1986

Man with Lantern, Approaching

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.3381
MAN WITH LANTERN, APPROACHING

from a painting, anonymous, circa 1920

At first, from so far away, he could have been a firefly, only the heart-glimmer of his flame visible in the darkness. The cone of light he traveled in we were blind to, like dusk when it irretrievably has gone, the night’s unseen penumbra.

But there were stars then, a feathery edge of timber on the foothills, and the clay road leading out across the meadow. We watched a long while as he came toward us, hauling the flicker of his lantern, the bright slice of dirt he walked on.

We saw as well how he carried a blackness impenetrable as tar, how the stars went out around him and the night closed in like a great and silent mouth, and how—just as he passed the fence gate—we could see only him in a spiral of brightness and shadow, how he was many feet aloft, but walking and smiling, just as though he were of this earth.