

J. P. White

Cold Cup of Coffee

If it hadn't been for that cold cup of coffee,
none of this would have happened at the Moulin Rouge
with that little man who claimed he was Lautrec's

third reincarnation, but then we couldn't wait
so religiously for a second cup like the French couple
next to us who made of their cafe table, a boudoir

with aperitifs, books, perfumes, even a peek of lingerie,
so we left Ile St. Louis, took the metro to Montmartre
where two mimes were cutting sections of rope

to hand out at the end of the world. You were just
beginning to run down the flurry of painters who once
justified sexual legend for the mix of their palette,

when this man on the sidewalk selling powder-puff wigs
offered me a thousand francs to dance in his drag troupe
at the Moulin Rouge. While you paid for a painted wooden fish,

I waved the lunatic off with my saffron boutonniere.
What I didn't tell you was how little cash we had,
and how once, when I was eight, my sisters dressed me

as a Parisian tart and I danced at the local talent show.
I was too young to grasp the weight of their laughter,
that somehow they wanted me, the only brother, to look

like them, imprisoned in a mirror, yet gleefully adrift
on stage. Sex, was it a form of control or surrender?
Later, over espresso, I thought how easily I survived

my first impersonation, and since this was Paris,
the infernal center of so much nervous limbo, what harm
was there in a repeat performance? No one from Ohio

would ever recognize me here. We had never before kept
secrets, but now I considered it prudent, until with another
cup, you came upon the idea yourself even though you felt

cheapened as though I'd asked you to dance for money.
That afternoon I rehearsed with the other men, who seemed
at ease with the chorus kicks and twirls. On a stool,

I fumbled with fish-net stockings, garter, brassiere,
blouse, heels. You helped me adjust my powder blue wig,
add the finishing rouge, mascara, lipstick. I thought then,

captured before the mirror, padding my chest, if we ever
have children, how will I explain such an elaborate disguise,
this spangled caricature of who I thought I was, the babble

of voices waiting in the wings, the strata of eyes looking
up my legs. Out there, on that can-can stage sizzling
with cat calls, I suddenly felt the whole animal kingdom

had been sold a ridiculous steamy caper, a sweaty souvenir,
a gold-plated cigarette lighter stolen from a crime,
but then I turned, saw the other drag queens thrilled

with the whistle and plunge of the band. Just when
our big number was about over, I heard a silly incantation
from the back, swelling forward through pounding tables,

the twinkling of chandeliers and the piano thumping hard.
They were pointing at *moi* to come forward, show more,
kick a little higher for the stalking bankers and sailors.

Still others, men in pinstripe and uniform, and women
smelling of frangipani and lemon, shouted for me to take it off.
That's when I bolted from the stage, my stockings torn,

tugged at, smeared with wine and butter. I don't remember what became of my outfit, or how many francs we collected. All I know is that you steered us to the Metro, back

to our hotel, where on the third-floor landing, I saw that we were ready, if necessary, to endure any transformation, however false or sad or misguided by a little money.

The next day before the bill was due, you wanted to see the unicorn tapestries at the Cluny. I'd seen enough art, artists, and the haunts of artists for one lifetime.

I wanted only our familiar bed, and in the morning, your steaming cafe au lait . . . but then we entered a round stone chamber beneath a wide, jangled boulevard.

In that dimly-lit dimension, far from the usual reliquary and armour, you approached the virgin and the unicorn as though free of the night before and all the pink-bottomed

cherubs floating on the ceilings. The virgin captured the beast, not with spears, dogs and the swiftest horsemen, but with an outstretched palm, her fingers fluttering

along its chest and pulsing temple, cradling the wounds it had already sustained in its passage through death to a difficult homecoming in her arms. Woven of frayed reds,

whites, silver-gilt, the tapestry offered impossible union. It was all there, you pointed out — forgiveness, praise, affection instantly translated in a gesture . . . all this said

and unsaid between a virgin and a unicorn, somewhere below the Moulin Rouge and the coffee-stained Parisian light.