

BALLADEERS BY NIGHT

It's still you I sing to every evening--
so natural I almost forget the audience,
the orchestra, the facts. After closing,
I come here, jeaned, bandanaed, beaded silk dress
locked up two blocks north. Just a few fast steps
from there down to declasse, but the vodka
and maybe the habitues are more honest.

The old man drumming spoons on the bar
is my friend. You'd like him. The obscenity
on his T-shirt offends me but I forgive his need
to lash out. The obscenities of his years offend me
more. He must have been handsome when he was young,
maybe as handsome as you. I rattle up fierce joy
with the ice in my glass-- age will never savage you.

My friend tells me cigarettes are bad for my voice.
"So's singing 4 hours," I say, and he laughs.
I watch how he does it before willing him faceless
as the bar top, cool against my bare arms, smooth
as Doc Severinsen's canned trumpet haunting the smoke.

Doc hovers over the practiced booth sitters,
the twosomes and the sorry solos.
He levitates them on a single luminous note
the way I sometimes do my audience
if I'm sure I can do it without breaking.

I sip the trumpet's lush legato lines, the sound
you reveled in, the sound you rivaled Doc with,
tasting the high blue-green vibrato. Easy to pretend
it's your warm elbow near mine. Soon my friend
will see me to a cab. I'll go home, maybe sleep.

But the next riff comes on like a siren damped in fog
out on the tollway. Like what you may have heard
that night. If you heard it...