

Caspar David Friedrich, 'Two Men Contemplating the Moon',
c.1825–30. Wrightsman Fund, 2000, at The Met.



Lob

Iain Rowan

After Edward Thomas

Once upon a time, or today, or tomorrow, because they're all the same even if you don't yet know it, this might happen. You will be walking down a narrow lane in the countryside, enjoying being away from people and trying very hard not to think about the next day when you are back to the routines of a life that seems to just go on around you.

You pass a gap in the white-starred hawthorn hedge, and where there's the gap there's a weathered wooden stile, and where there's the stile there's a weathered old man leaning and smiling.

"Fine day," he says, and you stop and look around and you nod. It is.

"It's lovely," you say. The man smiles, and the wrinkles around his eyes make him look like a dried berry.

"Walk with you a while?" This would usually fill you with despair; but for once it doesn't bother you and this surprises you as you can't quite work out why. You feel rather than know that he is not another dull walker who will turn the conversation to his GPS watch or his newest waterproof, or Brexit or his Audi or his wife's unsurprising lack of understanding. This is someone who belongs to this land, you think. To here. So, you walk on, mostly in companionable silence, but every now and then he'll point something out to you, the lapwing and the champion, the St Mark's fly and the alder. You enjoy this, because you like knowing what to call things and keep meaning to learn them but never do. That brings something to mind so you say, "Sorry, I didn't catch your name?"

The old man smiles and twinkles and nods. "Ah, my name," he says, and he sucks his bottom lip a little in thought. "Well, now," he says. "My name's Lob."

"Lob?" you say, and then wonder if your tone sounds rude, but it is such an unusual name. Still, country folks and all that.

"Aye, Lob," he says, and doesn't seem offended. "Or some call me Lob-lie-by-the-fire."

"Um, oh," you say. "Right." Here we go. Why am I such a magnet for people like this, you think. This is why I don't like to get buses.

"Or Jack, sometimes, by some folks. Jack Cade. Or maybes Jack Smith, by others." He gives you a sideways smile, and you try and not look confused. "Jack Moon, some of 'em say, poor Jack of every trade, Young Jack, or sometimes Old Jack, and then there's Jack What-d'ye-call, or Jack-in-the-hedge."

"Wow," you say. Relax into it. Humour him. You're starting to enjoy it; it would make a great story if you could think of someone who might listen. Proper rural colour and charm.

"Then there's the Robins," the old man says, and for a moment you think he's going to tell you what the birds call him, and you bite your lip to suppress a laugh. "Robin-run-by-the-wall, Robin Hood, Ragged Robin, or some folk will say Lazy Bob instead." And he laughs, his whole body shaking, and just for a moment, it feels as if the trees and the air and the ground under your feet shake and laugh with him too.

"That's a lot of names," you say.

"There are others," the old man nods. "Many more. But sometimes I forget 'em. Remember all the wars, but forget my own names."

"I'm not surprised," you say.

"Tell 'em to a poet every so often, so they can do the remembering for me. There's been a few of 'em, over time. Poets and wars, I've known so many. That's how it goes, when it's not one it's the other and oftentimes it's both. You're not a poet, are you?"

"Me? No." You laugh. "Not since school, anyway."

"Ah, well. I have plenty time. Prefer the poets to the generals." He smiles his sideways smile again and walks on with you. "And then there's my true name," he says, after a little while.

"Ah," you say. "What's that, then?"

The old man chuckles. "You should *never* give anyone your true name," he says.

You give him a look, and your scepticism shows, and then the old man says your true name, which is not the name people know you by, and the hawthorn and the sky and the birdsong and the road all rush away from you as if a camera has just zoomed out. In that moment the world is gone, and you feel as if you are standing on a vast empty plain, under a vast empty sky, and something incredibly old that you cannot see is looking at you. Its gaze passes through your body and into your mind and it sees everything you have ever done and everything that you will ever be, and every regret and every secret and every joy of your life, and you become known.

Then there's a moment as if an eye has blinked, and you are standing back on this narrow country lane, and a chaffinch pours its liquid song from the branch of an oak and the gentle breeze ruffles your hair with affection. The old man is looking at you, nodding his head slowly.

"There now," he says. "That is why you do not tell anyone your true name."

You are too confused to say anything for a while, and then it comes to you.

"But I didn't tell you."

He smiles, soft and sad. "You didn't need to. I carry them all."

You look at him, trying to understand what he means and why he is smiling but looks sad, as if he is bearing the weight of all things alive and all the things that once lived, but you fail, and just stand there, unknowing.

The old man sees how you are, and nods, not unkindly. He turns and speaks a name up into the air and you know the swallow swooping overhead, know the appetite in you that can never be sated because you have to drive that never-ending flight, you feel the maps of the world in your head that are unseen but will take you across continents and oceans, and you revel in the sweet joy of the rising thermal that cups you like a hand and lifts you high in the clear air before gently releasing you.

He says the name again and you are back in the narrow lane, and the swallow swoops and dives away over the fields, and you will not ever forget it. The old man looks to the side and speaks a name again, and you know the oak tree and you feel the tiny weight of the chaffinch on your branch, the wind's gentle shiver on your leaves, your long, slow exhalation into the world, and you feel the way your roots spread through the earth like thoughts and through them how you are connected to the trees nearby, and you feel the vast slow heartbeats of time.

Then the old man speaks again, and you are just a person standing in a country lane.

"Maybe you'll find yourself a poet, after all. Comes to people, sometimes. If it does, remember my names for me."

Lob nods, smiles and walks on, taking a turn through the hawthorn hedge that won't be there when you reach it. You know the dull ache in your back that never quite goes away, and the quiet static of anxiety which stays with you like your breathing, and you feel the weight of the week ahead. But now you know the swallow's flight, and the oak's mighty stretch, and how every day is the day before and the day ahead at the same time. You know that everything has its true name and if you could but say it, you would know the joy of everything, and for the rest of your forever, knowing that will be enough.

.....

Iain Rowan