

Tess Johnson – Three Poems

Amber Musk

candles on the table  
burn slow and low  
heavy and block-bottomed  
the wicks embedded  
in paraffin from which  
the flames flash in  
flamboyance. I love  
this table in all its phases  
even in the messy morning  
with coffee-rings, or now,  
in evening, almost dosing  
into dawn: here  
a book, there a pile  
of knitting. This morning  
the dog ate your  
toast. I watched  
him do it, moved to  
stop him, but the hound  
stole the rye into  
the corner. Now he  
licks his crotch by the  
TV where Michael Jackson,  
gushed, "I feel so alive...Can't  
you feel it?" The dog-eared  
chlorine stained magazines,  
fanned across the table  
in those few long summer  
days before he flat-lined.

The phonograph plays. Next  
door the infant cries,  
and Bob and Sarah go at it.  
I sit drawing Xs in my  
notebook in the chair,  
goose bumps in boxers  
in the January air  
into which the wax  
vaporizes. Between us  
unopened holiday cards,  
a magazine, my laptop,

your smokes. Beside us  
the lights we strung up  
glow. Stockings hang,  
so much to celebrate, and  
I can't shake the thought of  
MJ's bursting heart,  
his last groggy breaths. It'll  
soon leave me: what  
is there I have not lost?  
Or will some day lose:  
this table, the winter  
draft, you— even  
the scent, Amber Musk.

*Howlin' Wolf*

Bottleneck.  
Stag Antler. Buffalo Horn. He slides  
the hollowed bone  
down nickel wrapped strings. Mornings  
he smokes a Marlboro out the back  
of his father's trailer.  
He falls asleep  
humming tunes  
from his favorite album,

*Muddy Waters:*

*King Bee*  
Nights he drives down Moody Street in the  
blue pickup he won  
in Reno when he toured  
with The Blue Man Group. He talks like  
he's from nowhere  
Georgia, Boston,  
Los Angeles, Every  
saloon up and back  
Route 66.

He papers his windows  
with unfinished song lyrics, *My Pen Won't Write*  
*No More*. On weekdays  
he works the smoker  
at Blue Ribbon. In the dark

of his bedroom I memorize  
his profile. Once  
after a party  
he let a hobo clean

his apartment  
in return for the empties. On the first  
he collects from  
the renters. The proceeds buy  
scratch tickets, gas, guitars. Les Paul. Martin.  
Fender. Gibson. Taylor.

He sings to me  
so tenderly.  
His fingers: *Drive My  
Blues Away...*

*(Little Anna Mae)*  
He bought three dog tags from an Indian,  
carved his band name in the silver.  
Yesterday he painted  
his father's trailer: sanded  
filled and slicked over  
the flaking  
paint chips.  
Backstage he tucks  
his suit pants into  
snakeskin boots.  
*My Home is on the Delta.* Scars are  
cowboy tattoos  
with stories. *Rambling Man.*  
When he pulls me to him the metal  
is hot across my chest.

### Lovely Thing

Lola now lives alone  
but I lived with her  
two claustrophobic

years and dream of her  
in broken REM cycles

that desperate

insomniac pops  
Klonopin and Xanax  
like candied nut mix

that weighs on her nervous  
system and turns her into  
a waking bunch of jitters

passing most nights  
in the bathtub  
the porcelain surprisingly

warm but then again  
the water is steaming  
up the mirrors

and steam is rising  
and isn't it swell  
to be sweltering

she's got a real chemical (psh!)  
dependency that makes her  
act up and upset

the vase on her way to the icebox  
where things are slow  
and smooth and slippery

where she may wander  
in search of a cold  
breath her hair limping along

the caddy until the frost  
reveals god god  
she could use some rest

and he carries her  
blinking and breathing  
lovely thing

an ice tray that winks diamonds  
that cracks a smile as she does  
a living lovely thing

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