

TRANSNATIONAL LITERATURE

The Fooseball Table Heather Taylor Johnson

*Identity is funny that way.
Seeing my foundations reflected in plexiglass,
felt in the blow of a single white ball
shot from the goalie travelling the field
and reaching its destiny
untouched by foreign obstacles—
odd, to say the least.
-from 'The Fooseball Table'¹*

I can feel the sun on my face, and though I once lost the pigment of my nose due to excessive sunburning, I embrace the sun on my cream-less skin and my hat-less head. I shouldn't, I know better, but it's a new winter's sun in Adelaide and it's perfect. Dash wanders in and out of our shed to listen to the footy coming from the speaker we've positioned outside. His team is winning. He's loving his team and his afternoon beer.

My husband brews boutique beer with sage or dried banana chips. He never admits that his bravado to experiment is a credit to my passion for and knowledge of American microbrews. Our friends just think he's eccentric.

Last night we were in the foosery, which is to say the room out back which houses a large fooseball table and three heavy duty vats usually abubble with beer. Cath and Matty – our dinner regulars – were joining us in homebrews called 'Birth', 'Shine On' and 'Obamarama'. 'Birth' is a rosemary pilsner, nicely aged. Dash brewed it in honour of my first poetry collection. And when Denis Crisp died, Dash brewed 'Shine On'. He was my husband's friend and greatest mentor. His beer is a cardamom lager. And the risky but deliriously smooth Obamarama couldn't be anything but a celebration dark ale with forty mils of vanilla essence. Cath and I danced in between goals to tribal African rhythms fused with American blues. We were winning. I was slamming them in, totally in my element. I felt the blood of a twenty year-old me flowing through my veins.

Anyone else would tell you fooseball is a game played with a ball and plastic players on a moveable stick. The fact that I can beat most people at it doesn't define me, but I do enjoy such fringe benefits as appearing to be a total bad ass. To anyone else, it's a table made of wood and metal, but for me it is a chart of my growth – from pre-puberty to a woman heavy with love.

It cost \$600 to ship it over to Australia; \$1032 in taxes.

I've got this memory: the basement of the Vernon Hills home, my mom's face so burstingly eager for our reaction to the second hand fooseball table, my dad's readiness to fumble in ineptitude because it was new to him as well. We played two

¹ This poem is from my collection which is forthcoming in 2011.

games as a family, then it was only my brother and I. We played until bedtime. And every night after that.

It's huge. And ancient. Each time my family moved from one state to the next it was loaded onto the moving van with various grunts and numerous rest stops because the table is also heavy. It travelled to Virginia in the back of a pick-up truck and saw me through my undergrad years (and wasn't the house with the fooseball table just always the house for fun!). My early twenties was laughter and skydiving, a first love and lots of fooseball. I was the chick with the flick, deadly with the goalie shot. They lined up to end my reign. They stumbled home, full of beer and their tails warm and fuzzy between their legs. I put it on a desert-bound train and added to the décor of the hangar at the Arizona dropzone where my first boyfriend and I lived and worked and jumped from 10,500 feet. Skydivers played while waiting to board the 1952 Cessna 182, and my boyfriend and I played at night, the sound of a goal echoing off the thin tin walls, startling the distant coyotes. It lived in my kitchen when I moved two hours south. I didn't mind its positioning; why would a single woman need a table to eat upon when she has a perfectly good couch?

I have these memories: cheering from the sidelines; feeling sexy kicking goals; bourbon and Cokes in the table's wooden alcove; my first boyfriend's winning streak; two out of three, first to three, rematches; Illinois, Georgia, Virginia, Arizona; aged nine, fifteen, twenty-one, twenty-four. What other object has been so prominent in my life and for such different reasons at varying stages of my floundering development? Of course it had to be shipped to Australia. My friends were incredulous. What they didn't get was that it wasn't about the object as simple commodity (or fear that I wouldn't be so commanding on a different table); it was the trace of the object.

In the brown-carpeted basement of our house in the wooded suburb of Atlanta, Georgia, I am sixteen. My brother is away at college and my parents have yet to return from their Friday night margaritas. My friend Jenny and I have spent the night being mischievous and innocent all at once and now, at nearly-midnight, we are playing fooseball.

The sound of the garage door opening is a deep grumble felt through the basement floor. We tell each other to 'act cool', always afraid adults will smell our cigarette-scented hair. Soon enough there is whispered laughter and footsteps coming down the stairs. All that matters in the next few minutes is my father's face, clean shaven after fourteen years of hiding behind a thick, black beard. The sight of him sends me into shock; the moment made surreal. Such a feeling in all my life will never be duplicated.

When the laughter of the shock subsides and good-night kisses are passed around the room (they must smell the cigarettes!), my parents shuffle off to bed. I follow my mom's rendition of Jimmy Buffet's 'Margaritaville' to the very top step and I know my dad's hand is on the small of her back until they reach their bedroom door. I can still hear the mumble of their Friday night, post-margarita chatter through the vents connecting their bedroom to our basement, though I can't make out what they say. It is a comforting sound.

We finish the game then make our own way to bed, knowing if we can hear them, they can hear us.

The Bulldogs have it by five goals three. Dash is celebrating with our boys on the fooseball table. I hear high-pitched squeals from Guthrow and Sunny, low-pitched squeals from their father, an occasional ‘Tom, out of there,’ as Dash, no doubt, tries to move our dog away from his feet.

It’s called a ‘Hurricane’. It is worn with chips revealing tattered cork and I have littered it with bumper stickers from places where I’ve camped or skied or skydived my hard-earned money away. Each individual ball has images and stories attached. The fastball is a smashed window and an old friend Mary, who dumped me like a lover six years later, when I gave my son the same name as an ex-boyfriend of hers. My dream is that *my* Guthrow will learn to smash the fastball into the goal with a precision that can only be described as a *glide*. It will make a victorious sound as it bounces off the inside wall, and Guthrow will smile, having no regrets. The stealth ball is Seyl Park and his dog Denali on a summer’s day with two hours to kill. He was amazed that he could beat me on a few occasions but he could never score with the stealth ball. Fourteen years later I got an email about the passing of Denali. My husband brewed a Coopers Stout with one hundred grams of Milo. He called it ‘Denali’.

I am beginning to worry about my nose, so because of that, and my desire to witness unadulterated joy, I am drawn to the foosery. Guthrow and Sunny stand on a table-cum-stool, twisting their wrists in new and amazing ways (I cringe, knowing only too well that tonight their wrists will hurt). Their smiles are infectious. Dash isn’t giving too many goals away. He’s pumped for the Bullies and can’t resist an occasional slam. I laugh when he screams silly to the boys, ‘In the hole!’ pointing to his goal, because I know he is only half kidding. My eyes fall to the Skydive Orange bumper sticker from Virginia. I did my first two hundred jumps there. Two dozen faces race through my mind, snapshots of a thousand parties and a naked man jumping over a bon fire. I’m gone for no more than five seconds, but it’s a grand five seconds. Next to it is a bumper sticker from the hippie town of Nimbin, New South Wales, claiming ‘vaginas are way cool’, and so I continue to track my life. But it is more than places plastered on. It is the bulk of the table’s frame, the sound of the bars spinning in half rotations. It’s the time-before etched into the carved arcs of the goalie boxes from too many slightly-off shots. It’s the middle red player on the five-man stick electrical-taped together, and the fact that he’s endured a thirteen year injury. It’s my brother. My first lover. My husband and my sons. The homebrew bubbling away in the background, distinctly Australian with an American influence.