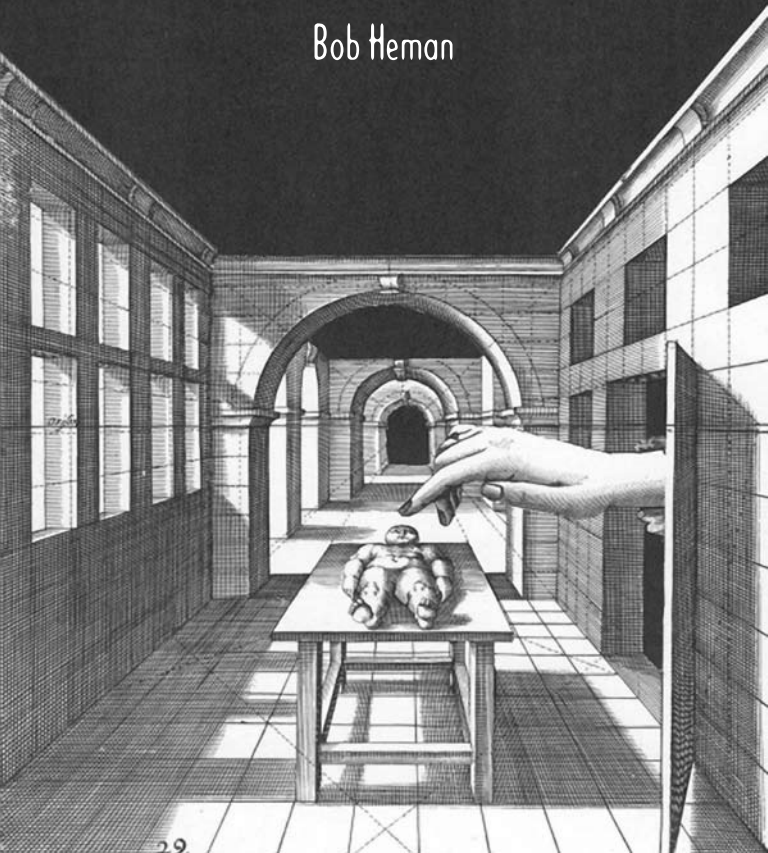


How It All Began

Bob Heman



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Quale Press

These works were written between 1975 and 1990. They previously appeared in *Antonym*, *Artful Dodge*, *Caliban*, *Flute*, *Hanging Loose*, *key satch(el)*, *The Prose Poem: An International Journal*, *Quick Fiction*, *Stained Sheets*, *Wormwood Review*, *Zone* and *Clown War/CLWN WR*, as well as in the issues of the author's personal letter titled *Bad Things for Breakfast*, *The End of the Building*, and *True Adventures*, in the small collection *Something Snaps Its Fingers* (New York: Stonegoat, 1982), and on the net at www.roguescholars.com/roquegallery.

"Gloss" was also included in Hungarian translation in Gabor Gyukics' bilingual anthology *Félmeztelen Múzsza: Half-Naked Muse* (Budapest: Magyar Könyvklub, 2000) and "True Adventures" in the e-anthology *Focus 9/11* (edited by Rochelle Ratner for PoetsUSA.com). The works in the final section also appeared in Arabic translation by Ahmed Saleh Shafie in the Egyptian arts newspaper *Akhbar Aladab*.

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I

Flood

It catches you off guard, hurls you to the ground. You cannot see. Your fingers clutch the soil. In another moment you do something that takes the rest of your life to explain. Your mother does not understand. Twenty years later your brother still spits whenever your name is mentioned. You grow old all alone. And older still. Your relatives think you will never die. One of them brings you some homemade cake. It tastes kind of funny. That night you dream of a man who walks in the wake of a flood. His shoes make sucking noises in the mud. He has no memory.

Getting Wet

For the word love read need. He needs you. He is afraid to grow old alone. For his impotence read his childhood. And if it all seems to hang over you like a smothering canvas, remember that the tent has two sides. There are those who dance in the rain and those who shiver. Whichever you are you still get wet.

The Drama

The man who invented tact wants to marry your sister-in-law. He has known her for a whole week. They have even been so adventurous as to touch hands. He comes to ask your permission. He has seen you polishing your rifle. He knows you are the one he must ask. You lean back in your chair and stare into his eyes. His words flow like butter.

Recessional

Relax down into the tensions. Count the numbers again. This time slowly. After the death comes decay. The electrons are always in motion. When the hand stops. When the breath stops. When the light stops. When the chorus in the inner ear hums down for the final time. And you feel like singing. An old stray melody you've always known.

Afterwards

The quieter ones wait outside. They are not necessary now. They will not be missed.

It is strange how each tells his neighbor about his wife and kids. And how they hold each other. As if they were all friends.

Eventually they will be wondered about. Someone will come out. "It's all over. We are in control. We would like you to come in."

They can almost understand what he is saying.

Unusually Dead

I find the yellow brick road that stops in front of your house. We gopher under it together, looking for lost dimes, and for the little people who are rumored to live there, massaging the roots of the oak trees. We find instead the rusted remains of a 1946 Buick. You wipe the dirt from the windshield and peer inside. The couple in the back seat are decidedly underfed and unusually dead.

Those Remarkable Eyes

An ant is crawling on the other side of the dodecahedron you are holding in your hands. You know he is there, but no matter how fast you turn the object he is always on the other side. You have never even seen him. You just know he is there. You can imagine the way his antennae wiggle. And his mouth parts. And those eyes. Those remarkable eyes.

||

How It All Began

an he remember how wen she die they stuff her an set her on tha porch an how evywun came around an they jes stare an dont say nuthin or do nuthin ceptin for a few of tha younger ones who crep up real close an try ta reach out an touch her toes but ther folks pull em back as soon as they see wat ther up to an evywun else is standin back aways an he could tell that maybe jes maybe they was a wee bit scared an he's watchin ther faces so he'll be able ta tell all tha folks up at tha holler about it wen suddenly ther was this great big noise an he look back at her sittin on tha porch an thers this black stuff sorta like smoke an sorta like tar comin outa her chest an that was how it all began

In The Terminal

You are vomiting into your husband's hat. He has gone for a minute to confirm the reservations, not realizing the surprise you are creating for him. You think it was something you ate. You refuse to admit that you are pregnant again. They are announcing your flight. Your husband has still not returned and for the first time you smell the fumes that are rising from the hat. It becomes hard to think of anything else.

At The Accident Site

Rescue crews ooze from the red-brown buses. The Albanian with the wounded eye tells the laborers what to do. It has been a long journey and the women are exhausted. In the back of the trailer you are playing cards with the three cooks. The vegetables have taken a different route entirely.

The Woodcut

A woman is beating the devil with a stick. Two men in cleric's robes hold him down as she applies each stroke. She is large and strong and capable and it seems that he will soon cry out. The caption reminds us that there is a little of the devil in every man.

After Love

After love became the heavy weight that was lifted and the bellman unlocked the ceiling to reveal the tired egg that was really an avalanche, I drifted back again into my little boat to sleep until my stomach rang aloud with the message that love was back and angry at the door, refusing to unzip itself until I was again stuck back into the ground from which I had only so recently strayed.

Monolith City

Mostly mouth. And eyes. She sighed and lifted the wedge. No one even noticed. She was standing on the edge, staring inside. She was wearing something soft and flowing. She was knowing everything and nothing. There was laughter by her side where two men tied a captive for the games. It was the same. And would be. She marked herself and left. She knew there was another stranger to expect. One not named death.



Meat

When the seal does not wear his skin he is called meat. A welcome friend he is shared by all. There is a saying too when they all laugh together. That we are all meat under the skin.

Lights

The same blocks form many different shapes. The same words many different poems. Doors open and close themselves in the mind with troubling regularity. Most are too small to get a foot or thought through, but once in a while a larger one opens, just for a moment, and from all directions the little thoughts rush in to carry off what goodies they can. Usually they get trapped behind the swiftly closing door, but occasionally one of them is able to bring out something beautiful. It was one of these that visited Coleridge just before he was unkindly aroused by a knocking at a different door.

Room

In a room a murder has taken place. The body lies in a certain position which the detectives are trying to record. The room itself is the same as every room except for one special thing. It is empty. That isn't to say that the room doesn't have furniture and lamps and pictures on the walls, or that the desk drawer isn't stuffed with old letters or the vegetable crisper piled high with turnips. All these things are there, yet it is obvious to even the most insensitive of the investigators that there is nothing in the room. It is an empty room, full of props made of nothing more substantial than the printer's ink that disappears when you, the reader, turns the page.

Track

The choice was not easy. As it happened we chose the door to another room, one that consisted only of more doors to more rooms, rooms that disintegrated once we left them so that we had no choice but to move always ahead, hoping once again to find the room we had burst from eons before, when our feathers were still wet and sticky and life itself seemed like something out of a dream.

Child

The simple line as the most complex of visual and conceptual statements. That line rendering forever the whole into duality. Suddenly good and evil, black and white, hot and cold, all become unalterable realities, each no longer recognizable as the part of the whole it really is. He draws the line with the crayon and smiles. His wavering yellow line really has nothing to do with any of this.

Gloss

In the river unhealthy things are floating. The ghouls dive for them, grab them in their powerful incisors, then swim back to shore. There they have their feast. This goes on for a long time. The night air is cool and there are many stars. Behind the bushes someone is labeling the whole scene to increase clarity and provide a concise record for the future. The river is “a,” the night sky “b,” the ghouls “c-1,” “c-2,” and so on. There are maybe twenty or thirty ghouls. It is hard to get an accurate count since there are always so many of them in the water. The things floating in the river are labeled collectively “d,” although they vary in size and substance quite a bit. The observer, with an eye toward immortality, has labeled himself “e,” not realizing the future implications of the unlabeled and unexplained footsteps that have crept up behind him unnoticed.

Wind

The wind is frozen and broken into bits, then placed in coolers and carried to the ocean, where, if the tales have not been too magnificently exaggerated, an outlandish flying vessel waits to transport them to a distant shore where the sea is always a mirror and life likewise has become too flat and predictable.

1940

Whenever she saw two Chinese standing together she assumed they were related. This led her to the case of the burning dog and the adventure of the spotted sweetie. The drunken pie caper came next, followed by the mystery of the frozen bog. After a brief vacation in Hawaii, where she helped solve the case of the singing steam, she returned home to the concrete blackmail caper and the riddle of the twin cabins. Next came the case of the punctured starlet, which landed her in the hospital for a third and almost final time. She decided a change of career was in order and went to Colorado and opened a small restaurant. But her past was not forgotten. Soon she became involved in the case of the painted snow bunny and the bunsen burner puzzle and then finally the incident of the leather lady. Her last case was the return of the ancient fingers, which left her as we find her now, lying face down in a little red pool.

Fire

The fire visits and asks for a place to stay. What place? The place where the devourer joins the devoured and all the dry grasses stand up and applaud.

Puddle

The puddle sounds like the quickest wheel. Air moves away and then returns, less clear and less dry. What we cannot see is what matters most: the metaphorical hand lifting the weight that keeps every thing in balance.

True Adventures

The barge and its tugboat disappeared somewhere between Bridgeport and Port Newark. Snow flurries in the afternoon were a strong possibility. The woman guarded the crossword puzzle as her rightfully private possession. The images kept coming upside down or backwards. They were related only in that they arrived on the same day at the same time. Two cards bore exactly the same number. The screen that filtered out the reflections seemed to be made of almost invisible strands of tightly woven silk. After the alarm went off he dozed a bit and was given the answer to his problem. When he came back to use the typewriter someone was sitting in his chair. The layer cake had pink icing. Someone was back from vacation and another was about to get married. He typed up four letters and a memo to the treasurer. The temporaries were given yellow lunchroom passes. His desk was full of paperclips.

Husk

Inside the wolf we live a happy life. It is warm and we are well fed and the mouth affords us an occasional glimpse of the world outside. The hunter when he comes wears a face that looks like war. He strips away our fur for boots and warmth. The little creatures that come later don't even know our name.

IV

Capsule

The lamp is filled with electricity. The campers are filled with each other. They each see a different face and then they die. In the hand is housed a certain kind of power. They eat and are hungry again. It gets cold before it gets colder. The man talks even though no one is listening. The line gets straighter as the night goes on. The woman in the photograph was once alive.

The End Of The Building

Because if you have to leave in a hurry you won't be able to. Because the heat will never come up again. Because you really were convinced by the salesman. Because the old woman was not her friend. Because the animals really could understand. Because the weather stopped suddenly at the end of the building. Because someone had painted them all red.

Strings

The man with the prominent nose fell in love with a marionette. He told her lies and watched as her nose grew and grew. He stared into her eyes for a long time but saw nothing there. This must be love he said to himself and tried to put her back in her box. But she wouldn't fit. Her nose had grown too long. He thought for a moment then loosened the connectors at the back of her head. The rest of her body fit easily into the box. Her head with its newly elongated nose seemed suddenly to take on a terrifying proportion. So this is love he said and covered the head with a pillowcase. He walked along the river for hours thinking about what he had learned. When he returned he uncovered the head and stared once again into its beautiful vacant eyes. The next thing he said was not a lie. For the first time the fear was gone. He took out his tools and changed her face into a laugh and carved her nose to a dangerous point which he plunged into his chest. In this way his love became complete.

Circuit

I rode up in the elevator with a man who was once vice-president of the united states. He did not smile. Under his arm he carried a briefcase full of dead rabbits. His hands shook as he paid his fare onto the shuttle. At the last minute I decided not to take the journey and boarded the elevator once again. Where the vice-president had been standing an irregular circular area had been charred. It still smoldered slightly. I bent down to almost touch it and could feel its wet heat singe my palm. I felt it again the next day too, when I read every newspaper I could find, searching for some rare detail I might have missed in my confusion.

In The Desert

The magician drew from the sand an army a hundred thousand strong, to drive from within the city wall the invading mongol horde. He was our saviour. Once again we were able to go on about our lives beneath the caliph's protective eye. The mongols fled across the sands and did not return. Weeks passed and we became more and more aware of the warriors who packed the streets and markets and alleys where before they had not walked. Somehow we had assumed they would be gone as quickly as they had appeared, but still they moved within our midst. Whether the magician was unable to send them back, or merely unwilling, we could not tell. But it did not matter, they still remained, the city swollen to three times its normal size. The newcomers were just like us. They prayed and dined and smoked with us. They knew the same songs and tales our people always knew. Soon it became difficult to recognize them at all. The desert surrounding us remained as impenetrable as before. Often we

stopped at its edge to wonder how the mongols were ever able to stage their strange invasion. Now every week the market stalls grow emptier. Food and goods become scarcer every day. Our poor methods of production just can't keep up with so many. The caliph has not been seen for weeks and no one knows where the magician has gone. There are those among us who think that perhaps this has all been a dream, a vision conjured by the magician to explain why the caliph can no longer provide us with our basic needs. They believe that in reality we are the same number that we have always been, just more aware of each other as the things that enable us to live seem increasingly to be in short supply.

Fingers

The hand was burning. The hand was wet. The hand listened again and again. She did not see his hand. The dog had five hands. In the forest the hand assumed a different shape. The sky was full of hands. The hand waited restlessly. His hands made him famous. They found a hand on the beach. It was unopened.

Episode

They retrieved the object from the sea. They shook me till the skin retreated from my bones. They moved me from point to point to point and then I was alone. I moved the object back into my heart. It was the only part I ever used. I moved against it as I climbed across the sky. The clouds were red. The only star was much too loud. I climbed until I reached the boundary of the page. They told me then that I was but a stage upon which they played their harsh delights. I watched them change the world to night, then turned the page and rested from their sight.

A Possession

Okay. It goes this way: the hunter and the wolf and the little red riding hood. They inhabit a room bounded by the sky and the earth and the forest itself. They are able to speak. There is also a dark presence we will call “grandma” and the conceptual structure it ordains at the end of the path. Once the wolf enters it he loses his will. He is occupied by grandma and dresses in strange garments. When the riding hood arrives grandma uses the wolf’s body to devour her and gain her energy. The hunter plays a necessary role in the transference. He cuts the wolf open to allow the riding hood, with her new occupant, to emerge once again. Later that evening, when they are alone, she has a big surprise for him.



quale [kwa-lay]: *Eng.* n 1. A property (such as hardness) considered apart from things that have that property. 2. A property that is experienced as distinct from any source it may have in a physical object. *Ital.* pron.a. 1. Which, what. 2. Who. 3. Some. 4. As, just as.

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