

## THE KILLING WAIT FOR A TELEPHONE HELLO

In my home seven hundred miles east  
of this phone booth, you spin the one  
record you like best. It is good to take  
Scotch slow. Etta James at age 23,  
a pool hustler's unclaimed daughter,  
knew the truth when she walked into the studio  
and laid down tracks to her platinum  
and permanently fractured heart, proving  
there is reason to learn and remember  
every note, to drink what burns slowly.  
In my phone booth seven hundred miles  
from my home, the receiver is sticky.  
The ringing continues. My eyes take in tin shacks  
in nattered fields, but I don't leave a message.  
You will find the way, following the gandy dancer's  
sweat song. The girl in the bar, beaded  
like a glass bottle, skirt hitched, and his lips  
on her neck making music of her while together  
they dance—you will follow the midnight of that.  
These are the tracks. This is the better story.  
The one that wakes you up, satisfied. The place  
my voice is an unnamed animal in the kingdom  
of impossible things. Where Etta sings  
a burn that travels a body slowly, where  
everything you have is enough.

## **DARE IN BOTH DIRECTIONS**

No quarters and he accepts the call. Good news  
is we broke even in every club. My fingers

are callused as harvest days. Through the receiver  
his laugh is work, an old dog turning circles before sleep.

I say Texas is endless, but let's agree on Soon. Don't leave  
without me. I can get there by daybreak

and I will—

## PLAYING THE ROOM

When it's over  
they stagger from their barstools  
  
into snow, homeward  
or elsewhere, our words  
  
in their beer, their stomachs  
emptied on tree lawns,  
  
the bed sheets twisted against,  
repeated and blurry. These stray lines  
  
sons and daughters  
will catch only the weather of  
  
behind the words,  
the carcasses of steel mills  
  
and rivers on fire. They try  
to reassemble the logic the way  
  
people interrogate suicide notes  
cold trails that could lead  
  
to the coordinates  
where certain hearts lay  
  
unspeaking, buried  
in the earth like gold.

## GIG

Their lives are better without you. Look  
at the moon faces and raised champagne glasses  
in this photograph. The dismantled flowers  
on the church steps. He married  
last week, and the girl, when you meet her,  
is well ironed and kind. Good thing  
Austin is just one in a string of occasional places.  
And you, a girl with a Stratocaster growling mud  
and chrome into microphones, can't stick around long.  
After the set you all will be a litany of vectored facts  
talking a scalloped edge around the sweet tea, six eyes  
parsing the differences between then and now:  
more creased, more safe, more of each of you.  
What is there to speak? You are alive  
within the memory of your own skin. You will be  
whatever creation you choose for the onstage hour.  
Eyes moldering, or not, heart lurching, or not. Tomorrow  
is another town with contracts and cheese danishes.  
But tonight—play them a broomjump.  
Call it. Wear out. Be new.