


November 2016

Vegas, Stripped: On Returning for a National Teacher's Conference

Elizabeth Johnston
Monroe Community College, ejohnston@monroecc.edu

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Recommended Citation

Johnston, Elizabeth (2016) "Vegas, Stripped: On Returning for a National Teacher's Conference," *The Word Hoard*: Vol. 1: Iss. 5, Article 13.
Available at: <http://ir.lib.uwo.ca/wordhoard/vol1/iss5/13>

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The *Word Hoard*

/wərd/hôrd/ n. 1. A journal open to all Arts and Humanities scholars.

Vegas, Stripped On Returning for a National Teacher's Conference

*Stripp'd of their gaudy hues by Truth,
We view the glitt'ring toys of youth.*
—Charlotte Smith, "Thirty Eight" (1783)

Elizabeth Johnston*

At twenty-two, a paradise.
Cocktail in hand and pair of dice,
I reveled in youth's glass-eyed chase,
bedazzled by the city's glow,
besotted with its champagne flow.
How differently I view its face

returning now at thirty-eight.
The swell of youth in time deflates.
A scene obscene my eyes survey
foul smoke-soaked halls, dark carpet stains,
crack-plastered walls, bloated remains
of bodies losing life at play.

Casino's rule: no light let in.
Outside by throngs, worn, bent-kneed men
in sweat-drenched tees sleep on the streets
or press in palms tickets for shows,
coupons for girls from Mexico
delivered quick and fast-food cheap.

I blush and wish to render more
than incensed scowl or glare of scorn
before the shuttle picks me up
and whisks me to the Stratosphere,
where book reps buy my food and beer,
and high above I richly sup

**Elizabeth Johnston's work has been nominated for the Pushcart and "Best of the Net" prizes. You can read her most recent poems in New Verse News, Mom Egg Review, Non-Binary Review, The Luminary, Rose Red Review, Carbon Culture, and Teaching English at the Two Year College. She lives in western New York with her partner and daughters, and is a founding member of the award-winning writer's group, Straw Mat Writers.*

with wits, who from a distance pan
the trappings of this shiny land
and glut our pity on the weak—
sagging strippers, alley dwellers,
homeless migrants, wanton gamblers.
They take their hits, we turn our cheek

then gorge on lofty discontent
and wonder where the waiter went,
return to rooms, our bellies full,
to scented soaps, to laundered sheets
and drift into a blameless sleep,
no thought that we're responsible

for evils we can leave behind
when we check out from sight and mind,
exchange our guilt—that weary weight—
for gaudy trinkets, souvenirs,
relieved that we live nowhere near
Las Vegas when we're—Thirty-eight.