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.