1980

On an Unconceived Painting by Lautrec

Jim Simmerman
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 rose 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.