

BALLADEERS BY NIGHT

It's still you I sing to every night.  
It's so natural I almost forget the audience,  
the orchestra, the truth. After closing,  
I come here, jeaned, bandanaed, beaded silk dress  
locked up two blocks north. A few fast steps  
from there down to declasse, but here the vodka  
and maybe the habitudes 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, his selfhood fading with each wash.  
The accumulated obscenities of his age  
offend me more-- in the heart or the belly  
or wherever unwanted non sequiturs lodge.  
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:  
At least the years will never savage you.

My friend tells me cigarets are bad for my voice.  
"So's singing 4 hours," I say, and he laughs.  
I watch how it's done. My mind makes him faceless  
as the bar top, cool against my bare arms,  
smooth as Doc Severinsen's canned trumpet  
haunting the smoke with one of your favorites.

Doc hovers over the practiced booth sitters,  
haloing the twosomes and the sorry solos,  
sucking them into the bell of his horn,  
levitating 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,  
almost tasting the high blue-green vibrato  
ending the passage. 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 heavy smog out on the tollway.  
Like what you may have heard that night.  
If you heard it...