smelled thick.

“You know I love you. No matter what...” Napoleon tried to put sincerity into his voice but he was unsure of how it came out. He wasn’t used to such conversations and it all seemed like a play. Doris looked at him with swollen eyes, her cigarette dangling sad from between her fingers.

“You always say that.” Doris was standing in the door frame now, as if scared to commit fully to coming into the room. “You men are always the same, always saying that you love some woman.”

Napoleon shook his head.

“It doesn’t matter to me that you can’t have kids. I don’t care...”

Doris was sobbing now.

“Don’t tell me what I can do. Don’t you tell me.” Her glasses were in her hands and she was wiping her eyes. She looked old. The ceiling behind her was sagging and stained.

“What do you want me to do?” asked Napoleon.

Doris seemed to analyze the man before her. Her eyes squinted and she appeared confused. There were sirens outside and she turned to see the commotion.

“Nothing. I don’t want you to do nothing.” She said as she stared out the window. Napoleon heard a sob and then a sniffle and then Doris turned and went to the front door and the front door opened and closed.

“Wait.”

He heard the heels of Doris’s shoes descend the staircase and fade out of range. He sat in the smoky orange light of the room listening to the sirens outside.

The night was silent except for the crickets and the frogs who played their music. Pitch black had vanquished Doris and Napoleon realized he was awake. He rolled onto his side and stared into the darkness as sleep came and took him again.

Morning was grey and seemed sick. Some chattering birds that roosted somewhere within the store had awakened him. He hated the birds and wished that they had been taken along with all the people. Not a single sparrow falls he thought to himself as a thin smile ran across his lips. He rubbed his thumbs against his index fingers feeling the layered grime from days without bathing. He remembered alarm clocks and red lights and bus schedules and waiting in lines. He remembered wasting time. He was glad there was death and desolation. The old world was gone. No more acting or standing in lines. No more righteousness. All of that was over. Within a

matter of months, the world had come apart and man returned to what man was meant to be, a survivor, a gatherer. These thoughts stretched the thin grin across his lips until it grew into a smile.

He chewed on a piece of cold dog as he stepped out of the furniture store. He stretched his thin arms and gazed up at the clouds that ruffled by. He felt damp in his clothes and his skin. The couch had been comfortable. The pistol hung heavy in his belt. His mind was on work and the open world that lay before him. He felt as if there was much to do.

Main Street was a picture into the past, into what humans used to regard as important. Between the road and the sidewalk were flower beds overgrown with living weeds and dead weeds, a crosshatch of brown vegetation and smothered greenery. Several cars and trucks had been abandoned, the doors still open, the driver in one frozen to the seat still wearing a purple turtleneck. There was an embroidery shop, a flower store, Wilma's Diner had a worn and half collapsed sign that boasted home cooking, several houses, a bank that had a dump truck driven into its side. Near the end of the street was a gas station.

The man took the gas pump from its holder and sniffed. He squeezed the lever and gas poured freely from the nozzle. He smiled and itched the back of his head. The windows in the small station were all broken. The door lay skewed as if it had been kicked in, its frame bent. The lock had been shot off. He chewed something from under his fingernail and ran his tongue around the inside of his mouth. He tried the other pumps. They all worked.

The town had already been rummaged, probably during the panic, probably after the panic. All towns were the same. Everyone got scared, everyone went nuts. He thought about the panic as he wandered about, his bag over his shoulder. Now and then he would eat a piece of meat, chomping greedy and loud. He would wash it down with a drink of water from a plastic bottle on a rope. Every now and again some overlooked item would catch his eye. A can of beans. A can of corn. A book of matches. A bumper sticker that had the telephone number 867-5309. He peeled the bumper sticker from the paper and pressed it on his bag. He hummed.

Sometime in the afternoon the man walked back to the gas station. He carried a large load of bed sheets on his shoulder. He threw them down in front of the gas pumps and returned to the furniture store for more sheets and curtains. After an hour of work he had amassed a huge pile of cloth.

He worked meticulously, laying out each of the bed sheets, each of the curtains, each of the blankets. He did not lay them flat, instead he coiled the material into bundles placing them end to end. When he had finished, the line of material stretched nearly fifty yards, from the gas station, down Main Street to what was once a flower shop. He gazed at his reflection in the half-broken flower shop window. His jacket was big on his skinny frame. He looked top heavy, awkward. His face was dirty and crooked and his eyes were sunken. He was no longer an air conditioning repair man. He was no longer a horseman of the apocalypse. No longer did he take orders. He was out of work. He was Napoleon.

The man filled a five gallon bucket with gasoline and doused the blankets. He poured a steady stream of the gas as he walked the trail he had laid out. When the bucket was empty, he

returned to the gas pumps and refilled the bucket and doused again. He went about his work thinking about nothing but the work. He felt purpose well up inside his soul.

When the last of the sheets had been doused in gas, he stood looking down the road at the gas station. He chewed a piece of dog meat and scratched with his long fingernail at the pieces that stuck between his teeth.

The remaining sheets and blankets and curtains were piled in a mound up against two of the gas pumps. One by one he took the nozzles from their places and tied the handles with strips from a torn bed sheet. The gas poured freely from the metal nozzles and soaked rapidly into the material. He stuffed the nozzles into the pile of material and walked away.

Dusk was coming. He squinted down the street gazing at the gas station in the distance. The smell of gasoline had coated the inside of his nose and he loved it. Sexual arousal ran through him. He bent down and lit the end of the sheet with a lighter, then pressed his face near the just birthed flame and lit his cigarette. Stale smoke filled his lungs. The orange flame raced away, a dagger through the rapidly dwindling daylight. He stepped back, away from the flame, never taking his eyes from it as it danced and flickered and bore a black smoke that rose up from the orange glow and disappeared against the street and the buildings and the sky.

There was a massive fireball and a plume of toxic black, soot-colored smoke rising up in the place where the dagger of flame met the mound of cloth. Then a volcanic explosion shook the man where he stood. He stepped back several yards and grew excited. His felt his penis became hard. The gas station erupted in a pyroclastic orange blaze. One of the gas pumps shot like a missile into the grey sky trailing a yellow tail as it cut across the dusk. It landed somewhere on the far side of town. Another explosion rocked the man as he masturbated furiously with his hand inside his pants. He felt heat brush up against his face. The sky was

aglow with light and fire and black smoke and it was as if hell had descended onto the place. His mind was an exploding mechanism fueled by the pleasures the fire had birthed. He reached climax and watched as the gestalt of flames and fury cascaded up into the heavens.

He sat down with his legs apart. He sat in the middle of the street. A white flare nearly twenty feet tall shot from inside the caldera that was once the gas station. Several more explosions shook the ground. He chewed on a piece of dog as the sky grew dark, as the stink of burning crept into his nose. Heat was upon him, a warming glow covered him inside and out. He lit a cigarette and watched, never blinking, never thinking. He watched the flames dance and fly and move to the other buildings nearby. He listened to the chorus of the catastrophe as structures collapsed, as explosions shook, as elementals of light and ferocious rage danced up into the night sky throwing their flares and their sparks. It was good to be alive.