



## The Writer and the City

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**L**IKE EVERYONE ELSE, I'm moving to the country (eventually). As a writer, I'm not sure this is a good thing.

Some years ago, I got the bus home after a collaborative show I'd written for. The show was a site-specific one, in a nineteenth-century police station, four stories high; a mini prison. It explored the lives of people (long dead) who'd worked, or been incarcerated, there. Afterwards, I told the director she'd created a 'flow of souls' through the building.

I was reminded of that 'flow of souls' on the bus on my way home from the show: in amongst the conversations, phones buzzing, passengers talking to disembodied callers, bodies swaying with the pitch and roll of the double decker. The flow of souls, all around us in urban areas, is precious for a writer. In the city we're surrounded by live ghosts, tracing chimerical patterns: fingerprints on a handrail; the imprint of a body on a seat; echoes of voices in the air.

I love the metropolis, but in my city terrace, I consume the countryside, hungrily. I crave a collection of bucolic poetry best of all: gorgeous lyric about trees, stark against iridescent clouds; a kingfisher, startling the poet on a dawn walk. A writer friend, a few streets away, is *infuriated* by this kind of writing. But I'm awestruck by those (mostly) women, who walk the woodland and hedgerows at dawn, foregoing the chance of a barista coffee at 8 a.m. (or p.m.) and the option of a five-minute round-trip to Wilko on foot.



When I do move to the countryside, I'll probably try my hand at a bit of rural verse: not to publish, but to send to my friend via text, to wind her up.

Meanwhile, there's my own dawn walk, with its usual destination. I pass the blazing lights of our unofficial 'Neighbourhood Watch' house. No twitching curtains, no curtains at all, just the smell of weed and occasional blast of R&B. But I credit them with keeping our houses secure through the night, preventing our wheelie bins from being burnt out during a recent spate of rubbish-fuelled arson.

I reach the park. Not my destination, but I enter. Soft ground yields beneath me, churned to mud by city feet. I pass a heron on the pond. The heron isn't our only wildlife. There's a badger set in the woods beyond the chip shop; muntjac deer in the cemetery. A few years back, two tiny red pandas escaped from our little zoo. I never saw them, but it was on the regional news.

I exit through another gate of the park, turn another corner and arrive... at a cul-de-sac of 1970's semis on a hill. I gaze out across the valley, filled with council estates; allotments; a convent; retail parks and a University ranking twelfth in the UK. I can see all the way to Europe's largest critical care hospital, on the other side.

If I ever make it to the country, I'm going to miss the view.