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Editor's Note

by Scott Dickensheets

I edited this volume on my Apple MacBook, upstairs in a suburban house in a part of Henderson that didn't exist when I was a kid—I live so far beyond the city limits of my youth that my bravest lizard-hunting expeditions (as a young kid) or most urgent desert make-out sessions (as a slightly older kid) didn't bring me anywhere near this spot. Fancy computers, outward-pushing suburbs—in the vocabulary of modern culture and Las Vegas, these are solid emblems of *progress*.

This book is the fifth in the Las Vegas Writes series, a yearly anthology meant to showcase noteworthy Las Vegas authors—novelists, essayists, short story writers, especially literate journalists. Something about that nice, round *fifth*ness called for a milestone-like topic. After pinging my brain trust, we eventually settled on this: progress. It's a concept that, in one way or another, figures into almost all the master narratives of Las Vegas, in ways that are both obvious (in the manic suburban growth

spurts of the nineties and early 2000s; in the manic urban growth spurt now transforming downtown) and less so, in the forward motion, or absence of it, in millions of individual lives.

One thing we emphasized to the writers assembled here was that progress could be measured in more than housing numbers and exciting new trophy architecture. It's more than just a measurement of civic motion. It has political, social, personal, emotional, and spiritual dimensions.

And one more thing: *Lack* of progress says something about progress, too. There are any number of darker portents possible here, cautionary notes about the limits of progress. I mean, my MacBook is cool, but it's a 2007 and has been outmoded several times over; and my house is part of the epidemic of civic sprawl that, at its peak, according to one measurement, consumed two acres an hour and has created all sorts of infrastructure tensions, not least among them water issues. Every rehabbed building downtown carries with it the seed of gentrification and the pricing-out of lower-income residents. Every step forward in your personal life comes at a cost. This ambiguity at the very heart of progress made it such an attractive subject.

Happily, the writers—fiction and nonfiction alike—responded to the potential of this variety. Short fictions by Geoff Carter and Abigail Goldman put a grim emotional backspin on notions of progress, whether it's the advanced technology in Geoff's story or the medical healing in Abby's. Sarah Jane Woodall offers a shadow history of the once ubiquitous showroom camera girl, doomed by smartphones. Kris Saknussemm finds evidence of human progress in a nonhuman heart. Rena Mason tells a supernatural tale of fear and letting go, while the

progress in Aurora Brackett's story has to be read to be believed. Henry Brean describes his own lack of progress on a key personal front. Douglas Unger offers a fictional portrait of a man trying to maintain his sense of self in the face of forces that threaten to drag him backward. And John Katsilometes looks at progress in a larger civic context, pondering what it means now, post-recession.

This slim book you hold in your hands is itself a totem of advancement—there was a time, not that long ago, when plenty of people would have snorted at the idea that you could find five books' worth of good writers in Vegas. Well, as of *Getting Better All the Time*, we're forty-one writers into this project, and I still had trouble narrowing this book's roster. Progress, indeed.

The Birds of Minnesota

Fiction by Aurora Brackett

The night I was conceived my father ate a bag of honey roasted peanuts for dinner, flipping through the channels of a muted television, while my mother read *A Natural History of the Desert Tortoise* in a king-sized hotel bed, in a room they'd been upgraded to when they complained about what they thought looked quite like a blood stain on the bathroom tile of the first room they were given. They were fighting. What I would learn later about my parents is that for them, a fight consisted of a brief quibble, a few lines of dialogue: six at most. This was followed by a deadly, uncomfortable silence—four, eight, occasionally thirty-six hours of silence. And this is where the real battle took place. He rearranged his position on the bed and she glared, turning the page of her book with a ferocious slap. She cleared her throat and my father stood and locked himself in the bathroom. And more than gestures and movements, they seemed to be communicating by vibration, seething at each other. As a

child in these moments I did everything I could to bring them into a conversation, but I was powerless. Inevitably, that night, one or the other of my parents turned out the lights and they lay together tensely in the dark, and eventually one reached for the other, he touching her thigh lightly with the tips of his fingers, she rubbing her foot along the inside of his calf, and they met again in silent, angry, grappling, frustrated sex.

It lasted no more than fifteen minutes. My father fell asleep professing his love. My mother got up and took a shower.

My parents were amateur biologists. Both followed a prescribed path to their chosen careers, leaving their passion as hobby. My mother was an elementary school teacher whose classroom was filled with cages and tanks: fish, mice, turtles, a gerbil, a parakeet that too often interrupted her math lessons with its loud shrieking chirp. My father called himself a bean counter. He was an accountant in a high-rise building in San Francisco full of accountants, all of them dressed in identical polo shirts. He spent weekends hiking the hills around his home in Berkeley, squatting to examine and identify flowers and to watch pollinators, bees, butterflies, bathing in gold, plunging their proboscises into petals and pistils, their furry legs coated, sprinkling dust like fairies, this subtle act of procreation.

They met at an Audubon Society picnic in Pleasanton, and in a circle of bird lovers bonded over their passion for bats. My mother had found one in her classroom's wastepaper basket and devoted the weeks of the class she was supposed to spend on

test preparation teaching her students about the Chiroptera, its webbed wings, its cry and echolocation. "Did you know," my mother asked him, holding a neatly cut square of PB and J delicately between thumb and forefinger, "that scientists are using vampire bats to cure stroke patients?"

"The blood-clot-reducing enzyme," my father said, watching her thin, pink lips curl into a smile. A crumb of bread caught in the corner of her mouth. He wanted to press it with his pinky.

In the hotel where I was conceived, my mother was unsatisfied and irritated. My father was snoring. In the bathroom she first flushed and then washed away millions of possible half-me's. All this carefully bundled genetic material: blue eyes, a strong jaw line, a leonine head of hair, or maybe the genius gene, maybe the thick shoulders of a linebacker, all of this potential lying dead on the tile floor of a bleached hotel shower. She turned off the water. She dried herself, dressed, and thought about the city and how she'd always hated it. Vegas was my father's idea. He was lured in by the cheap room and the promise of a pillow-top bed and cable television. My mother wanted to sleep outside, startled awake by the yelping of coyotes. They were on their way to the Mojave. It was spring and they were hoping for a display of wildflowers.

She looked out the window. What he'd muttered under his breath as they drove into the city, what had caused the fight was: *Jesus Marjorie, can't you have a little fun?* It rankled her. It echoed like a refrain all night, and now down below in the street, a

group of women walked, talking loud and drunk, a parade of young men, hair slicked and glistening in the lights made their way to a nightclub, and downstairs eighty-year-old women sat in front of glowing machines nursing cocktails. My mother was scientific. She was curious. She decided to find out about fun.

As she stood and as she dried, and as she dressed, as the elevator dropped her down eleven floors, these precious little half-me's were determinedly defying the laws of gravity, trying to move up, when everything seemed to be pushing them down, clinging to the walls with nothing but their thin, shivering heads, to burrow to safety, great numbers of them dying, the act of conception a war zone, the living surrounded by the corpses of their brothers, calling to each other. "Charlie? Walter? You still here?"

In the elevator my mother made a list:

"*What is fun*?"

My book group—but then she remembered how the other teachers got tipsy and laughed when she wanted to answer all of Oprah's questions. *(Jesus, Marjorie, have some fun.)*

Folding laundry at the Laundromat—the smell of warm sheets

Classroom art projects

Sex (sometimes)

Singing in the shower

Ice cream sundaes

And then the doors opened and she was overwhelmed by the sound of the machines, the hum of voices, the flashing lights. She sat down at a machine next to a man in a cowboy hat. "How does this work?" she asked. And he looked at her and smiled. He was missing a tooth at the side of his mouth. There was a lasso hovering in mid air tattooed to his hand. She wondered if she lifted the sleeve who she'd find holding the rope. She dug through her wallet for a credit card. "Do you win anything?" she asked.

"Maybe," the man said. "If you believe." He tapped his chest with his open palm. My mother suspected that his next sentence would contain the word *Jesus*. She put her credit card into the machine. For twenty minutes she pressed buttons, losing, then winning, then losing, the orchestra of computerized notes rising to crescendos. The man next to her watched for a few minutes and then drifted away. My mother felt a twinge of sadness when he left. And then she felt lonely. She was on a slot machine island, swiveling in her chair. She pushed the "play all" button and she wanted to feel a thrill, and she wished she was the kind of person who looked at the whole world with wonder, like her yoga teacher sister, like the kids when they first enter the classroom in the fall, circling the perimeter, touching the bars of the animals' cages, their sticky fingers on the aquarium glass.

She lost forty dollars and got up to wander the casino.

She continued her list. What *is* fun?

Bats. Holding that animal, the skin of its wings taut, its enormous ears and tiny eyes. The lunchtime nerds who refused to play outside huddled around her, following as she marched the

creature into the shadowy side yard of the school and released it. A real wild animal and she had held it in her hand.

Watching goats graze the blackberry brambles at Tilden Park.

Gardening: pressing the sliver of a seed into the dirt, watching it sprout, a small string.

Bird watching. Hawks and kestrels were her favorite. In Kentucky she'd seen cardinals, the brightest red, candy red streaking through the summer-green forest.

This was wonder. She did have wonder. A group of girls, no older than twenty, jostled past her on the carpet, a wash of blond hair and tight jeans and T-shirts in boldfaced text, the smell of fake strawberries and liquor. They were a cloud of songbirds, jumping, twittering, humming with energy. One of them, long legs, a thin, horse-like face, paused for a moment, touched my mother's arm, and looked at her. "You're so beautiful," she said. The other girls, passing, called their friend away. They pushed open the doors of the casino and fled—and my mother thought of the flush of birds from a bush, the sudden burst of their bodies into air. Wait, she wanted to shout. And driven by some faint memory, by the smell of strawberry bubble gum, she followed them.

Inside my mother's body, the sperm were now swimming through the cervix. I imagine the few in the lead twitching with enthusiasm, the desire to continue, a surge of energy, a shout of "Charge!" A feeling of victory, as those behind them slacken and die.

The girls poured out onto the street. My mother followed, listening to them talk about their bras. "It's killing me, Marcy. It's totally cutting off my circulation."

"Shut up. You bought it. You wear it. It looks hot."

"Hot! Hot!" another girl shouted. "I'm so hot!" She pulled up her T-shirt and flashed the passing cars.

"Hey!" The horse-faced girl turned around to face my mother. "It's you!" She stumbled back to where my mother stood on the sidewalk, embarrassed, a thirty-year-old woman in hiking boots stalking a sorority. "*You* are totally coming with us," the girl said. "She's coming with us!" she yelled to the other girls. There were seven of them, not including this one, my mother counted. They didn't seem to notice the announcement.

"I'm too sexy for my shirt," one of them sang out.

"Do you know where I can get an ice cream sundae?" my mother asked the girl attached to her arm.

The girl shrieked, "Ice cream!" And her friends shouted back, a cacophonous chorus: "Ass!" "Dick!" "Beer!" "Ryan Gosling!" "Hot pants!" "Fuck me!" "Justin Bieber!" And then they all started laughing, and the girl at her side swept her into the group, this fast moving cloud, this strange organism. "We're going dancing," the girl said.

My mother imagined my father peering out the window, seeing her here. She started to laugh. "What's your name?" the girl at her side asked.

"Aster," my mother said. Her favorite flower.

"Wow," the girl said. "Are you an actress?"

"Yeah," my mother said. "New York."

"Oh my god," the girl said. "Broadway?"

"Off Broadway," my mother said. My mother had never been to New York.

"Oh my god!" the girl said. "Do you know how much I love you right now?"

"Marcy, she's an actress!" the girl yelled. "Fucking Broadway!" The crowd of girls cheered and hollered.

In my mother's body, the egg began to sing. Textbooks tell us that the body emits chemicals that draw the sperm in, but why not a song? Why not a conversation?

The egg hums a bar or two of "Moonlight Sonata," feeling like a kind of moon, floating alone in space, wearing her crown of protective cells. "Anybody out there?" she sings. She listens to the echo.

And what about our teeming mass? The dying float for the living to swim past and the living are too occupied to hear her.

Soldiers in the trenches become friends for life after a five-minute bombardment. In these survivors a kind of camaraderie develops, a group-think. Here's one we'll call Stanley. Swimming through the tunnel, his tail is caught fast. He curses. His friends turn back. "Go on," he tells them. It doesn't matter anymore who gets there first.

At a booth in a loud bar, my mother made observations. The girl she no longer wanted to call horse-face had greasy bleached blond hair, her roots showing. Three of the other girls were also fake blondes, while only two were real—the one called Marcy, who seemed to be the leader, and another pimply girl who was short and quiet. Two were brunettes. The girls always spoke in a kind of call and response that did not in any way seem like conversation. One shouted, "What is that?" and the others chimed in with, "Oh, I know." Or "watermelons!" Or, "Shinalingaling." And then occasionally, they burst into song. Songs from *Grease* or *Wicked*. They were, my mother had deduced, theater geeks trying to masquerade as cheerleaders, or some crossbreed of the two. They were also, most of them, having fun. Marcy pushed her half-empty, very pink drink across the table at my mother. "The actress needs to get drunk," she said. My mother drank.

"Where are you guys from?" she shouted.

"Minneapolis," someone said.

"St. Paul," someone said.

"Minnesota," someone said.

"Oh my god I love this song!" someone said. And they all got up as one body and moved to the dance floor. My mother sipped her drink. The music was so loud, she could feel it, not hear it. She thought about the birds of Minnesota. Flycatchers, treecreepers, wrens, magpies, snow buntings. The smallest girl she could call a snow bunting. Marcy would be a towhee.

"What are you doing?" Horse-face shouted. A loon, my mother thought. She pulled my mother into the mass of bodies. A bare-chested man was gyrating against a pole. "Hot," the girl

shouted in her ear. My mother closed her eyes where they stood. Her feet began to move, her body followed. The drink was hot in her stomach. The last time she had danced was four years ago at her wedding and that was all ballroom. "You've got moves for an old chick," Horse-face shouted. My mother laughed. She felt a weight lifting, something cracking inside of her. She wanted to sing.

In my mother's body, the one we're calling Stanley is alone, the dead bumping against his head, slimy and rigid. He wriggles to free himself. He waits. He thinks he hears a faint singing. The sound excites him and he wriggles again and his tail comes free. "Hello!" he calls. "Hello?"

She opened her eyes and realized that she was dancing close to a thin young man, whose eyes were also closed. He was dark-skinned, Latino, she thought, dressed in pressed jeans and a plaid button-up shirt. He moved his hands as he danced, in a way my mother could only characterize as elegant. If she leaned in two inches, her lips would be on his cheek. He opened his eyes and they both smiled, embarrassed. He held out his hand, "Dance?" and she nodded and then she realized she didn't know how to do whatever it was he wanted her to do, so they ended up doing a kind of elementary school ballroom dance. He looped her under his arm and spun her around and she bumped into