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On an Unconceived Painting by
Lautrec · *Jim Simmerman*

Think of an apache dancer bent on
the indifferent arm of her partner
in a painting by Lautrec. Think of red
as the scarf knotted at her throat,
and of the faint impression it
will leave on her flesh. Think of
the brilliant blade of the knife
her partner used to slice the soft
clay from his boots not a half
hour before. And of the clouds
of cigarette smoke swirling
in the spotlight's beam. And
of the shadows carved into the
hardwood floor.

In a dark corner
of the canvas, the illformed
artist arranges his legs and
coughs. He imagines he knows the
woman across the room, sipping
rosé through a straw. He dabs
at his mouth with the tip of his
cravat and studies the line of
her neck. He imagines cutting it
with a clean red stroke, stepping
back to appreciate the slow violence
of paint drying hard.

Think of
night, Lautrec alone in his studio
with a box of paints and an empty
heart. Think of the spot of blood
on his cravat. And of the cathedral
bells coughing out the hour.