

Go Way From My Window

I'm sitting in a bar – drinking a martini larger than I'd make at home – because I do not want to drink alone. I am, of course, drinking alone.

I like the noises, the “warm, drunken wash of voices,” the beat of the bad music just beneath disturbing loud – I'm aware that the gin is good and I'm aware that I'm thinking of Gladys Swarthout when she came to Danville, Kentucky in the fall of 1950 to perform at the basketball court which four times a year doubled as a ballroom and once in a blue moon as a concert hall. I'm sitting in the bleachers listening, something to do in a town and time when any something was better than the usual nothing.

I float above the clinking beer glasses remembering how beautiful and exotic she was – broad-chested, dark-haired, big-voiced, and I remember wondering what we were both doing there. I was sitting next to my roommate, also from New York, who in the spring would serenade the girl's dorm singing “Some Enchanted Evening” in his fine baritone, and when his former girl would not come down and join him (these were the days of girl's dorm lockdowns and house mothers and the like, and it was maybe two in the morning, his voice muzzy with drink) brought out a pistol full of threats. He waved it around and shortly after waved goodbye to the school.

One could say “girl's dorm” then; Breckinridge Hall was the boy's dorm in turn. The returning GI-billed soldiers lived in Vet's Village, ran a never-stopping card game, and supported a steady trickle of moonshine from the hills. I was 16 and a long way from home which mostly felt good.

I can't remember the first part of her program – maybe some 19th century German art songs about babbling brooks and the beloved which I likely wasn't ready for. At the end she sang, “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child” which explored a place in me I didn't know existed, and then, “Go Way From My Window”:

Go way from my window
Go way from my door
Just leave me with my broken heart
And bother me no more,
And bother me no more.

I'll give you back your diamonds,
I'll give you back your rings
But I'll ne'er forget the love we knew
As long as song birds sing,
As long as song birds sing.

her big voice carrying passion so darkly that no sweet-voiced Judy Collins ever could seduce me a decade later.

My drink is gone, though the ice cubes I suck on are reminiscing about the good times with the good gin. I could have another, but it would not be as good. I know that, but I'm still tempted.