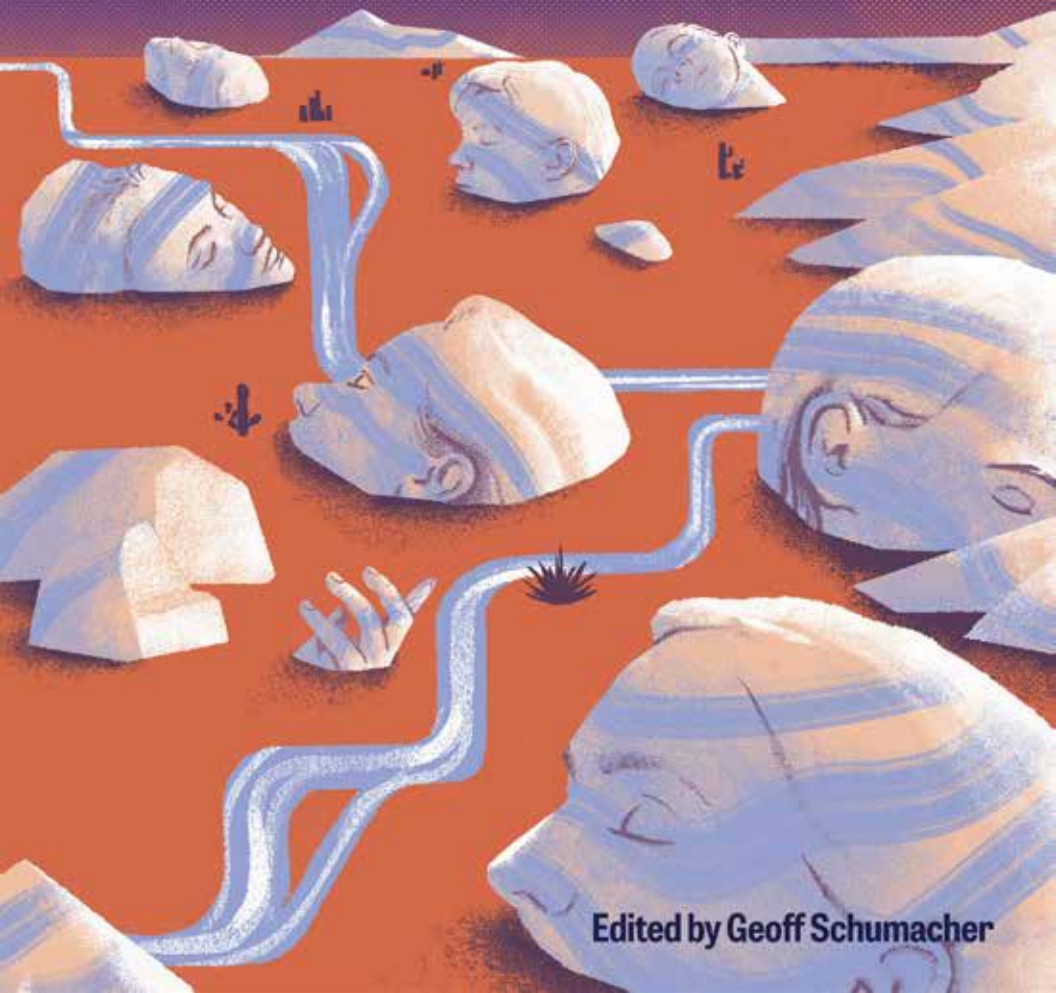


THE ANARCHY OF MEMORIES

Short Fiction Featuring Las Vegas Icons



Edited by Geoff Schumacher

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Introduction

by Geoff Schumacher

What you hold in your hands is a literary exercise, a challenge for local writers to step out of their comfort zones and explore a specific theme.

Las Vegas Writes started in 2009 with a particularly difficult project: a serial novel. Each participant wrote a chapter, one after the other. There was no outline to follow. When the first chapter was completed, the second writer jumped into action to advance the story. The seventh and final writer tied up as many of the story's loose ends as possible. Remarkably, the resulting novel, *Restless City*, tells a suspense-filled Las Vegas crime story that holds together to the final page.

The following year, Las Vegas Writes presented the participants with a very different task: to write short stories inspired by historic Las Vegas photographs. We compiled a diverse collection of historic pictures. The seven writers drew numbers to determine who would go first in selecting a photo and so on.

The resulting book, *The Perpetual Engine of Hope*, offers an array of compelling, only-in-Vegas stories.

I served as editor of the first two Las Vegas Writes volumes, then turned over the reins to veteran local journalist Scott Dickensheets for the next four. Among other innovations, Scott introduced nonfiction to the mix — to wonderful effect. In 2011, *Fade, Sag, Crumble* featured ten writers addressing the theme of decay. *Wish You Were Here* presented stories and essays inspired by Las Vegas postcards. *Getting Better All the Time* contributors examined the theme of progress. And 2014's *Lost and Found in Las Vegas* asked contributors to deliver works of fiction and nonfiction exploring the lost-and-found theme.

I returned to the editor's seat for this year's Las Vegas Writes project. When we conceived the theme — short fiction featuring Las Vegas icons — we envisioned stories about Frank and Bugsy, Liberace and Elvis, Charo and Celine. You know, individuals so famously identified with Las Vegas that last names are unnecessary.

I still would like to read such a volume, but this isn't it. Rather than opt for the obvious subjects, the eight writers followed a range of different paths to fulfill their assignment. The icons featured here aren't the usual suspects, and in some cases they aren't even the main characters. But the writers have found clever and intriguing ways of honestly tackling the theme.

For example, Scott Dickensheets imagines *Fear and Loath-*

ing in Las Vegas author Hunter S. Thompson making one more doomed journey to the Las Vegas area. Thompson never lived in Las Vegas and didn't spend a lot of time here, but he's nonetheless eternally linked with the city through his most famous book.

In the case of Erica Vital-Lazare's story, the entertainment icon Ruth Brown makes a brief but important appearance. Drew Cohen introduces the ghost of Ted Binion, son of casino icon Benny Binion, into a modern-day family drama. Chip Mosher gives us a historical saga featuring a once-larger-than-life Las Vegas — Sheriff Sam Gay — who is not well known today.

Helen H. Moore took the riskiest route. Her main character is not an icon per se — not a celebrity, politician or athlete — but more of an archetype, one that reflects upon this city's ability to bring down even the most earnest and optimistic young souls. The late historian Hal Rothman wrote that Las Vegas "is a hard town that will make you pay for your inability to restrain your desires. ... If you have a weakness, Las Vegas will punish you." Moore explores this assertion to poignant effect.

Three writers used the tools of science fiction to address the theme, all in fascinating ways. Sonya Padgett offers a variation on the more outrageous theories about what's really going on at Area 51. Jessie Humphries has a blast with a futuristic courtroom drama centered on tennis legend Andre Agassi. And Douglas Elfman pits celebrity clones against a giant bedbug in a

madcap satirical romp through a future Las Vegas.

Over seven volumes, Las Vegas Writes has featured the work of sixty local writers. No one has repeated as a contributor, reflecting the depth of writing talent in Las Vegas.

Stephens Press, now defunct, published the first four Las Vegas Writes books, while Huntington Press has published the past three. In both cases, the publisher has taken on this project not to make a bundle of money, but to play a part in fostering the growth of literary Las Vegas. Thanks to them, and to those of you who acquire these books to enjoy and support the work of local writers.

What Stays in Vegas

by Helen H. Moore

Someone is just dead, thought the shivering girl, as into and out of her mind flickered the image of her grandmother, who had loved her. Gran was dead now, too. *They* had called her gran an enabler. No more.

The desert gets so cold at night. Sweet Pea rested her scrawny back upon the pavement, but found no respite from her bone-deep pain, and only a profounder chill. Her groundsheet was gone, along with her puffy jacket. She drew herself into a cranny between the abandoned buildings.

Cold and sore, she lay on her back and squinted at the crystalline slice of darkening sky that was visible from where she lay. People died all the time on Main Street, but only rarely did a star fall. Sweet Pea *thought* it had been her grandmother who told her that “when a star falls, a soul ascends to God.” *It must have been. Only Gran talked like that.*

Sweet Pea’s thoughts lately were all like that — as fleeting

as those falling stars, insubstantial as smoke. Either ragged and flyaway, or as real as the concrete under her head at night, as real as the dopesickness. Neurons fired, synapses sputtered, memory muddled her thoughtstream, nothing made sense.

She reached down and scratched ineffectually at her bare ankle, close to the place where her name was tattooed. She couldn't worry or wonder about whoever it was that was dead. She had to do whatever she could to stave off that bone-breaking bastard, the dopesick, *for* as long as she could. Most days that meant beg, borrow, or blow. But not this evening; not for now. She had a stash. A big one.

Night was falling, and the desert was quickly giving up what heat it had absorbed during the hours of daylight. Sweet Pea didn't care, not really. She had enough shit on her to carry her to her next fix. She fumbled for it.

It was a fact that Sweet Pea could no longer get high, no matter how much heroin she smoked. She and many others along Fifth or Main or Bonanza or Fremont, or any of a hundred other Las Vegas streets, spent their days and nights hustling each other, just trying to fend off the dopesickness. What ecstasy there had been was long gone, and they were now wraiths, all slipping down into the long funnel of decay and slow death. The three seconds and the long nod didn't go as far as they used to.

Sweet Pea's once-strong young heart still beat, but more and more faintly now, almost aimlessly. ... She had given up

hoping for the whatever-it-was she'd come to Las Vegas to find. She'd found something else, though. Something that could turn all the lights on and make the world clean and new, that could warm her body with that warmth that could melt even the sun, a profound contentment that was like kissing the face of a loving God and having him kiss you back. She still remembered that feeling, and she still chased the dragon, but when she had him caught, the ride lasted no time at all anymore.

The shakes were starting in earnest. She tore open the skin of one filthy, trembling finger while pulling the bent tinfoil packet out of her pocket. From a fold in one of the loose layers that served her as shirt and jacket she pulled her pipe: the empty barrel of a plastic pen. She rocked and shook on her haunches in the growing dusk. The surface of the vacant lot glittered with a million tiny lights; reflections in broken glass, spreading out around her; a glimmering lake of darkness in the gathering dusk, with herself a crouching gargoyle of need in its center.

Before it had come to this, before the city of lights had begun its quick, hard grind, she had been pretty enough for Iowa, which is pretty indeed. Pretty enough for Hooters, maybe, but not pretty enough for the better Las Vegas "gentlemen's clubs." She had been smart enough for a high school diploma, needy enough for the lure of the Vegas luster, and just naive enough for the people who feast on girls and boys like her; girls and boys who were too much, maybe, for their hometowns, but in the end not enough for Las Vegas. She was their natural prey.

The pretty young thing who believes everything she sees on TV,
who thinks reality shows show reality. The only thing she wasn't
was tough enough.

Not tough enough for Las Vegas.

