

SALLY BREEN

Vertical Vegas

We have been express lifted to the thirty-first floor of *Monte Carlo* Casino. I'm standing at the window of our room, one of three thousand, and they are all full. The bed is a mess. You have already left—too busy to look at the view. I am gazing at the sheer elevation of the hotel as it runs on beside me, at the cream surface of its right wing, higher and more expansive than ten football fields. I am standing alone, framed by one window, a frame that repeats itself identically in hundreds of long lines. I look into the other rooms, notice the same details. The gold lamps, the dark wood furniture. The striped luxurious wallpaper. The inherited flourishes of a Mediterranean past. And only when I have fully registered the immensity of this thing I'm in, can I cast my eyes out. To the mighty stretch of Las Vegas. To everything getting bigger. To the city of endless lengths, endless heights, endless concrete and endless sand.

I remember the flight over the majestic red rock canyons. How you reached to squeeze my fingers. The parched mountains pierced with snow. The city stretching across the flat plain of the desert, the thousands of houses spreading back from the strip in the brown and dusty earth. It hardly ever rains in Las Vegas. Nothing grows roots. There are

no drains. Instead the city is settled, held down with concrete and it is only concrete that can give this desert's incessant horizon line any vertical symmetry. I look left and right at the massive casinos, knowing there are more of them I cannot see, and I am impressed, full of wonder, caught by the thrill and the horror of their size. I look further to the distant ragged horizon, to the giant red mountains that ring this city. Finding myself caught in this strange symbiotic exchange between the constructed topography of the casinos and the colossal real. And it's as if the casinos are trying to be the mountains; trying to call out to them across the expanse of the great American plain—this big, unforgiving country—and esd

And the casinos know it. I tell you all about it later when you're back at the hotel after dark about the walkways that run the length of the strip purposefully convoluted—lined by barriers and directional diversions like complicated stairway structures and narrow escalators—leading me on tangents and one way directions. At times I have to wind my way through the casinos just to get back out onto the street. I have no choice but to follow. I am transported over side streets, carried into elaborate foyers, required to bottleneck at certain points and therefore be tempted to stop. I get caught in rooms which, “smell like plain hugeness, the smell of a room big enough to have weather.”³ And nothing is exempt from this game of snagging human attention—I'm swamped by the incessant affects of the “architecture of persuasion.”⁴ The holograms, dancing girls, choreographed waterfalls, spruikers, voice-overs, giant LCD screens the size of buildings, oxygen bars, the imitation Elvises, curling lights and flashing signs all get in my face, in my head and under my skin without any actual contact. Hovering just beyond me. I move and absorb and I'm saturated; and it is not until later that the effects of this engagement will appear like magic, like neon stigmata.

Las Vegas *is* about cruising and gazing but it is also high speed and fly-by. It is all these things. I freewheel along the Strip on my own two feet, on a Harley, in a helicopter, a Corvette, and a Cadillac. They sell all kinds of movement here, to alleviate the vertigo, the pressure of open skies and flat open space. People hire choppers, private planes, and strange celebrity-style people-movers that look like elongated A-Team vans. Limousines are as prevalent as dimes. And nearly as cheap. But I keep walking because gazing at the surfaces of these buildings in slow motion is just one part of a series of simultaneous experiences dealt out at street level, eye level and from the sky. My sense of placement is

