

Home Game

All three leaves of the dining room table
have elongated the surface into playable—
if felt-less—space, and ten of us crowd
around it for poker, chipped up, happy and loud
until the rare tense showdown shuts us up
so well we can hear the healthy neighbors
plodding the gravel road beyond the trees.

Harder to bluff here, among those
who taught me to play, and one or two
I taught. Easier at the casino to be mystery enough
to fool a few strangers. But here, we recognize
each other's most-loved moves, the rhythm
of each round, the pace across the long hours
as the minimums rise, and the stakes,
low as they are.

A few of us friends long enough now
that we've seen one another both brilliant
and broken, will see more yet along a continuum
that I'm not ready to name *the rest of our lives*.
I split a pot with someone who's seen me
weep; knock close-quartered elbows with others
whose secrets I've stowed carefully:
pocket aces I'll never play.

Amnesia at the Cash Tables

After I've doubled up three times in a row
on miraculous hands and fat pots;
when I've amassed enough chips
to comfortably indulge the occasional experiment
in math or psychology, or the irresistible
slap-down of the young dude
still convinced women can't play poker —
the world changes.

I forget
what luck is. I forget accidentally mucking
the winning hand in a tournament
upstairs, just an hour ago, in that other world
where I lived inside a person who needed
to be paying more attention to everything.
It was exhausting being her, guarding that small stack
and eyeing the button's slow circumnavigation.

But now that I've got this fortress of chips
looming between me and the rest of the table,
I forget the exhaustion of that vigil,
the hard choices and their consequences.
I forget that each dollar chip is worth a dollar.
I forget the price of anything that comes in gallons.

I forget, as I must, that this wall of dollars
isn't a part of my body or a geologically solid feature
of the landscape; I forget that it wasn't always here,
casting its generous shade across my small acre of felt,
and that it could be toppled by the faint breeze
of a modest but well-played pocket pair
being turned over two seats down.
I forget I'm not here to stay; this acre
was never actually mine.