Nature and violence are the forces at work in “Middle Cyclone”—easily Case’s best album. Photograph by Elinor Carucci.
Kelly Hogan, as people with voices as precise as “coping saws.” “They’re like little mountain goats—they’re just hopping up the cliffs,” she said.

Case’s change in writing style began with “The Tigers Have Spoken” (2004), an album of songs recorded live. The material is mostly covers—several traditional numbers, Loretta Lynn’s “Rated X,” and “Loretta,” by the obscure late-seventies Boston group Nervous Eaters—combined with four Case originals, including “Favorite.” It’s a waltz, a time signature that Case leans on a little heavily, and though the textures are country, the melodies have become longer, the chord changes a little stranger, and the themes more Case’s own. (She hits a deer with her car, but only in a dream.)

The next release, “Fox Confessor Brings the Flood,” from 2006, is in some ways the first Neko Case album. Country music is mostly perceptible in the reverb, now dialled back. Case’s words are more like passages from novels than like country lyrics. “Girl with the parking-lot eyes, Margaret is the fragments of a name. Her bravery is mistaken for the thrashing in the lake of the make-believe monster whose picture was faked” are several lines from the languorous and stately “Margaret vs. Pauline,” a song I hear as a description of the sisters from Marilynne Robinson’s “Housekeeping.” “Fox Confessor” was a relatively big success for an independent act, selling around two hundred thousand copies in this country. (It does not hurt that Case tours constantly. “Touring is the greatest thing in the world,” she told me.) The mood of the album is intense but cool—a long, meditative, slightly bumpy hum.

“Middle Cyclone” may be the place Case has been driving to. Working with the New Pornographers has clearly affected her pacing, which has picked up. There’s nothing as straightforward as, say, the punk-rock “Loretta,” but Case has moved out of the Nashville ballroom. Another difference between this and her previous records is that she has a steady, full-time band now, and they woodshed the tunes before recording them. Case arranged the songs with the guitarist Paul Rigby, a trained jazz musician who, as she put it, “is really savvy about bizarre transitions or chords or how to shift from one time signature to another.” The opening number, “This Tornado Loves You,” moves steadily forward on Barry Mirochnick’s train-track beat and a quietly echoing guitar that could be a quieter figure from a U2 album. Case fuses the personal and the natural instantly: “My love, I am the speed of sound. I left them motherless, fatherless, their souls dangling inside out from their mouths. But it’s never enough—I want you.” The singer carves with “bloody hides” and leaves “broken necks” in the ditch, clearing an area “sixty-five miles wide.” There is no obvious tipoff—is this Case’s heart or her countryside come to life?

There are dozens of moments of vocal delight here: Case soaring on the words “blue, blue baby” in “The Pharaohs”; blending her voice with Paul Rigby’s rapid fingerpicking and the singing of Lucy Wainwright Roche and Kelly Hogan on “Vengeance Is Sleeping”; building steadily on “I’m an Animal,” one of her best rock songs to date. It’s almost certainly about sex, and if it’s not it’s certainly about something that has to happen soon.

When Case returns to her comfort zone—mid-tempo to slow—the music has a different feel, slightly wilder and heavier than before. “Prison Girls” could be a story about the assassin Anton Chigurh, from Cormac McCarthy’s “No Country for Old Men”: “Who am I tonight? My hotel room won’t remember me.” Or maybe this singer has been captured: “The prison girls are not impressed, the ones who have to clean this mess. They’ve traded more for cigarettes than I have managed to express.” When Case and her band join for a group chant of “oh, oh, oh,” there is more than a hint of the chain gang amid all the reverb. But this outlaw doesn’t return to guilt, or vengeance; the song’s recurrent phrase is “I love your long shadows and your gunpowder eyes.” And since we’re switching among the human, animal, and physical worlds, it seems fair to say that shadows in “Middle Cyclone” remain even when the light moves.

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