

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.