



UNIVERSITY OF  
SAN FRANCISCO

Gleeson Library |  
Geschke Center

November 2014

## “Colette’s Last Cat,” “121 Waverly Place”

J. P. White

Follow this and additional works at: <http://repository.usfca.edu/ontarioreview>



Part of the [Poetry Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

White, J. P. (2014) ““Colette’s Last Cat,” “121 Waverly Place,”” *Ontario Review*: Vol. 41, Article 10.

Available at: <http://repository.usfca.edu/ontarioreview/vol41/iss1/10>

For more information, please contact [southern@usfca.edu](mailto:southern@usfca.edu).

# Two Poems

J. P. WHITE

---

## Colette's Last Cat

On an evening in June when bumblebees were still swinging  
on the pendulous white orb of peonies, and I'd nearly forgotten  
about the chronic muscle spasms shooting across my shoulders,  
I saw the giant green parrot sitting on the ridge of my neighbor's roof,  
and my striped cat palpitating on the window ledge, her tail swelling,  
her heart breaking, certain that her most exotic, intoxicating interlude  
had finally arrived. I wanted to capture the parrot, for out of its cage  
in Minnesota, it could not last but a few nights on once clipped wings,  
but I didn't know its name or how to climb high the worn shingles.  
Instead, I watched Tigre crouched low, eyes glistening tangerine  
and vermilion, and thought of Colette, and how she saw herself,  
toward the end, as the last Parisian cat, arthritic and curled up  
like a turban beside an open window, still fickle and searching  
the alleys of the arrondissement for the object of greatest curiosity,  
her upper ledge emptied for the coming badinage, gambling years  
of looking for the privilege of one more assignation with the laugh  
of a passing child, or the sudden twirl of a parasol, because even it,  
her precious, hated, irreconcilable pain, fed on isolation and complaint,  
even it would one day, soon enough, vanish to play with someone else,  
just as, in a freshening breeze, the parrot flew off over the oaks,  
and my cat, exhausted by the sudden removal of the perfect, painful  
aphrodisiac, flopped over to dream again of a salacious variety  
of traps, any colossal moments of astonishment and unscalable myth.

## 121 Waverly Place

By August the air draws down like cracked gray paint  
or a collapsed tent, and nothing rises through heat  
but bus fumes and the penny whistle of sirens  
shooting up the avenues, but in May the wisteria  
can't be stopped especially at 121 Waverly Place.  
It's not as old as the scaly horizontal branches of  
the Hanging Elm looming in Washington Square,  
but old enough to have seen Poe, Millay, and Cummings  
carried off. Like those poets, this unkillable ghost

vine wrestles with anything it comes in contact with,  
pulls it from its fastenings, a bad neighbor for shutters,  
downspouts, mortar, shingles, air conditioners, windows.  
In this flash of sun, it reaches up by trailing runners,  
and claw-like, embracing tendrils, tussling, crowding  
out all other growth, dense clusters swaying  
sinuously in the slightest breeze, what Colette called  
that "flourishing, irrepressible despot" gone mad  
with power of the imperial metropole, driven

to search for gold, raw materials, new markets,  
slaves, the quick annexations of conquered territory,  
the great hanging panicles of lavender thick  
with bumble bees smothered in pollen, and dizzy  
from spiraling inside the rampant, spidery jungle  
and the moist, unanchored spring air. One woman,  
scuttling under the periwinkle brim of her hat, says  
it has always been here, even her grandmother  
remembers the oily scent...and how can one ignore

the weaving of bees, woody roots like lovers' arms  
twisting love with hate, mixing servitude with adornment,  
all that's crooked in lower branches made straight above,  
all that's revealed in the higher swags, entwined  
and surreptitious below, its seeds hot and poisonous.  
Gazer of the disbelieved 1835 visit of Halley's Comet,  
chronicler of the Civil War amputees home from dressing  
stations, spectator of dithering parades, protests, brawls,  
mutterings, recitations, buffoonery, poor whisperings

in the dark, you remember where we are most weak  
 and lacking and too often satisfied with appearances  
 of beauty untouched by ugliness, disease, torment.  
 What had the florid Henry James called himself,  
 the “incorrigible observer,” the watcher at the window,  
 a child treasuring his impressions like “winter pears”  
 for when he must return home to his New York street  
 like this one, where a torn umbrella, a shoe and a playbill  
 rest beside the man on a stoop with a sign propped

between his knees, “I’m HIV positive. Sick. Help. Now.”  
 Up there, where petals mingle and loop through, cornice  
 and facade flow smoothly into pinkish-mauve light,  
 one can almost imagine an artist like Nijinsky in  
 say *Le Spectre de la Rose*, simulating this unstoppable  
 vine, practiced in concealment, conquest, revelation,  
 when he applied make-up that blurred his features  
 into insect eyebrows, rose-petal mouth, leafy ears  
 until there was no telling flower from man, the dancer

unscrambling the flesh, holding one minute of eternity  
 on his tongue, savoring the unhuman sweetness of a floral  
 being not yet available for consumption or abandonment.  
 But there can be no comparison on this unrehearsed day  
 as the wildly bold wisteria strangles the air, spreads,  
 winds to 119 Waverly Place, rising on a thermal lift,  
 then up it goes over the roof to scale the parapet.  
 Unquenchable weed, sun-seeking flower—voyeuristic,  
 aggressive, high-climbing, reptilian, long-lived, tapping

at upper windows for death or is it life, the contest is on.