

A Valley of Light and Shadow

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Las Vegas Writers on Good and Evil

Volume 11

Edited by Jarret Keene

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Contents

Introduction: The Thin Line Between Salvation and Damnation	1
<i>By Jarret Keene</i>	
Valley Times	9
<i>By Keith A. Brantley</i>	
We Had Cash	11
<i>By Brittany Bronson</i>	
Up in the Palace.....	27
<i>By Krista Diamond</i>	
Whores Are My Heroes	43
<i>By Dana Jerman</i>	
The Off Ramp	57
<i>By Don Hall</i>	

Contents

Beyond Designers.....	69
<i>By Eric Duran-Valle</i>	
My Nuwubi Story	95
<i>By Fawn Douglas</i>	
Animal	113
<i>By Samantha Goodman</i>	
Neon Bastard.....	127
<i>By Tim Chizmar</i>	
A Storm from the West.....	137
<i>By Glenn Puit</i>	
This Is What You Will Become	149
<i>By Beth C. Rosenberg</i>	
Wisdom.....	163
<i>By Elizabeth Quiñones-Zaldaña</i>	
The Risks We Take	177
<i>By Laura Decker</i>	
Contributors	189

Introduction

The Thin Line Between Salvation and Damnation

By Jarret Keene

It's difficult to transplant oneself into the amoral blitzkrieg of Las Vegas and be ignorant of why so many people visit the city. They come here to blow off steam, stave off darker temptations, seek inoculation from ravaging addictions (opioids, porn, shopping) available back home. Las Vegas offers a safe, sanitized, corporate playground for adults to indulge in a bit of evil for the good of their human—in other words *fallible*—souls. They arrive in droves to ensure that their weaknesses don't get the better of them.

Of course, Las Vegas allows a percentage of visitors to destroy themselves. Consider, for example, the people inhabiting the city's storm drains, those sacrificed

Introduction

to the neon Moloch. Still, the vast majority of tourists go in and out of the Strip unscathed, happy for the short-term pleasure of having survived sensory overload, wallets drained, a slight yet somehow satisfying ache in the temples, vaccinated from larger threats, bigger evils. They can return to a noble routine of going to work, to church, to Costco, to driving their children to and from school. They can go back to being good with the faint taste of sin simmering in their palates.

For Las Vegas residents, however, the tang never really dissipates. We marinate in the juices of controlled, highly regulated evil, finding ourselves compromised to varying and deeper degrees. *I have everything under control*, we convince ourselves as we settle into an evening (it's always at night, have you noticed?) of questionable behavior, of dubious labor. Talk with anyone who has lived here for more than a decade and you will hear surreal stories. Chances are they have, at one time or another, committed the unthinkable. Served as a nude-figure sushi plate for a convention of Asian technologists. Designed deranged DVD box covers for a local adult-film purveyor. Driven tourists into the Mojave to shoot machine guns at cactuses. Lied, cheated, and stolen for the filthiest lucre, redolent of Red Bull, gunpowder and stripper cologne.

Why do they—I'm sorry, we—do it? We tell ourselves

Las Vegas makes us tougher and stronger in all our broken places. In truth, our scars simply, well, split open and scar over again. What we believe is armor can grow into a wound we imagine ourselves bandaging. But money isn't a compress; it's a compressor, squeezing us for blood, pushing us to sweat, driving us to tears.

I can speak from personal experience on the compromise Las Vegas offers. When I first moved to Las Vegas twenty years ago, I was a promising young writer with a Ph.D. from a highly ranked English department. I believed in art over commerce and had New York literary agents emailing me, clamoring for my novel. But the flash and bang of a city glutted with casino-advertising budgets fertilized the local newspaper industry, and I saw an opportunity (and dollar signs) to realize an adolescent dream I had long nurtured: to become a badass alt-weekly writer and underground music critic. Boy, did I accomplish this fantasy to the absolute hilt, writing cover stories for up-and-coming indie acts, judging band battles, publishing unauthorized rock biographies for extra cash, traveling to L.A. by private jet to interview hot-shit rappers, and attending the biggest music conferences in the world.

Then *People* called my desk phone, the magazine's L.A. bureau chief treating me to a fancy dinner at Spago and flattering me and my writing to the point

Introduction

of suspicion. When he said I would be paid \$50 an hour to interview celebrities at red-carpet events and follow them around the hotel-casinos for an average of 10 hours every week, I did the math in my head: \$2,000 a month, as much as what the weekly newspaper was paying me. I had doubled my income by eating a free plate of ricotta cavatelli. What I failed to register was that I had been recruited to join the scummiest group of journalists, the most debased writers on earth.

I was now a credential-carrying member of the “stalkerazzi.”

I followed Sandra Bullock and her then-husband to a restaurant in the Palms, slipping a waiter \$100 (for which *People* reimbursed me) for an itemized receipt so I could know everything the star had ordered for dinner. I followed Ben Affleck into the Bellagio baccarat tables, taking furtive cell-phone photos of his poker-chip piles. I followed Michelle Rodriguez into a bar in the Wynn to ask her what favorite items she had in her purse, an accessory she never carried and a question she took as an insult. I waited in the North Las Vegas Airport baggage claim with a gaggle of bloodshot-eyed entertainment writers for a tabloid-hounded Michael Jackson to make his appearance. I followed Michael Douglas into the sand trap at Shadow Creek and asked him about his throat cancer.

The shadow of evil had fallen over me. The slippery slope took effect as I plummeted all the way down into reviewing strip clubs and profiling political figures like Newt Gingrich, both assignments for a libertarian magazine. Then I went lower. Does it get any worse than writing internal propaganda for casino companies? The money was fantastic, but I was dead inside, having crossed the thin line that divides salvation from damnation, and I hadn't noticed myself doing it.

It has taken me years to convalesce, to scratch and claw my way back into the literary realm. This book and its introduction might be another gesture of redemption on my part.

Regardless, I wouldn't go back in time to change a thing. It was all necessary for me to grow.

My Sin City catharsis isn't unique. In this book, eleventh in the *Las Vegas Writes* series and the first I have edited for Nevada Humanities, you will discover writers grappling with the moral quandary of existing in a valley that makes it difficult to separate good from evil, much less define the terms. From Brittany Bronson's gasp-inducing account of her stint as a dollar-clenching cocktail waitress to Krista Diamond's sticky valentine to Imperial Palace (the last of the old-school Strip hotels) to Dana Jerman's lovely confusion about being pulled toward the flame of Las Vegas, eager and "breathless"

Introduction

to compartmentalize “needful deeds to their rationalized motives,” this collection of essays is a searing articulation of what it means to hate the Devil even as you beg him to close his burning fingers around your throat.

There are ambient, contemplative moments gathered here, too. Consider Samantha Goodman’s darkly lyrical vignettes in which she encounters animals (domestic and wild) of Southern Nevada, seeing in their plight the agony of being caught in traps that we can dimly perceive. Or look at Eric Duran-Valle’s “Beyond Designers,” which parses the positive gains of gentrification with the ambivalent impact of Tony Hsieh’s vision of Downtown Las Vegas on smaller minority businesses, including the ruined shop owned by the man who Eric once idolized. You won’t likely forget Glenn Puit’s revealing glimpse into a career of crime reportage, which he characterizes as “walking through an expansive cemetery, looking at the tombstones.”

There are the straight-up, razor-sharp confessions. For example, reformed movie producer-turned-horror author Tim Chizmar discusses his long but so-worth-it climb out of a pit of delusion that only a city like Las Vegas can make possible. Beth Rosenberg, meanwhile, chronicles the uneasy, and ultimately impossible, transition from a vibrant New York City to the beige wasteland of the Vegas Valley, and Elizabeth Quiñones-Zaldaña

tenders a philosophical meditation on how duplicitous habits accrue in a town of surfaces.

There are the essays that offer entirely new perspectives that, until now, haven't appeared in the Las Vegas Writes series: Don Hall illuminates his late-night, blue-collar, off-Strip casino gig in a realm where working girls refer to him as "the nice manager." Laura Decker recalls the challenge of being visibly pregnant while serving free drinks to gamblers eager to touch her belly and offer wretched parenting advice, making her graveyard shifts feel "like having a terrible baby shower once an hour." Indigenous American artist and member of the Las Vegas Paiute Tribe Fawn Douglas delivers a report from her community with an essay that blends the history of Paiutes in Southern Nevada with her childhood experiences on a reservation and her current struggle toward "creating new traditions in Las Vegas." Indeed, *A Valley of Light and Shadow* showcases new local voices that I am confident will endure and grow louder in the coming decades.

The essays—and Keith Brantley's kickoff poem observing our city's infinite capacity to adapt to challenges—in this book represent the sort of conflicts every Las Vegas resident and visitor has to address at some stage. I am so proud of the work done by these writers, of the style and literary depth displayed in each piece.

Introduction

I couldn't ask for a better group of companions with whom I might hate the Devil. I thank them—along with Huntington Press, photographer Aaron Mayes, designer Christopher Smith, and my comrade-in-arts Bobbie Ann Howell—for making this necessary journey.

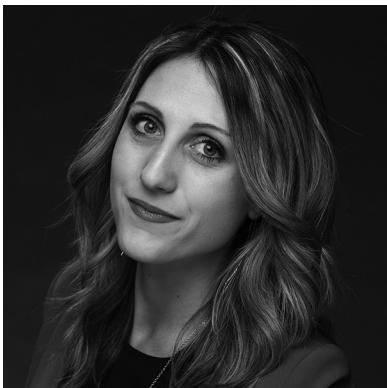
❧ Contributors ❧



Photo by Rodney Lee

Keith A. Brantley is the co-founder and 20-year host of the Poets' Corner (the longest running Open Mic poetry venue in Las Vegas). Keith has been a fixture at various cultural events, especially those involving the West Las Vegas area.

☞ Contributors ☚



Brittany Bronson is a writer based in Las Vegas, Nevada. She is a contributing opinion writer for the *New York Times*, where she writes about class, gender, and income inequality. Her work has also appeared in the *Guardian*, the *Times of London*, *Desert Companion*, *Bitch*, and others.

Bronson earned her MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Nevada, Las Vegas in 2014. She has received awards and recognitions from the Nevada Arts Council, the Pinch Literary Awards, and TalkPoverty.org.



After graduating from Edinboro University of Pennsylvania with his bachelor's degree in Communications, **Tim Chizmar** has written for various magazines, newspapers and websites including *Fangoria*, *First Comics News*, and many others. He has sold short stories to such collections

as *Chicken Soup for the Soul* and has written screenplays for Hollywood production companies. Tim co-founded the Las Vegas Chapter of the prestigious Horror Writers Association. Tim's collaboration with writing legend Clive Barker was featured in the Bram Stoker-award winning book *It's Alive: Bringing Your Nightmares to Life*, published by Crystal Lake Press. He has produced various television pilots including a comedy/action series for CMT starring wrestling superstar Rob Van Dam. He's produced such features as the Eric Roberts film *Unchained* and *The Year of Laughing Dangerously* starring Patrick Kilpatrick and Mindy Robinson. As a comedian Tim was a favorite at the World Famous Hollywood IMPROV and the Jon Lovitz Comedy Club.

❖ Contributors ❖



Laura Decker is an Assistant Professor of English and teaches composition, writing studies, and other literacy-focused courses at Nevada State College. Laura is a native Texan and enjoys being outdoors the most, especially hiking and camping with her family in the beautiful

wild spaces Nevada has to offer. She holds an MFA in creative writing from Texas State University and a Ph.D. in Literacy Education from UNLV. She is currently working on a poetry collection that examines the challenges of parenting during climate change.



Originally from New Hampshire, **Krista Diamond** worked in the national parks for five years before leaving Death Valley, Glacier, Yellowstone, and Big Bend behind for Las Vegas. She is now a freelance/fiction writer. Her writing has appeared in *HuffPost*, *Thrillist*, *Business Insider*, *Fodor's*, *Eater*, *Time Out*, *Desert Companion*, *Nevada Magazine*, and elsewhere. Her short fiction and personal essays have been published in *Barrelhouse*, *Barnstorm Literary Journal*, *Barren Magazine*, *Longleaf Review*, *After Happy Hour Review*, and *Adelaide Magazine*, for which she was a finalist for the 2017 Short Story Award. In 2019 she received a grant from the Nevada Arts Council to help fund the completion of her first novel at Sundress Academy for the Arts. Krista loves to write about travel, the outdoors, restaurants, and is especially interested in obscure places and the people who live in them. When she is not writing, she can be found at a tiki bar, the Salton Sea, or at a ghost town somewhere in the high desert. You can learn more about her and view her portfolio at www.kristamariediamond.com.



Fawn Douglas is a member of the Las Vegas Paiute Tribe, where she previously served as a Tribal Councilwoman. She also has roots in the Moapa Paiute, Cheyenne, Pawnee, and Creek Nations. In 2012, Fawn earned a degree in Global Studies from the College of Southern

Nevada. In 2015, she obtained a B.A. in Art, Painting and Drawing at UNLV. Fawn has been involved with the Native American Student Association, American Indian Alliance and serves as the President of the Native American Alumni Club at UNLV. Fawn is a community organizer for many issues on conservation from Standing Rock Protectors for the water to the designation of Gold Butte National Monument here in Southern Nevada. Her efforts have not stopped there, she continues to be a force in the preservation of the Desert National Wildlife Refuge and Paiute Cultural rights. As an artist, Fawn continues to pull her heritage into her work. She works in mixed media, print, pastel, spray paint, acrylic, oil paint and ceramics. She has murals in various locations in the City of Las Vegas as well as the Paiute Indian Reservation. Her art in the MFA program addresses issues from the Indigenous perspective on what it means to be Native in the contemporary, and shines a light on race, class, and gender through sculpture and performance.



Eric Duran-Valle is an emerging writer from Las Vegas. He is currently part of the communications department at Vegas PBS, where he manages the station's social media accounts and writes press releases for their blog. He writes both fiction and nonfiction about the changing culture

of Southern Nevada's community through the lens of a lifelong resident. He is currently working on an adventure novel for Primal Future Press. The most valuable thing he owns at the moment is a framed print of the old Stardust Resort and Casino, which was imploded on March 13, 2007.



Samantha Goodman has previously published her work in *Henderson Libraries: Unlocked Voices*. She is currently working on a YA fantasy-adventure novel set in the Pacific Northwest during the 1990s. She has worked all kinds of jobs in Las Vegas, from directing public relations for Spec-

trum (a UNLV student organization dedicated to the queer/LGBTQ+ community and its allies) to overseeing an aquatic center for the city of Henderson to managing subscriptions for *Witness* literary journal, published by the Black Mountain Institute.



Don Hall is an events consultant, producer, writer, and a casino manager with Station Casinos in Las Vegas. In the past thirty years, Don has worn many hats: former Chicago public school music teacher, story-slam host, Off Loop theatrical producer/director, Director of Events for WBEZ 91.5

FM, front-of-house manager for Millennium Park, retired professional trumpet player, and one-time homeless busker. Each of his random gigs is a chapter in a truly strange novel written by a lunatic. Hall lives in Las Vegas with his brilliant poet/musician wife Dana Jerman. Go to his website, donhall.vegas, for more info and to enjoy the digital magazine he co-edits and contributes regularly to, LiterateApe.com.

❖ Contributors ❖



Born in the dawn of a western Pennsylvania spring to a secretary and a salesman, poet and fiction writer **Dana Jerman** is the author of the poetry collections *Pisces Eye* and *Diminishing Returns: Seventeen Washed-up Love Poems*, among others. She is a regular contributor to LiterateApe.com

and is married to author Don Hall.



Jarret Keene is an Assistant Professor in the English Department at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where he teaches American literature and the graphic novel. He has written books—travel guide, rock-band biography, poetry collections—and edited short-fiction anthologies such as *Las*

Vegas Noir and *Dead Neon: Tales of Near-Future Las Vegas*.



Glenn Puit, 50, has performed award-winning journalism in states across the nation for nearly three decades. He currently works as a public safety reporter for the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, where he has covered public safety and violent crime in the Las Vegas Valley for 12 years.

He has worked as a reporter and editor in multiple states, including New York, Indiana, South Carolina, Michigan, Nevada, Oklahoma, and Kentucky. He is the recipient of the national Sigma Delta Chi award for public service journalism from the Society of Professional Journalists for work done documenting questionable spending practices in a rural Southeast Oklahoma school district. He is the author of five Las Vegas true crime books: *Witch*, *Fire in the Desert*, *Ghost*, *Father of the Year*, and *In Her Prime*.



Beth C. Rosenberg is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, where she teaches courses in modernism, contemporary women's literature, nonfiction, and global Anglophone literatures. She especially loves the work of Virginia Woolf, is the author of *Virginia*

Woolf and Samuel Johnson: Common Readers, co-editor of *Virginia Woolf and the Essay*, and has published articles on Woolf's nonfiction, the Bloomsbury Group, Anita Desai, Caryl Phillips, and Elena Ferrante. She has served on the editorial board of the *Journal of Modern Literature* and is currently on the advisory board of *Woolf Studies Annual*. She lives in Summerlin, Nevada, with her daughter and spends time cultivating her own garden.



Elizabeth Quiñones-Zaldaña lives and writes in southern Nevada. She earned a B.A. in English from the University of Nevada Las Vegas. Her poetry has been published in *From Snowcaps to Desert Flats: An Anthology of Latino Writers in Nevada*, *Helen: A Literary Magazine*, *300 Days*

of Sun, Nevada Public Radio's *Desert Companion*, and elsewhere. In 2019, her chapbook, *Bougainvillea*, was published by Tolsun Books.