



BEACON BROADSIDE

A PROJECT OF BEACON PRESS

***Editor's Note:** Fear—one of humankind's primal emotions. Nothing rouses fear like perceived darkness and the unknown. From the shadowy recesses of the imagination to the deep of the woods, fear can distort our thinking and our reality, beguiling us to see phantasms and monsters that aren't there. It can send us running in the direction of safety or entice us with the call to danger and adventure. But once you engage your fears head-on, without aggression or arrogance, you learn more about yourself than you could ever expect and begin to experience perceived darkness on new terms.*

Writer and activist Kay Whitlock has spent much of her life inquiring into and writing about the roots of fear and the systems/structures of oppression, violence, and injustice that stem from it. In this four-part series, she whisks us to the start of her fascination with fear...to her childhood in her southern Colorado hometown.

The Haunting

On Fear and Seeing Differently in the Dark

Kay Whitlock



No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream. Hill House, not sane, stood by itself against its hills, holding darkness within; it had stood for eighty years and might stand for eighty more. Within, walls continued upright, bricks met neatly, floors were firm, and doors were sensibly shut . . .

—Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House*, 1959

AS A CHILD, I WAS THE CLASSIC SCAREDY-CAT; in some respects, I still am.

And yes, I’m afraid to admit it. It’s embarrassing, and I hate to embarrass myself, especially in public. But it occurs to me that, in part, I write so much about fear and its structural forms in public and private institutions because I have so often been afraid.

It’s not my dilemma alone. Along with many individuals and families, the lives of entire societies may in some measure—and never to good end—be distorted, manipulated, even dominated by fear. The inevitable results are varied combinations of repression, displacement, brutality, and tragedy. How is it possible, then, not to be done in, led astray, or paralyzed by fear, but rather be usefully transformed by it in more imaginative ways?

In lieu of an answer, I have a story to tell.

In the 1950s and 1960s, as a child growing up on the southern Colorado plains just east of the front range of the Rockies, I was tormented by frequent, sometimes repetitive, nightmares and an abiding fear of the dark. I imagined disturbed men with vacant eyes crouched by outside doors, looking for ways in. Occasionally I sleepwalked, sick with apprehension when I awakened to find myself standing outside in the front yard or in some other part of the house, having unconsciously opened and closed doors to get there. I lived in heart-thrumming dread of the unlit emptiness at the bottom of the narrow stairs to the cold basement and the gloom that pooled each night outside my bedroom window.

Much of my fear was anchored in my family’s struggles with our individual and collective demons and disillusionments—and with the confusion produced by whiplash shifts between happiness and hurt. There were other factors, too. I was haunted by whispers of “what happened to Bobby Greenlease.” A six-year-old boy from Innocent Child Land—probably a local kid I thought at the time, but actually from a well-to-do Kansas City suburb—Bobby was kidnapped in 1953, held for ransom, and killed anyway after it was paid. My folks made it clear that care-

less, disobedient kids might well suddenly vanish into strange cars, the ether, and death. And just like Bobby Greenlease, we would have brought it on ourselves.

Fear didn't have to be plausible to colonize my imagination. It had only to promise something bigger than me, surprising, and awful; to reinforce my secret terror of inconsequentiality by shattering anything that made me feel safe, special, or good. Sharks, for instance. Long before *Jaws* began its relentless swim across America's movie screens, and despite growing up in a landlocked, semi-arid, overgrazed prairie, I dreaded the unseen presence of sharks. I told anyone who would listen—a rapidly dwindling audience—that most shark attacks occurred in less than three feet of water (not true, but I thought it was then). A budding Cassandra, I repetitively sounded the same warning: *Danger is Always Closer Than You Think and Will Almost Always Drag You Under When You Least Expect It.*

To illustrate: one summer night my dog Trixie, her nose pressed to the window screen, awakened me with frantic barking. Groggy, I tried to hush her and found myself staring into the unblinking eyes of a peeping Tom standing outside the window, only inches away. Screaming bloody murder, I sent my father and the perpetually splenetic man next door—a pest exterminator—into the driveway in their boxer shorts, both brandishing guns. Police never found the guy, probably because he'd already taken up permanent residence in my psyche. Even now, whenever I am alone at home and look out a window at night, I half expect to see his eyes looking back at me.

Even so, roughly between my eleventh and fourteenth years, I arose from my bed well after midnight on occasional Saturday mornings in the late spring and summer. Throwing off the pajama top that covered my t-shirt and still wearing jeans, I shoved my feet into red canvas Keds, and sneaked out of the house. A chum spending the night—not always the same girl—was

always in tow; once there were three of us. And for two or three hours, blessedly unsupervised, we disappeared into darkness.

In the wee small hours, everything is in some way familiar and evocative of what is already known. Yet nothing is the same. The earth relaxes and reimagines it all. The darkness reveals unseen aspects of itself that are rendered invisible or incomplete in the light of day. The terms of daytime logic are often so narrow; there is incessant effort to whittle things down to size, to manage them, to set them in orderly rows and arrange them at predictable right angles. But in the dark, things are not managed; they are only encountered. Nothing is linear, fixed, or certain. Shapes and textures constantly transmute into that which is almost...but not yet...recognizable. Under the slow movement of granite clouds in a moonlit sky, everything rearranges itself in almost imperceptible ways. These are the trickster hours, necessarily disrupting the ways most of us usually experience the world.

Trees no longer simply line the streets; they loom, huge and indistinct, and their branches vanish into a vast, indigo web. But who or what created that web? Houses—stucco, vinyl-sided, wooden, and brick—recede into the gloom, save for an occasional muted light behind a curtained window, almost invariably only one. Who is awake at this hour, and why?

Such earthy forms of alchemy stir curiosity and invite intriguing questions that are never spoken aloud, either by children or adults, or even fully formed in the moment: What is this? Am I seeing what's really here? Or only what I want to see? Is there something out here that I am afraid of or refuse to see? Deep shadow is often disorienting; it feels intensely alive and vital even as it amplifies loneliness and uncertainty. It provides hiding places for whatever a person would rather not know while simultaneously offering the possibility of examining what is tucked away in those places, out of sight and out of mind.

But I did not understand that then.



MAGIC WAS AFOOT AND ON THE MOVE IN THE DARKNESS WHEN I WAS YOUNG; that much is certain. The night air, clear and deliciously cooler, even in the dog days of summer, flowed in long, almost riparian, currents of pleasure, carrying the scents of mown grass, starlight, and anticipation. In those liminal hours, everything slowed down: the passage of time, sound, movement, and perception. It is possible that time ceased to exist at all. Except for an occasional cop and the usual weekend complement of barflies, the streets remained virtually empty of traffic until 3:30 or 4:00 a.m. In that hour, a handful of people roused themselves from their beds and drove slowly though traffic lights blinking red to jobs as bakers, milkmen, janitors, and other odd-hour laborers.

Sounds were revelatory. When a wind came up, the sudden, rippling *flap!* of unseen bed sheets left outside on a clothesline suggested the presence of a giant raptor. The faint *shhhhhsh* of a sprinkler mistakenly left on overnight gave rise to other kinds of waking dreams: a desperate little whirligig on the lam, maybe, or a cluster of tiny librarians moving relentlessly through the grass. Even hoary auditory clichés—crickets chirping, owls hooting, and dogs barking in the distance—became fraught when they suddenly ceased. Sometimes it was

possible to creep up to an open window, and crouch silently below it. There we harvested shards and splinters of information from the low voices, angry words, tubercular coughs, and fits of weeping that tumbled out.

Hearing the measured scuff of leather shoes on the sidewalk or whenever the crunch of automobile tires or headlight beams turned in our direction, we darted into recessed doorways or alleys, swallowed by shadows which themselves, owing to slight shifts of light, seemed not only alive, but aware. Underneath and in the spaces between these small sounds, the darkness became tangible. It shifted and whispered, but though I strained to listen, there were never any words. There was only the slight shivery sense of *something else*. In those days, at least in my hometown, my pals and I weren’t worried about small armies of security guards on edge, armed and eager to shoot. We were afraid of being busted by the police—and once nearly were. But we were white, female, and from “intact” homes, so it never occurred to us to regard cops as life-threatening. Had we been caught, they would only have delivered a blistering lecture and taken us home.

Apart from an inventive prank or two—we were capable of efforts far more imaginative than flinging rolls of toilet paper into trees—prowling was almost always improvised. Avoiding yards where we knew dogs were left out at night, we wound our way through residential streets and alleys, through faintly lit parks and schoolyards, past an old red brick mill that exuded a fragrant blend of dreams mixed with straw and stock and animal feed. Breathing it in, I sensed a possible future, populated with horses, in which I never had to wear anything but jeans, checkered shirts, and cowboy boots.

How exhilarating to cross a broad intersection empty of cars and pedestrians at a still-dark hour of morning, suffused with the intoxicating illusion that we were free to wander at will

forever. Occasionally we stood at one end of the Union Avenue Bridge, one site where, according to local lore, vigilantes hanged people. A “hanging tree,” a towering old cottonwood that once also stood somewhere in this area, had long since been cut down. Gruesome to imagine, it nonetheless appealed to that exuberant but nonspecific bloodlust harbored by many children—an old-time story about the deliciously horrific deaths inflicted on nameless, disposable people with no discernible resonance in our own lives. Death to the Bad Guys! Lynch mobs were not, so far as we knew then, part of our communal histories. So we gave no thought to who those luckless people were (beyond knowing they were considered “wretches,” “thieves,” and “desperadoes”). Who cared about about why they were murdered, or who was in the mob that strung them up—much less why the authorities let them do it?

Once, feeling especially daring, we crossed the bridge partway to peer down at the levee and river flowing on the far side of the railroad yard. Mysterious things might be drifting downstream on the nighttime current of the Arkansas River: perhaps surly escapees from the Canon City prison or bodies or even a ghostly, out-of-century showboat.

And we kept going into the night, replete with signs and wonders. Though we didn’t get there often, the train yard offered a dramatic payoff. The harsh clamor and clank of engines and boxcars being switched out sounded like a city constructing itself when nobody is watching.

In its heyday, built of red sandstone in Romanesque Revival style, the imposing Union Depot served by five railroads, each bearing an enchanted name sure to ignite wanderlust: Denver & Rio Grande; Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific; Missouri Pacific; Colorado & Southern; and best of all, the fabled Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe. By the time I was growing up, those vibrant days were well on the wane. While a few passenger trains still rumbled through, more and more engines hauled only freight. But that hardly mattered.

A train was still a portal between Hell on Earth (Here) and Anywhere Else (There). Like so many restless kids in smaller towns over so many generations, I longed to be transported out of my awkward past and misfit present into a future filled with some authentic sense of belonging. Maybe even into the idyllic realm of Judy Garland movies, like the park, filled with happy families, in which she strolls at the end of *In the Good Old Summertime*. The world in those movies was more real than the one in which I was growing up—or so I wanted to believe.

Sometimes we headed over to Main Street, which in those long-ago years anchored a thriving downtown. After dark, all those buildings that consumed so much of our daylight lives—stores, banks, public buildings—transmuted into ghost structures, silently watching and waiting until the authority of daylight permitted them to resume feeding. Once, the mysterious aura of the Catholic diocesan cathedral on Grand Avenue drew us in. Were its doors always so generously open during the night? Or only when someone forgot to lock them? Does anyone remember? In the end, the only thing that matters is that once they opened in the predawn darkness to admit errant kids as well as a small scattering of lonelyhearts and derelicts. In my memory, the cathedral is forever a place of opaque stained glass windows, shadowy niches, forlorn statues with blank eyes and uplifted or outstretched hands, and tiers of flickering votive candles. All enveloped in a dim haze of sorrow and loss.

Our daring wasn't boundless. The scandalous 85 Club featuring Hot-Cha Hinton with Her Pussycat Revue, was, sadly, too far away. The steel mill, with its roaring blast furnaces that in those years still defined the cityscape was more than we could manage. We stayed away from the sprawling grounds of the state insane asylum and the less kempt Pioneer Cemetery where, in the 1920s, according to my mother and grandmother, the Ku Klux Klan presided over member burials. We visited these places often in the daylight, and even at twilight, on our bikes with a

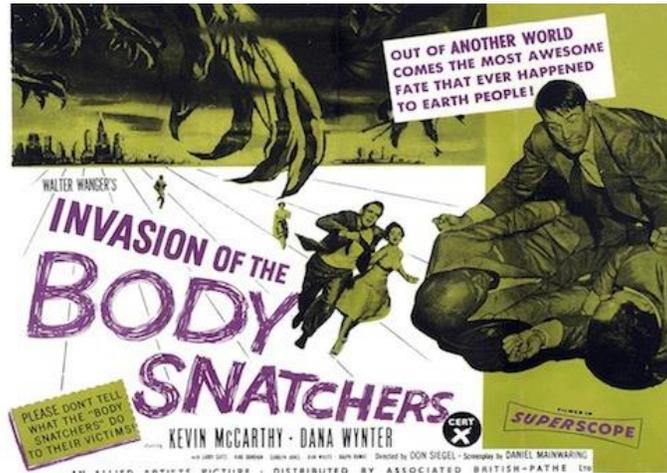
gang of pals, during raucous games of “ditch ’em.” But never in the deep darkness. When it was just two of us.

As for real danger, I want to think that we never encountered it. It’s impossible to know for sure. We were never harmed or obviously threatened in any way. Yet memory is selective, and so many things happen in the darkness that may be sensed but go largely unseen. And there was that one night . . . A friend and I were heading home, walking single file along a residential sidewalk. I was in front. Thick privet hedges lined the front yards of two or three homes. Suddenly she hissed something like, “Run! Don’t turn around! Just run!”

And oh, we ran, we ran, we ran, skinny stick legs flying, and did not stop until, blocks later, we reached my yard, bent over, gasping for air, chests heaving, hands on thighs. I have no recollection of what it was we fled, or if it was anything at all. Maybe my friend was just having a little joke at my expense. I didn’t think so at the time; still don’t. We lost touch for many years, and when we finally reconnected, she couldn’t dredge up a clear memory, either. So it’s all consigned to the great psychic landfill of Things Not Remembered from Childhood. Still, for the sake of argument, let’s assume she did see or hear something that filled her voice with such chilling urgency. What on earth was it? A flasher? Our school principal up to no good? The spectral emanation of Bobby Greenlease?

My pre-dawn rambles did not continue long after that night. New hairline fractures in my burgeoning courage constellated old jitters. And we were entering our teens, a time when the lives of newly-menstruating girls were more closely monitored by just about every possible authority figure. More than fifty years later I still wonder what I would have seen had I turned around. Maybe something really was watching us, following us, not only that night but also on other nights, and we just remained unaware of it.

More to the point: What did my own fear distribute and conceal among all those hedges and houses, among all those structures and graveled alleyways, along all those empty streets on all those nights?



THIS IS A MOTHER’S WORST NIGHTMARE: that without her knowledge, her child, willful and self-propelled or dragged by malevolent others, will somehow vanish into the great Out There, Into the Dark, where Unspeakable Things Lie in Wait. But just before dawn, we always returned home, squeezing noiselessly through the gate and coming in the back door, carefully tiptoeing up four creaking stairs and into my bedroom. There we listened anxiously into the silence for sounds of my mother’s wakefulness that never came.

Mom arrived home from work dog-tired on Friday nights and always seemed to be sleeping deeply on our return, perhaps lost in her own seldom-realized dreams of adventure. Affable Trixie barked only and briefly at strangers or menacing dogs while the cats remained focused on their own comfort. My older sister undoubtedly would have snitched; she and I ratted each other out given the slightest opportunity. But she was always away, spending those nights at somebody else’s house. And my father was never home. He worked the graveyard shift, 11 p.m. to 7 a.m., monitoring gauges and machinery at a pump station for the local water works.

It’s tempting to offer up my dead-of-night traipsing about as a modestly triumphalist tale about “facing and thereby conquering my fears.” But that’s not true. Or I could simply say that my experience reveals the wonder and beauty of darkness, disproving the nightmare with which it is so often associated.

But the truth is much messier and far more interesting. The darkness remains, for me, a carnival-like repository of dread *and* a shapeshifting source of wonder, knowledge, and beauty that cannot be glimpsed in daylight. In some inchoate way, I have always known this; it’s probably what led me outside. Yet even this explanation feels a bit twee, a perky *both/and* insight standing in smug opposition to the stern rigidity of *either/or*. As if the whole supply of possibilities could be contained in that mangy space between such reductionist bookends. Committing to the borderlands that constitute The Dark is a tangled undertaking. The journey does not lend itself to the kind of self-congratulation and pithy sloganeering so beloved by New Agers, self-help gurus, and workshop facilitators; so endemic to organizational fundraising and commodified spirituality; so intrinsic to the crusades and campaigns of demagogues and politicians.

For one thing, that *something else* wandering about in the darkness is real, unsettling, and it refuses to slink away. When we don’t consciously engage it, someone always bears the terrible brunt of its consequences.

In order to go adventuring in the dark when I was young, it was necessary to leave the house in which I lived.

So long as I stayed within the cocoon of purported “safety”—which is to say, within the familiar, well-defined parameters of home, family, church, and school—my fear was lumpy, undifferentiated, and usually displaced. I could not permit my apprehension to be lodged in what

was familiar and commonplace, even though that is where much of it belonged. Symbolized by The Dark, which held Evil and all of the dreadful, unspoken things that could happen to me, fear was comprised of artful, indistinct, and unforeseen sound and movement. The things that suddenly *thump* against the doorframe, creak unexpectedly on the staircase, scrape and scratch at the edges of closed windows, and exhale softly as they lie in shadowed wait just around the corner.

I employed various stratagems to keep this sense of impending doom at bay. Hid my most cherished thoughts and dreams. Tried to appease angry people whether or not I had anything to do with their rage. Ceaselessly apologized for shortcomings (real and imagined) and, indeed, for my entire existence. Made myself useful to people more popular than I. Sharpened my mind like a knife and conjured great fogs of words to disorient my enemies. Tried, impossibly, to become so good that I could exist beyond reproach. On rare occasion, my pent-up imagination, always theatrical, demanded release and unexpectedly popped like a cork, but everybody explained those moments away as aberrant: “That’s so unlike her.” Any relief these methods provided was temporary; none of them freed me. And so, with no conscious awareness of what I was doing, I began to move toward whatever it was that promised to annihilate me.

Already an avid reader, TV watcher, and moviegoer, I fell easily into the gravitational pull of the Fearful Darkness through story. Sure, it was scary—but also a huge relief. Tales from the astonishing imaginations of Shelley, Wells, Stoker, Poe, Conrad, Conan Doyle, Bradbury, and Jackson, and movies like *The Bad Seed* and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* provided emotional recompense for my fears without actually exposing me to danger. But more than that, hinting at intricate, multilayered understandings of reality, these stories produced fantastical images and symbols that struck a nerve, even if I didn’t fully understand them. I know now that it was never terror I yearned for so much as truth, no matter how slant it was served up.

Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1941 version) told me that goodness and the capacity for violence co-exist in the same person. Other stories revealed that the outward appearance of morality and happy conformity could easily mask lies and the ability to inflict great harm. The menacing aliens in *The Martian Chronicles* turned out to be *us*, not *them*. The monster might be a product of someone’s well-intended but misbegotten machinations, or a symptomatic eruption of society’s folly—*Frankenstein*, *Godzilla*, and *Them!* come immediately to mind. They wreak havoc not because of some intrinsic devotion to depravity but as a result of human hubris; they are Good Intentions gone monstrously wrong. *King Kong* and *The Creature from the Black Lagoon* are able to love, but persecuted and abused, they lash out at their tormentors in pain, fear, and rage. In these narratives, traditional storylines of innocence and guilt, good and evil, who is harmed and who harms become hopelessly ensnarled. They can’t be separated out into eternally distinct categories of Good Guys and Bad Guys; it can all turn on a dime.

This discomfiting truth is embedded in many of these classic tales. And every shred of truth turns out to be as disposable as whatever it is that we fear. The monsters of our own creation—and our complicity in their emergence—are almost inevitably disavowed by means of cruel treatment and violently destroyed. No evidence remains that they existed; no set of tracks will be traced back to their creators. We don’t want to remember. The impulse to safety only for self always permits the administration of incalculable pain to others in order to underscore its own vulnerability. But none of the violence deployed to kill the monster produces the absolute security so desperately sought; that is impossible. Many tales of terror end with a somber (and prescient) suggestion that even victory over what scares us is only temporary. Who know what bides its time, still lying in wait, in the shadows, Out There?

Telegraphing the message that the world is far more mysterious and unpredictable than I’d been taught and that safety was never assured, even in the most ordinary and customary places, unnerving stories opened doorways into larger theatres of imagination and exploration.



IN 1963, ROBERT ALDRICH’S NOW-CLASSIC HORROR FILM, *The Haunting* (1963), with Julie Harris and Claire Bloom, based on Shirley Jackson’s acclaimed novel, played to rapt audiences. The story concerns four people who convene at Hill House, a foreboding, isolated, and possibly haunted mansion. Their purpose is to invite the appearance, document, and perhaps discern the origins of purportedly malevolent psychic phenomena within it. Eleanor Lance, the central character, is a colorless and timid middle-aged woman, a self-denying and resentful Good Girl who has spent a dutiful lifetime caring for her invalid (now deceased) mother. The story’s focus is the influence of the mansion’s derangement upon Eleanor’s already vulnerable psyche.

Hill House is not deranged because it harbors darkness. It’s tempting to think so because, as novelist Toni Morrison says in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness in the Literary Imagination*, darkness is “terror’s most significant, overweening ingredient.” It is commonly conflated with the unknown, evil, danger, and death; with peoples who are not White, “black magic,” female power, and more fluid expressions of gender and sexuality said to be “primitive” or “un-

civilized.” While ancient mythologies and creation stories in many cultures are varied and nuanced in their treatment of darkness and the underworld, the dominant American imagination relies on a popular white supremacist vision that typically places “blackness” and the dark in hostile and inferior opposition to “whiteness” and light.

Yet darkness, like illumination, is an inherent aspect of everyone and everything. There is nothing intrinsically disordered, dangerous, or evil about it; its existence is central to individual and societal health and wholeness. But our society doesn’t believe that, and so, for better or worse, currents of imagination—yours, mine, and ours—construct the darkness. There are many ways, Morrison reminds us, in which internal conflicts, alarms, and collective needs to allay internal fears are transferred to that “blank darkness.”

Hill House is deranged because it holds its own conceptualization of darkness—centered in fear, death, and destruction—too close. Decade after decade, it nurses and consolidates fearful, isolating darkness to the exclusion of everything else. Hill House refuses self-examination; it recoils from the possibility of connection with a larger world. There is nothing to discover within its walls beyond an ever-increasing distillation of terror and, ultimately, psychic, spiritual, and physical death. The edifice produces its own dangers; it haunts itself.

This in turn permits the darkness only disorienting expression in the imaginations of others who, crossing the threshold into Hill House, encounter the structure’s insatiable desire for control. What happens to the four people is predicated upon individual and collective abilities to meet the structure on its own terms, refuse to project their desires and needs into the frightening energies amassed within, and remain centered in a more complex and irreducible reality.

Danger does not come at Eleanor Lance from the outside. She is finally destroyed by her own response to the house’s distortions and manipulations. Like Hill House, this woman has al-

ways held her own fear tightly confined. Unexamined, it will consume her and place others in danger. The palpable darkness provides her with purpose, significance, and the only real stirrings of physical and emotional desire that she permits herself: an erotica of fear. However funereal such attraction may be, it is fleshy and sensate. By surrendering to this repressive atmosphere, Eleanor Lance hopes for a different future in which she matters. She finally *feels* something. She possesses agency and power. At last she is wanted; she belongs. She doesn't want to leave. And Hill House doesn't want her to go.

This is only one of many possible readings of *The Haunting*. But I have come to think of Hill House as a skillful representation of a psyche dominated by fear and obsessed by strategies of manipulation, containment, and control that are said to be necessary for securing safety and realizing freedom. Its urgent and overriding need is to suffuse the darkness with dread and make others who come within its influence experience the world in the same way. Though its effects are isolating, it taps into legitimate hopes and longings for “the good life” and a sense of community, familiarity, and belonging as well as confirmation of one's own virtue.

But if clinging only to the distorting thought of a brutal darkness for self-definition is problematic—so, too, is an obsessive and unquestioning embrace of “the light” to vanquish the demon darkness. However attractively packaged, conquest is always [the wrong paradigm](#), with its simplistic, self-serving storyline of inevitable victory of “the light”—goodness and enlightenment—over barbaric, savage, evil, and death-dealing darkness.

Over many years, I have learned how easy it is to imagine that any problems with darkness and all of its connotative, fearful associations belong to someone else. For a long time, I pushed aside concerns that some of those problems might also be mine by romanticizing the is-

sue and focusing on the splendor in the darkness that revives an ancient sense of reverence and in some way reflects and amplifies one’s deepest hopes and dreams. While opening the self to such beauty and wonder is essential, it is also the simpler task. It’s much harder to admit to playing in one’s own dark gardens of fear.

It has taken me most of a lifetime to realize that, all along, the mysterious and elusive source of unease, that unnerving sense of *something else* wandering about in the darkness was me.

It was never Bad Guys, thugs, psychopaths, morally vacant people with even less money than my family, child molesters, ghosts, monsters, or sharks. The unlit terror I experienced in childhood and carried with me since was never just at the bottom of the stairs, located in some terrifying and inherently menacing, oppressive *Other*.

All along, it was just me creeping around in the vast stuff of my own fears with which I often populated the darkness and that shaped so much of my life. This is not to say that there are not real things to fear. Violence, abuse, and exploitation are real; they are not phantasms of overwrought minds. But they also have nothing to do with darkness. To manage our fear—in the worst ways possible—many of us simply refuse to see that the most massive forms of these ills are routine occurrences in respectable, daylight society. They are found in families, corporations and businesses, politics, religious and spiritual communities, schools, and institutions charged with the creation of public and national safety. Together, we bear responsibility for them.

How is it possible to take responsibility for something whose existence we don’t want to even acknowledge? That requires rounding the corner, looking into the shadows, and coming face to face with ourselves. During those trickster hours, I did more than learn to love the night. I also unwittingly transformed into something of a mirror image reflection of my personal terrors.

I became the unseen person creeping through the night, hiding among shadows, and crouching beneath open windows. The person capable of deceiving someone else, and even myself. It was my footstep that now creaked surreptitiously on the stair while someone else slept, unaware of the presence and movement of other people.

I didn't actually become a Peeping Tom, but close enough. My intentions were never malicious. I did nothing to harm or knowingly frighten anyone else. Yet it turns out that what I fear in others in some way turns out to be a part of me—or at least a nascent ability I possess, a dormant capacity that I may or may not act on over time, as conditions change. This is one step toward coming to terms with the aspect of self that amasses my own psychic stores of avoidance, denial, and dread; that seeks to find only righteousness in myself and fault in others; that seeks to displace all of the world's indifference, injustice, violence, and cruelty onto that all-purpose, elastic, demonic *Them*.

It's important not to overstate the case. I did not bring the abuse I once experienced upon myself. I'm not an ax murderer, state-sanctioned torturer, corporate destroyer of ecologies and the environment, or fascist dictator in the making. But even when I was young, I couldn't help feeling the thrill of breaking the rules and being one up on unsuspecting others. I *loved* the heady sense of power—or at least the potential for it—that emerged as I charted my course through the ambiguous darkness. Imagine what politicians and religious leaders can do by fueling the fears of their followers while simultaneously appealing to their desires to feel more powerful than and superior to those who are feared. Imagine the blurring of fear and power for those already inclined to be bullyboys. Imagine what this might mean for fearful people who have always been conditioned to be meek and subservient. Imagine how susceptible many of us are to the confi-

dence men who bang violently on public doors at midnight, demanding that we buy their dread-and-rage-soaked wares.

Now in the seventh decade of my life, I have never outgrown the siren call of nighttime rambles. The world has changed in some respects, and I have changed as well, though not, I hope, in cramped and sour ways. My fears have not dissolved, but we are cranky old friends now, no longer enemies—in some ways, each other’s teacher. This new relationship becomes possible when fear is, at last, experienced as a transformative pathway into psyche and soul—individually, societally, spiritually—and no longer a prison.

I still love to go out and about in the indigo hours, although I now travel less by shanks’ mare and more by way of contemplation and meditation. Sometimes I awaken from a vivid, often mythic, dream around 3:00 a.m. and feel the same shiver of excitement and apprehension that I first felt so long ago. I raise the window blind just enough to see the moonlight spilling over trees. Sometimes there is slight movement in the interplay of light and darkness among the shadows. I settle into the comfortable reading chair by my bedside, look out into the night, and set my imagination free.

And oh, we roam.



Kay Whitlock is a writer and activist who has been involved with racial, gender, queer, and economic justice movements since 1968. She is coauthor of *Considering Hate: Violence, Goodness, and Justice in American Culture and Politics* with [Michael Bronski](#), the award-winning *Queer (In)Justice: The Criminalization of LGBT People in the United States* with [Joey L. Mogul](#) and [Andrea J. Ritchie](#), and cofounder and contributing editor for the weekly [Criminal Injustice series](#) at [CriticalMassProgress.com](#). She lives in Missoula, Montana. Follow her on Twitter at [@KayJWhitlock](#).