

Excerpt from *Moon Palace*, by Paul Auster.

*Marco, the narrator, is working for a man called Effing and who told him to go see a particular painting at the museum.*

It was a weekday morning in winter, and the museum was nearly deserted. [...] The American paintings were on the fifth floor, and except for a drowsing guard in the first room, I was the only person in the entire wing. This fact pleased me, as though it somehow enhanced the solemnity of the occasion [...].

I tried to put Effing out of my mind, then stepped back a foot or two and began to look at the painting for myself. A perfectly round full moon sat in the middle of the canvas - the precise mathematical center, it seemed to me - and this pale white disc illuminated everything above it and below it: the sky, a lake, a large tree with spidery branches, and the low mountains on the horizon. In the foreground, there were two small areas of land, divided by a brook that flowed between them. On the left bank, there was an Indian teepee and a campfire; a number of figures seemed to be sitting around the fire, but it was hard to make them out, they were only minimal suggestions of human shapes, perhaps five or six of them, glowing red from the embers of the fire; to the right of the large tree, separated from the others, there was a solitary figure on horseback, gazing out over the water - utterly still, as though lost in meditation. The tree behind him was fifteen or twenty times taller than he was, and the contrast made him seem puny, insignificant. He and his horse were no more than silhouettes, black outlines without depth or individual character. On the other bank, things were even murkier, almost entirely drowned in shadow. There were a few small trees with the same spidery branches as the large one, and then, toward the bottom, the tiniest hint of brightness, which looked to me as though it might have been another figure (lying on his back - possibly asleep, possibly dead, possibly staring up into the night) or else the remnant of another fire - I couldn't tell which. I got so involved in studying these obscure details in the lower part of the picture that when I finally looked up to study the sky again, I was shocked to see how bright everything was in the upper part. Even taking the full moon into consideration, the sky seemed too visible. The paint beneath the cracked glazes that covered the surface shone through with an unnatural intensity, and the farther back I went toward the horizon, the brighter that glow became - as if it were daylight back there, and the mountains were illuminated by the sun. Once I finally noticed this, I began to see other odd things in the painting as well. The sky, for example,

had a largely greenish cast. [...]. How could the sky be green? I asked myself. It was the same color as the lake below it, and that was not possible [...]. Blakelock was clearly too deft a painter not to have known that. But if he hadn't been trying to represent an actual landscape, what had he been up to? I did my best to imagine it, but the greenness of the sky kept stopping me [...]. In spite of their smallness in relation to the setting, the Indians betrayed no fears or anxieties. They sat comfortably in their surroundings, at peace with themselves and the world, and the more I thought about it, the more this serenity seemed to dominate the picture. I wondered if Blakelock hadn't painted his sky green in order to emphasize this harmony, to make a point of showing the connection between heaven and earth. If men can live comfortably in their surroundings, he seemed to be saying, if they can learn to feel themselves a part of the things around them, then perhaps life on earth becomes imbued with a feeling of holiness. I was only guessing of course, but it struck me that Blakelock was painting an American idyll, the world the Indians had inhabited before the white men came to destroy it. The plaque on the wall noted that the picture had been painted in 1885. If I remembered correctly, that was almost precisely in the middle of the period between Custer's Last Stand and the massacre at Wounded Knee - in other words, at the very end, when it was too late to hope that any of these things could survive. Perhaps, I thought to myself, this picture was meant to stand for everything we had lost. It was not a landscape, it was a memorial, a death song for a vanished world.