

The Hamlet

I started taking walks around the hamlet at night when I moved here in 1989. I have always had an affinity for the nighttime. I leave the house as the setting sun hits the western hills. Then the magic happens, minute by minute. The world is suddenly still and bathed in shades of blue—monochromatic, quiet, and dream-like. The familiar is transformed by light, or lack of light. All the shapes of the day are simplified. Alone with my imagination in this altered reality, I am transformed too.

The walks are about movement, breath, and escaping the confines of life. There's some kind of defiance as well—no, I will not succumb to sleep like a proper person. I am a rebel, a nomad, an insomniac. The hamlet becomes a mysterious, magical playland for this dance I do, with or without sleep.

In the late 1800's, a train brought people and goods from NYC and other points to the hamlet. It was once known for a long horseshoe trestle that straddled the surrounding Catskill Mountains. When the trestle was torn down in the 1960s, the community suffered. People stopped coming to this wayward outpost. On Main Street, old wooden structures, as dry as a bone from years of exposure, are relics of an illustrious past, sagging and mellowed by time. Some have gotten a midcentury facelift; a picture window was added to view the world more closely. Walking by, I see the glow of a giant flat-screen TV. Modern life slowly ebbs into the picture. Still, the past haunts this place—a shimmery shroud that is more present at night.

When you live in a small community, you notice change. The hamlet is defined by a haphazard smattering of streetlamps and a bunch of zigzagging wires that tie them all together. The lights set the stage. They cut through the darkness, and the real world falls away. A few years ago, the soft pink glow of incandescent bulbs was replaced with LEDs. Suddenly, the hamlet that had looked like a 1930s film, a melodrama, became a 1950s film noire in the edgy white light. Change comes slowly to this time-forgotten place. I take note.

Just beyond the light, wildlife roams with me—skunks, raccoons, and foxes rustle in the blackness. A deer nibbles at a front yard yew bush. At the edge of the hamlet, the coyotes cry out in mournful longing. A misguided black bear occasionally visits a familiar apple tree. They are my companions, along with the stars, the moon, and the trees. I collaborate with them. Even a passing car is part of the scene.

Recently, I've stopped walking so late at night. I do not venture out when January cracks like a whip. My younger, emboldened self shuttered at the possible confinement of age. I think back to what a neighbor said to me. "I thought you were a witch when you first moved here—out in the dark, your red hair blowing in a flurry around your head." Now, I try to remember my reflector jacket. The hair is fading to white.

I cross paths with other people scurrying about in the quietude. There is a feeling of apprehension in these brief encounters. Young people pass. The glow of an iPhone lights their way. I see facets of myself in their youthfulness. I wonder about their lives—many are just getting by. I sense the anxiety of our time in our brief hellos. Like most places, poverty is no stranger to the hamlet. There is a kind of honesty among my fellow night travelers that I appreciate. Do they dream of other places, points unknown? I know I have. Here we are, a cluster of two hundred people suspended in the glow of the lamplight.

This painting project is about a sense of place and time, the magic hours of eventide and night. It's about the humanity I see in the people in my community and in myself, our shared bond. As the work evolves, I've realized I'm not just painting my subjects; I'm painting different versions of myself at different points in my life. At sixty years old, past and present, real and imagined, the outer and inner worlds collide in this place called the hamlet.

— Jessica Farrell