

**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**