



The Town Mouse and the Country Mouse

“The Country Mouse stopped in the Town Mouse’s den only long enough to pick up her carpet bag and umbrella.

“You may have luxuries and dainties that I have not,’ she said as she hurried away, ‘but I prefer my plain food and simple life in the country with the peace and security that go with it.”

Aesop and Doña Flor

Kimmen Sjölander

Doña Flor dos Guimarães, professor of the culinary arts in Salvador de Bahia, Brazil, had a problem: her dead husband’s ghost. Vadinho had brought her more trouble back in his in-the-flesh days than a woman could bear, spending more time at the casino and in brothels than with his wife, but when he returned home and crawled into bed with her, Flor turned into a fount of forgiveness. Vadinho might have been a cad, but he was a wizard between the sheets. And didn’t the Bible say love covered a multitude of sins?

After her husband’s death at only thirty-one, Flor mourned while her mother rejoiced. But celibacy didn’t suit the lovely widow. Her second husband, Teodoro, was a respected pharmacist and a gentleman; in other words, Vadinho’s total opposite. Teodora was also, quite unfortunately, Vadinho’s opposite in bed. From the torment of her marriage to Vadinho, to her desolation after his death, to the disappointment of married life to a

truly decent man who so clearly adored her: poor, poor Flor. And then one day Vadinho returned: naked, ready, and willing. “You rang, Madam?”

I paraphrase. The ghost didn’t say exactly that, but he did make his intentions clear.

What’s a woman to do when her husband’s ghost offers to satisfy her in ways her new husband can’t, but her religion condemns adultery? If you’ve seen the 1976 film *Doña Flor and Her Two Husbands* or read the novel by Jorge Amado, you know how it turned out for our conflicted heroine. Some girls have all the luck!

All of us face conflicting needs throughout our lives, even if these are not the kind confronting Flor. To marry or remain single, to have children or not, to take a demanding job or seek work-life balance; these decisions, and a host of others, define in significant ways the trajectories of our lives. Of these, choosing between city life and life in the country might not seem

particularly momentous (and it's easier to change one's abode than one's spouse) but it colors and molds our day-to-day lives in profound ways.

The question of city or country goes back millennia. Aesop's fable of the country mouse and the city mouse favors country life, and if you follow surveys of where people hope to live in retirement, you'll find huge numbers voting for the countryside. But for every person leaving New York City for a home in the Hudson Valley, and every Thoreau seeking solitude and nature, there are folk making the opposite journey. People can be compelled to live in a city for work, but cities can also exert a peculiar magic that draws people to them, despite all the things that can, and do, go wrong whenever large numbers of people crowd into a small space. Like Doña Flor forgiving Vadinho his many faults, we can ignore all the warts of city life, from higher rents and outrageous real estate costs to noisy neighbors and

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I've been obsessed with this question most of my life. As a child growing up in a United Nations village in Queens, surrounded by people from different countries, my primary fantasy when I reached my early teens involved being a painter or a writer living in Paris, ideally in a garret, and spending hours in cozy cafes looking out at the rain. My secondary fantasy (undoubtedly spurred by Kim Darby's to-die-for leather gaucho pants in *True Grit*, the 1969 John Wayne film) placed me high in the mountains somewhere, living on a ranch and riding horses. I did, in fact, end up having a close semblance of the Parisian life I'd imagined, although most of it took place in Manhattan's East Village and San Francisco, with only a few weeks in Paris. I never lived in the mountains, but my seven years in Santa Cruz surrounded by redwood forests and minutes from the Pacific coast satisfied the spirit of that fantasy. But from the branches of the sycamore trees where I perched as a child plotting my future life, I never saw myself living in a suburb where the only cafes would be in strip malls and most of these cafes would be Starbucks, never mind the fact that there were no Starbucks back when I was a pipsqueak daydreaming halfway up an itchy-ball tree.

My soothsayer skills are clearly limited, because I ended up spending two decades in exactly such a suburb. (I also never imagined that my first marriage would end in divorce, leaving me at thirty-two with three children, one year of college, and no marketable job skills beyond waitressing and light office

work, providing yet more evidence against any claims I might have made back then about my psychic abilities, but that's another story.)

As suburban towns go, Lafayette wasn't bad. Originally home to the Miwok and Ohlone tribes, the land itself is exquisite: hilly, criss-crossed with streams, and covered with trees. It is protected by the Berkeley-Oakland hills to the west from the fog that covers much of coastal California every summer. For the climate alone, I might have wanted to live in Lafayette. The pretty downtown is filled with posh shops, nice restaurants, and perfectly groomed people. The small house I managed to buy was about two miles from the downtown, near the top of a hill, with panoramic views of the hills to the west. Nevertheless, every time I returned from a trip I had to pull out the Benadryl.

People obviously choose to move to the suburbs but not normally in order to fulfill a childhood dream. Suburban life is a practical choice when one's job is in a city, but there are children to consider. I had a job offer in Oakland, but the public schools were problematic, and I couldn't afford private schools. In California, where property taxes fund K-12 education, that basically meant a posh suburb.

Real estate in the San Francisco Bay Area is absurdly expensive these days, but in 1997, when I was driving around looking at for-sale signs, prices were reasonable, especially for small run-down homes that needed a lot of work. I didn't care about the ratty carpeting and the broken glass in the mirrored closet doors, and I had no idea the deck was rotting and the roof would need to be replaced, and that the previous owner had done his own electrical work—I was bewitched by the views and the seclusion.

Two years later, I met and married a

British physicist. We replaced the deck and the roof and fixed the wiring and the plumbing and continued to ignore the broken mirrors on the closet doors. In the middle of all those renovations and repairs, I got a tenure-track faculty position at the University of California, Berkeley, and for years I was too busy to think straight about anything but getting tenure and keeping the grant money coming in and university politics and taking care of my children and keeping my husband happy to even think about taking some time for myself. That lasted until I had two cancer scares and discovered the curious ability of a brush with mortality to put things into perspective.

Previously, I'd only questioned where I was living; now, I began to question every aspect of my life. My sixty-to-seventy-hour workweeks made it hard to stay on top of regular medical checkups—things like mammograms—much less getting to the gym regularly. Suddenly, Seneca's essay "The Brevity of Life" was making all too much sense. I wanted time to walk in the hills, to have long talks with friends, to finish the novel I'd started writing, to read more books, to pull out my easel and guitar. Unfortunately, none of that quality-of-life stuff was consistent with the productivity required of me by the university. Slowing down—working perhaps only forty hours a week—wasn't an option. I knew what my colleagues called fellow professors whose publication rates slowed or grants dried up: *deadwood*. It didn't matter if you already had tenure; they could make your life so miserable that you'd voluntarily leave. I knew faculty who had gotten to that point.

My feelings about suburbia, at least the version I was living in, reminded me of the problems inherent in interdisciplinary

research. I'd gotten my PhD in computer science and was working in computational biology, but as far as most of my colleagues in the computer science and life sciences departments were concerned, I was neither fish nor fowl. To the computer scientists, my work was too applied to be respected; life scientists, meanwhile, expected a certain level of experimental lab work instead of the machine learning algorithms and databases my group developed. Suburbs were like that: they provided neither real countryside nor city life. And because so many residents commuted long distances to San Francisco and Silicon Valley, our charming suburban town also lacked much of the close-knit neighborliness of small towns.

In fact, many of the reasons I wanted to leave were buried, and it was only after I'd been gone from that world for a year or two that I came to understand what was going on inside.

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After my second cancer scare, I decided it was time to take a step back and applied to take a year's sabbatical. The official sabbatical proposal I submitted said I'd spend the first semester visiting universities around Europe and choose one university for a collaboration in computational biology (my research area) in the second semester. It was all a ruse. My actual research plans were unlikely to get the dean's stamp of approval as they involved looking for the next place my husband and I might live. My husband's job gave him limited vacation, so I was mostly on my own.

Everywhere I went during that first half of my sabbatical, from small villages in the south of France to major capital cities, I took notes. I went looking for what

Ray Oldenburg calls "third places" in his book *The Great Good Place*—meeting places where newcomers can be integrated into a community. I struck up conversations with people in cafes and restaurants and got myself invited to parties.

In a small village not far from the one made famous by Peter Mayle in *A Year in Provence*, I was befriended by a cluster of Parisian women who had decided to flee city life. In the week or so I stayed there, I became enamored of the close-knit community they'd formed, the fields of lavender and ancient olive trees. I began to look at real estate listings. A week later, at the Pasteur Institute in Paris, a young postdoc from a small village in South America told me she preferred the anonymity of city life. In villages, she said, everyone knows your business. Anonymity wasn't high on my wish list, but villages in the countryside, it seemed, might not be exactly right, no matter how bucolic. And besides, that adorable village didn't have a single bookstore, cinema, or ethnic restaurant, and although I really liked French people, French culture, and speaking French, I wanted to live in a much more diverse society. I went back to focusing on cities.

As a scientist, I wanted to be near a research university, but another part of me—the part that remembered my years in New York City—was becoming increasingly vocal about access to culture: concert halls, museums, theaters, cinemas, bookstores, and so on. And of course another part lobbied to live in the countryside.

I began to fantasize about a home where the front door opened onto the center of a major capital city, something like Paris or Amsterdam or London, but with cozy neighborhoods for village-like community,



and the back door opened onto pristine wilderness. I was looking for the impossible, but that didn't stop me from trying.

Near the end of the first half of my sabbatical, I grew tired of the constant traffic and cigarette smoke in Paris and hopped on a train to Amsterdam. I'd been to Amsterdam before and loved it, but this time I was looking at it differently.

There have been a small number of times in my life when I have fallen in love with a place, bonded to it with the intensity of romantic love. Parkway Village, the United Nations village where I grew up, is one. The next place I loved was Santa Cruz, the beach town surrounded by redwood forests where I went back to school post-divorce and forged a new life. And then Amsterdam.

Amsterdam is the capital of the Netherlands, but it's really a small city; you can walk across the center from one side to the other in under an hour, and because there are very few cars, it's surprisingly quiet, and you're mostly dodging bicycles. Outside the tourist center, I discovered, Amsterdam is composed of a number of small villages, each with its own local color, traditional brown cafes, farmer's markets, and shops. It's hard to beat culturally, with everything from classical music concerts to world beat and jazz, opera, theater, and ballet, with numerous open-air festivals in the beautiful parks. And I don't have to tell you how beautiful it is.

In short order, I rejected London, Stockholm, Barcelona, Rome, Paris, and Montpellier and decided I wanted to return

to Amsterdam for the second part of my sabbatical. That left finding a place to stay. On the second or third day, I wandered into a little women's clothing shop on a canal and struck up a conversation with the owner. Did she happen to know of any apartments for rent, starting in January? She did, in fact. She owned the two apartments above the shop, and one would be available in January. Did I want to see it? I did.

A few weeks into the second half of my sabbatical, after I'd moved into the little apartment above the shop and found a cafe that I loved and had started writing again and had begun to make friends, I called my husband and told him I wanted us to give up our jobs and move to Amsterdam. Not then, of course, but in a few years. He thought I was joking.

Nigel came out for a three-week vacation, which we divided between Amsterdam and Portugal. Just before he headed back to San Francisco, he said he thought Amsterdam was quite a nice city, and of course it was fun to see Portugal, but I really needed to be sensible.

Just before I returned to California, I sat in my kitchen watching the results of the United Kingdom referendum on membership in the European Union. Afterwards, I called my husband. The clock was ticking; if we wanted to live in the EU, we'd need to do that soon. By then he knew I was serious, but he still thought I was being silly.

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Returning to the Bay Area after spending most of the previous year in Europe was a bit jarring, and yet, as much as I fantasized about living somewhere else and living differently, I was at least a decade away from normal retirement age for a Berkeley professor (tenured faculty can, and do, work well into

their seventies), and I wasn't quite ready to step down. I loved teaching and research, and almost everything about being an academic. That didn't stop me from kvetching about the hours, the departmental and university politics, and the sexism, of course. It did, however, stop me from taking action.

But there was a part of me that wasn't happy with the status quo, and it began to be a bit of a nuisance. It nagged at me day and night. I began to see it as a scrawny thing, perhaps six or seven years old, the smaller sister of a pair of twins. The larger twin, obviously, was the scientist-academic. From the runt's perspective, she'd gotten a raw deal when I put all my eggs in the science-and-academia basket almost thirty years earlier. I was thirty-two, with three children, including two-year-old twins, when I decided to leave my first husband, and I had a plan: return to school, get a PhD, and become a professor. Computer science was a practical choice: if I couldn't complete a doctorate, at least I'd be able to get work. At the time I decided to go back to college, the artist-twin was actually bigger and stronger than her sister, but she was put in a box on a shelf, and all the resources went to the other twin. Almost thirty years later, the artist-twin was a shriveled thing, and the scientist-academic was in control. Naturally, they bickered all the time.

The artist twin wanted to stop letting academia consume all the time and energy, and she wanted to move to Amsterdam. *Remember the short stories we wrote?* she'd say. *Remember the beautiful park we walked through every day to get to the cafe, with the swans and the ducks and the green parrots?* She liked it there.

The academic sister, of course, wasn't going to just shut up and go away. *You're*



being totally illogical, she'd say. First of all, it's too late for you to do anything particularly impressive, and anything less than awesome would be totally embarrassing.

Where is it written that I have to be a super-star? the scrawny artist-sister would reply. What do you expect of me, that I'll emerge fully formed like Athena from the head of Zeus? That's not fair. Artistic skill takes time to develop. Anyway, this idea about having to be at the top is your value system, not mine. (And then, quietly, I heard her say she just wanted a chance to play, and was that really so ridiculous?)

The scientist-academic sister would roll her eyes at these arguments. *What planet*

do you live on? Be practical. From a financial perspective alone, it makes absolutely no sense. Every year we stay at Berkeley, our pension will increase.

At this point the runt twin would practically be in tears. *How long am I supposed to wait? Have you forgotten what Seneca wrote? Neither of us has any idea how long we'll live.*

And then she would turn to me and say this was like submitting a grant proposal to the National Science Foundation and having it shot down because she didn't have preliminary results to convince them that she would succeed. It wasn't fair! First she was starved, and then she was criticized



for not being an Olympic athlete. She would point her skinny finger in my face. Wasn't I the mom? Didn't I get to choose who got funded? The scientist-academic sister had gotten all the funding for decades. It was her turn now. It had to be!

The arguments went on like this, day and night. It got really tiresome.

My husband, for his part, was perfectly happy with our lives in California and was far from convinced about moving to Europe. He liked his work, and his golf buddies, and playing squash, and our home. He was not a man who liked change, and the change I was asking for wasn't trivial.

But another development changed the dynamic: Donald Trump's presidency. In the fall of 2018, Nigel and I left the keys to our house with my youngest daughter and headed to the airport for a new life in Amsterdam.

Our life in Amsterdam has been so different from the life we left behind, for all sorts of reasons—retiring, the pandemic, living in a new city in a new country, etc., etc.—that my life pre-Amsterdam feels like it occurred on another planet. The fact is, Amsterdam has a very different vibe from other cities. Amsterdam is an outlier even in comparison with other Dutch cities, and it both attracts a different kind of person and fosters a different way of being.

Visually and sensually, we live in a very different place than anywhere I've lived before. Our apartment is on a tiny island in a cluster of three islands known as the Westelijke Eilanden (westerly islands) built in the early 1600s; the islands are linked by narrow white wooden bridges. For three centuries, the

Westelijke Eilanden were home to shipyards, warehouses, various small industries, and a few stately homes. The Westelijke Eilanden fell into a long decline in the early 1900s, and for many years these islands were a place of ill repute. But as Amsterdam became a tourist destination and the cost of housing rose around the city, artists and musicians moved in, and the islands that had been derelict for so long gained a new life. Over the last two decades, the old decrepit warehouses were renovated

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and turned into apartments, a few modern buildings were put up, and gardens were planted. Walking into the Westelijke Eilanden feels like you're entering the Dutch Golden Age, with cobblestone streets, repurposed gas lamps, and beautiful houseboats moored along the quays.

Because of the semi-isolation from the rest of the city, it's also like living in a village. In the four years we've lived in Amsterdam, we've come to know far more people on these islands and around the city than we did in twenty years in Lafayette. A large part of this connectedness to the community is because we walk or cycle everywhere, as does pretty much everyone, and all the shops and markets and services one needs are within a short walk. For everything further afield, there are trams and ferries and all sorts of public transit, but like most Amsterdammers, we're more likely to get on a bike. Our apartment came with two parking spots in an underground garage, but even now, four years later, we don't have

a car. We do, however, have five bicycles, including one tandem. This slower pace and more local life means you get to recognize, and then know, your neighbors.

A United Nations study some years back declared that Dutch children were the happiest in the world. From my experience, it's also a good place for adults. Dutch people work fewer hours and take more weeks of paid vacation than almost anyone else anywhere. Nobody complains about work-

life balance because it's fundamentally not an issue. Even during the pandemic when people worried about getting sick, the anxiety didn't become existential: nobody feared being bankrupted by medical bills.

Not everything about the Netherlands is perfect, and I could complain *ad nauseum* about the Dutch government's handling of the COVID pandemic and how I wish there were some hills nearby, but in a million other ways, it's a great place to live, and something of that Amsterdam mindset has crept into us and begun to push out the competitive status- and achievement-conscious mindset that is almost impossible to avoid in the US.

The point I'm trying to make is this: Humans are porous things; like gulab jaman floating in rosewater sugar-syrup, or tofu in teriyaki sauce, we absorb the flavors and ideas of our environment.

Lord Byron wrote of that porosity in his autobiographical poem "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage":

I live not in myself, but I become
Portion of that around me; and to me,
High mountains are a feeling, but the hum
Of human cities torture.

Byron was clearly no fan of urban life. Nor, it seems, was Vincent van Gogh, and it was probably his leaving the Netherlands, enabling him to immerse himself in a totally different world, that made all the difference to his art. Would Vincent van Gogh have become the Vincent who is beloved around the world if he hadn't swapped the cold gray skies over Holland for the sun-seared landscapes of Provence? I expect van Gogh might have continued painting variations on the *Potato Eaters*, a different experience entirely from viewing his sunflowers. I, for one, am glad he went to France.

Obviously, not everyone is averse to urban life. Samuel Johnson, the distinguished eighteenth-century Englishman of letters, adored London:

You find no man, at all intellectual, who is willing to leave London. Sir, when a man is tired of London, he is tired of life; for there is in London all that life can afford.

Was Lord Byron more sensitive than Dr. Johnson, or was the London of Byron's day, some hundred years after Johnson's, that much noisier and more draining? Or does Johnson's comment on London simply reflect the need Johnson had for the resources and connections available to him in London, which he required for his work?

Alternatively, perhaps Dr. Johnson was drawn to novelty. The attraction of a city like London lies not only in the monuments

and cultural events. It lies in the promise of surprise, a genetically hard-wired appeal that has been documented scientifically.

For me, at least, it is not possible to arrive in the historical center of almost any city around the globe and not want to explore, especially in Europe, where cities date back to the Middle Ages or earlier. Some cities are effectively monocultures, but those that are home to large numbers of immigrants—like New York City, San Francisco, London, and Amsterdam—present even more reason to go off the beaten track. The more ethnically diverse the population, the more one finds neighborhoods with different types of shops serving different foods, with people wearing different clothes, speaking different languages. Perhaps because I grew up in a place just like this, my UN village in Queens, I feel simultaneously at home and energized in cities that have this kind of character, while my response to suburbs tends toward irritation. This is why suburbs with cookie-cutter strip malls with chain stores may be convenient, but are not an invitation to explore. And it is why Amsterdam, with its high level of architectural, ethnic, and cultural diversity, and very low crime rate, is such an appealing city for urban explorers.

I felt almost immediately at home in Amsterdam, despite how different it is, and part of that feeling of familiarity is because of the historical links between Amsterdam and my hometown. Before the English took over and named it New York, the southern tip of Manhattan Island was a Dutch colony known as New Amsterdam.

Like New York City, Amsterdam is home



to a huge number of cultural venues and there is never a lack of things to do. In our first year in Amsterdam, before the pandemic, my husband and I attended numerous cultural events across Amsterdam. At Amsterdam's Concertgebouw, we attended a piano recital of early twentieth-century French composers. The pianist, Natacha Kudritskaya, a young Russian woman who lived in Paris, gave a brief lecture on the impact of the French Impressionist painters on Satie, Ravel, and Debussy before sitting down at the piano and blowing us all away. On another night, we went to a concert of African jazz at the Bimhuis, Amsterdam's premier jazz club; on others, we attended concerts by American singer-songwriters at the Paradiso; and on still others we walked down the length of the Prinsengracht canal to the Royal Theatre Carré for everything

from Jethro Tull to a musical from London's West End. Amsterdam's international appeal, combined with its varied venues, means that on virtually every night there are concerts, theater, opera, or ballet from around the world somewhere in the city.

So what does it take, in essence, for a city to be a center for the arts, for culture, and creativity? Money, for one thing.

Well before the Medici family became known for sponsoring the arts in fifteenth-century Florence, the provision of key resources has been central to the arts. Writers (in the English language) flock to London and New York City, the Anglosphere centers of publishing. People working in the film and theater industry are supported by the infrastructure available in Los Angeles



and New York City. Musicians and composers tend to live within reach of cities having concert halls and performance venues. Painters and other fine artists may produce much of their work in the countryside, but they head to cities for exhibitions at art galleries and museums. Without that concentrated financial investment, the corresponding arts would not have achieved the same levels of sophistication. These resources draw both artists and the public, facilitating a flow of new ideas, people, and income.

The flip side of that coin is that for a city to incubate the arts, it has to be a good place for creatives to live. Few creatives, after all, have high incomes, and affordable housing is essential to attracting and retaining them. But it is not only a question of affordability; it's about livability. Are

the streets safe? Are minorities protected? Is it possible to raise children in the city and to grow old there? Are the resources in place to nurture early-career creatives? Societies with economic safety nets that protect all members and make it possible to live on modest incomes can provide an environment that fosters the arts.

It should also go without saying (but I'll say it anyway) that for the arts and culture of a city to be accessible to the population in general, ticket prices cannot be absurdly high. Putting aside the question of nurturing local talent, if the cost of admission is beyond most people's means, that city will fail at being a center for the arts and culture. Discounted and free tickets to matinee concerts and museums, free public open-air theater in the parks—such benefits enrich the lives of people living in or visiting a

city and encourage the artists behind those works.

Money, of course, is not the only thing. The arts flourish in highly diverse environments. In contrast to villages and small towns, large cities are far more commonly home to ethnically and culturally diverse populations, with universities and industry attracting talent and energy and drive from around the globe. A higher level of education is also associated with liberal political views and greater tolerance for freedom of expression, and this spills over into the arts.

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Although I was raised in a culture that viewed participation in the arts to be essential to happiness, it was easy to forget that during my long years as a scientist in academia. That's not to say I didn't listen to music or go to the movies, and, of course, I never stopped reading books, but I almost never went to plays or concerts, and the hootenannys of my youth were a distant memory. I just didn't have the time.

But in the few years leading up to our decision to leave the US and move to Amsterdam, I began to change that. I started taking time before and after scientific meetings to experience the local culture: music and dance, arts, cinema, and theater. Some of these I happened upon by accident when I wandered away from the endless Powerpoint presentations at conferences, such as an open-air performance of Japanese folk dances in the middle of Tokyo and an exhibit of Sebastião Salgado's photography in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. I'll admit to remembering nothing about a single lecture at either conference—including the ones I gave—but the moments when I watched an old man from Okinawa leading a dozen or so

Within the physical framework of a performance, the creators of art come together with the consumers of art, and through this common celebration, the two sides connect to each other.

adorable children on the stage are still vivid, years later, and the British-Saudi woman scientist I dragged to the Salgado exhibit became a dear friend.

Those experiences broadened and deepened my experience of culture, and it was while my husband and I were watching a Shakespearean play in Cambridge, UK, that I began to look at the arts as having an underlying yin-yang structure.

The yang phase is obvious: here a work of art is generated—a novel is published, a play is written and staged, a musical work is composed and performed, a ballet is choreographed and performed, a painting is executed and exhibited. The importance of the yin phase is equally essential: few artists would continue in their arduous endeavor without the support and appreciation of the public. And yet, the yin phase is far from passive. The emotional/spiritual sustenance provided by an audience rising to applaud at the end of a play or concert, the readers of books sending letters of appreciation to authors, and those who offer financial support is necessary to foster and maintain the creative ecosystem.

We could have found a way to stream that Shakespearean play, perhaps performed by a different group, but it wouldn't have been the same. Part of what I found so thrilling was that at the end, when the entire audience rose to its feet to cheer the cast, my husband and I were close enough to see the looks on the faces of the cast when they understood how much we'd loved what they'd given us; they practically melted into the stage. This give-and-take between artists and the public is a fundamental component of performing arts. Within the physical framework of a performance, the creators of art come together with the consumers of art, and through this common celebration, the two sides connect. Humans are social animals; we need to connect with others, and the performance arts play a critical role in serving that need. And when the performance is world-class, the experience can be transformative.

A friend called me the other day from the French Alps, where she was staying with her husband. "You should get out of the city," she said. "It would be good for you."

I tried to explain that we didn't have a car and were still avoiding planes and

But when we got off our WhatsApp call, I realized she was right. Although I do miss the mountains and the redwood forests and being able to look up at the night sky and see stars, I *am* such a city person. I love cities. Bertrand Russell, the Nobel Laureate, logician, and activist, collected rivers, but I collect cities. Especially cities like Amsterdam, with urban villages that bring people together and the rich, complex arts and culture that they provide. I don't think I could really live anywhere else.

Within seconds of writing that last line, I realized it's not entirely true. That is, I still regularly fantasize about living in the countryside. Living in the center of a city, even one as beautiful as Amsterdam, can be stressful, and there are times when what I need, more than anything, is to be far away from cities and people. That's not to say that Amsterdam doesn't have nature. Of all capital cities, Amsterdam may be one of the most green, and not only because it is so bike friendly. The canals and rivers and parks are home to all sorts of wildlife, and even within the city there are extensive green spaces—Amsterdamse Bos, for

example. It's also possible to cycle out of the city along one of the largest networks of bike paths anywhere in the world to polders and rural landscapes with small charming villages.

While I was working on this piece, a

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public transportation, as long as the COVID pandemic continued.

"Ah," she said, "you're such a city person. I couldn't live that way. I need nature."

"I do too," I said. "And I'm not such a city person."



Dutch artist friend who had read an earlier draft wrote to me, saying I'd missed a spectacular nature reserve under an hour's drive west of the capital. The pictures she sent of Amsterdamse Waterleidingduinen showed a truly beautiful landscape. But the Netherlands is one of the most densely populated countries in the world, and if you are, like me, occasionally gripped by anxiety over the catastrophic mess humanity has made of this planet, sometimes you just want to escape to parts of the planet where much larger stretches of the natural world remain undisturbed. The Netherlands is also potentially one of the countries most vulnerable to rising sea levels, despite the assurances of Dutch engineers. When you start thinking about those sorts of things, you look for hills, but there are no hills in sight. Whatever you think of the climate crisis,

living in the Lowlands is hard for someone who loves mountains.

I return to thinking of Aesop and Doña Flor. Aesop had it wrong: why should we be forced to choose between city life and country life? Why can't we, like Flor, have both? Perhaps, like Tomas Tranströmer and Tove Jansson, the solution is as simple as dividing one's time between city and country. Most people don't have this option, and I certainly didn't during the years I was a struggling single parent. Wherever we live—on an isolated homestead in the countryside, a small town, a bustling city, or we divide our time among these—those of us who love the arts and culture will inevitably find our ways to the great cities to participate in this astonishing enterprise. ❄️