

With Hone in Las Vegas

We're home Hone after four years in Hawaii
but the winter cold is driving out the delicious warmth
of those islands from my bones

La'u uo our lifelong addiction has been to gambling
not with money but with words and though our winnings have been sparse
we've kept on playing
That's probably why I thought of you when Reina and I were in Las Vegas
for the first time a few weeks back
and I recalled your winter pilgrimage many years ago with your son down
from the Head of Maui's Ika to Wanganui and up to Jerusalem
to farewell 'a tired old mate in a tent
laid out in a box
with no money in the pocket
no fancy halo, no thump left in the old
ticker'
Our trip though was not to a mate's tangi
but simply to visit a cousin and meet the Beast that is Vegas

At Honolulu Airport beloved friends wished us well

and sent us on our way with their aloha

In summer America is cocooned in air-conditioning
so when we unpacked like blind sardines out of the air-conditioned plane
and the Vegas airport terminal into the morning the desert heat was
like raw buffalo hide tightening around us as it dried
and we blinked into thick bone-white air that smelled of dead fires and ash
Why had I expected Vegas to smell new and crisp?
And I remembered we agreed every thing is about aboutness
all our journeys are about other journeys and through intricate layers of maps
Not just geographical/political/historical maps but those of
the moa and heart dream maps cinematic and literary maps
maps of pain and suffering arrogance and deliberate erasures
maps which are the total of our cultural baggage
and in which we are imprisoned
and through which we read our elusive reflections
This trip wasn't any different

The luscious persuasive blonde at the Avis counter offered us
a GPS system and we took it – we'd not used one before
Out of all the maps I'd inherited of Vegas I'd come to imagine
it a supersized civilization created by a movie special effects genius
hired by hip gangsters or conjured up by a gambler prophet hallucinating wildly
after fasting forty days and nights in the desert wilderness
But as our GPS with the Maureen O'Hara voice piloted us
through gigantic rows of Casino and hotel billboards
with gorgeous Colgate smiles inviting us to dance forever with chance
through supersized developments of new homes they couldn't sell –

the bottom had fallen out of the housing market –
through oases of grubby pawnshops and other businesses that picked
at the desperate bones of addicts
the hip maps began to vanish

When we checked into our Holiday Inn well away from the Strip
we were told our room wouldn't be ready until mid afternoon
so in the blistering heat we went looking for food and found Sunset Station
and walked into all the clichés about Vegas casinos : cavernous palaces of perpetual
air-conditioned night without time peopled by exacting machines into
which mesmerized worshippers fed their adoration
gaming tables surrounded by narrow-eyed players totally in the zone
of the spinning wheel or the flip of the card and the throw of the dice
The huge craziness of it was enthralling

Later as we sampled the Strip's mega megaresorts
with names straight out of Hollywood and the dream of gigantism

The Mirage

Wynn Las Vegas

The Sands

Treasure Island

The Golden Nugget

The Excalibur

The Luxor

The MGM Grand

Caesar's Palace

The Venetian

I recognized the Beast was indeed a creature
as magnificent as the Sphinx and the pyramids born out

of the Pharaohs' addiction to immortality
But this Beast was feeding off the insatiable American Dream
of limitless credit choice and size
one press of the button one spin of the wheel one throw of the dice
and you're out of the desert forever

Every night the porcelain moon over the city wore the Joker's cynical face
but a rescuing Batman wasn't anywhere in sight
as our cousin showed us how to play the machines
He played as if he was playing the piano and we tried to copy him
as we slotted in our money and lost and lost but I didn't care
because I kept hoping for that buzz that radiates through
my veins when I'm gambling with words that shape
fabulous beasts out of the deserts of ourselves
But aue Hone the buzz never came
and I found gambling for money sadly sadly boring
Definitely not my choice of addiction

The Tangata Whenua have been written out of Vegas' history
On our last night as we and our cousin and other relatives gorged
on a lush buffet at a Japanese restaurant they told us of Hawaiian friends
who'd just walked off a building site because three of their mates
had been killed there in terrible accidents
When they'd started bulldozing the site one of the Hawaiians a kahuna
had sensed the enormous disquiet of the spirits of the tangata whenua
who he believed were buried there
and had asked their white bosses to stop the project
and let him perform the rituals of appeasement and cleansing

They'd refused and within three days their friends were dead

The next morning in light as brittle as salt Reina my beloved tautai
drove us out of Vegas and we headed for the Grand Canyon and Santa Fe
in the arid heart of America

But that's another story Hone for another winter day

Albert Wendt