



Blood & Spades

Marge Simon

I first met **Alan Ira Gordon** while I was editing *Star*Line* in 2010. I found his poetry quirky and delightfully dark. I didn't realize he is also a published author of Bradbury-esque short stories as well until later. What a true delight it is to read and appreciate both his writing and poetry! I'm so pleased he has written the following essay for this month's column.

Alan is a full-time community planner and Adjunct Professor of Urban Studies at Worcester State University. He has published short stories and poems in *Starshore Magazine*, *Worcester Magazine*, *Star*Line*, *Beyond Centauri*, and the anthology *Strange Stories of Sand & Sea* (Fine Tooth Press). His stories are included in several *Whortleberry Press* anthologies, and he is Associate Editor of the upcoming *Whortleberry* anthology *Strange Summer Amusements* (Summer, 2014). He is the author of the **Ray Bradbury** tribute story collection *Journey into Dandelion Wine Country*. His story "The Bulgarian Poetess" received an Honorable Mention listing in the eighth annual *Year's Best Science Fiction* anthology (St. Martin's Press). He lives in Worcester, Massachusetts, with his source of Northern Lights inspiration, his husky dog Lucky.

Light a Candle and Laugh Out Loud

Alan Ira Gordon

Dark can be funny. And dark can be subtle with a light touch. As **Carl Sandburg** wrote:

*The fog comes
On little cat feet.*

*It sits looking
over harbor and city
on silent haunches
and then moves on.*

So too can dark creative themes (both poetry and fiction) patter-in on quiet cat's paws as an option for making its effective presence known. This subtler form of dark writing is what attracted me to the genre in my younger years and still holds my reading and writing interests and attention today. Dark-themed stories and poems as styled by writers such as **Ray Bradbury**, **Isaac Asimov**, and **Arthur C. Clarke** influenced my own thought processes and approach to the fictional world of less light.

A Not-So-Final Note from the Editor
From the Trenches
Spotlight on the Bram Stoker Awards®
Jones, Stine Win Lifetime Horror Award
Norman Rubenstein to Receive The Hammer Award from HWA
Members Handbook Updated
HWA YouTube Channel
Author Database
HWA Events - Current for 2014
New Article Opportunity
The HWA's Horror Roundtable
Colorado Chapter Update
Horror in Oz
Fiendish Endeavors
Calendar of Readings and Signings
Blood & Spades
Recently Born of Horrific Minds
Brain Matter
The Grumpy Grammarian: Things I Read Lately
Marketing with Teeth: Preparing for a Book Tour or Book Launch Party
Authors for the March KGB Reading Series
No Boundaries
An Interview with David Gerrold (Part I of III)
It's a Strange, Strange World
In The Spotlight
Classified Ads
HWA Market Report #222

And how many of us experienced our first taste of dark writing from a school literature textbook? In my case, it was **Robert W. Service**'s sly poem "The Cremation of Sam McGee" that firmly set myself and my fellow junior high school classmates onto the path of dark entertainment, with its memorable opening and closing stanza:

*There are strange things done in the midnight sun
By the men who toil for gold;
The Arctic trails have their secret tales
That would make your blood run cold;
The Northern Lights have seen queer sites,
But the queerest they ever did see
Was that night on the marge of Lake Lebarge
I cremated Sam McGee.*

I think there's plenty of room in dark writing (and dark pop culture in general, for that matter) for both ends of the intensity spectrum to thrive. It's easy in my middle-age to decry the steady and continued increase in the popularity of splatter-gore, intensified coarseness, and heavier extreme violence within the various creativity genres, but in reality the hard-core and lighter dark genres seem to be co-existing fairly well. For every hard-core dark movie such as the *SAW* series of films there's a lighter-themed dark film such as *SHAUN OF THE DEAD*. For every *DEXTER*-like cable television series on Showtime there's a *DEAD LIKE ME*.

The current state of dark poetry and fiction also lends itself to this balance of writing approach. Poet **Wendy Rathbone** wrote in her November 2013 guest turn in this column, "The darker story is like a car wreck ... sometimes you just can't look away." While that's truly often the case, at other times dark writings can be just as effectively and metaphorically described as a different type of accident, perhaps a scary fender-bender or a humorous slip on a banana peel.

Humor not only deserves its claim of birthright within the realm of dark writing but often can be inextricably linked to the harsher, car-wreck side of the genre within the body of one work or within a linked writing series. **Neil Gaiman**'s dark masterpiece novel *American Gods* naturally evolved into its dark slapstick sequel *Anansi Boys*. A personal favorite successful example of this symbiotic dual styling within one short story is British horror writer **Anna Taborska**'s award-winning short story "Tea With The Devil," a rollercoaster ride of a tale providing further proof that a mix of subtlety and Satanism can result in a very effective and entertaining piece of work.

In 2010, I read for the first time *Star*Line*, the journal of the Science Fiction Poetry Assn. (SFPA) and was immediately struck by the wide range of creative approaches to darkness represented within each issue of the quarterly publication, ranging from the "car wreck" side of darkness through subtlety and into the realm of dark humor. The respect and equal support within *Star*Line* for the various approaches to dark writing lent itself to a few of my own more subtle dark poems being included in some subsequent issues. Herewith, a few examples along with some brief explanatory comments:

The Thing on the Wing

*It just sits out there
not doing Its job.*

*I think It's reading *Cosmo*
and is that a donut
clutched in Its claw?*

It's a lot smaller than I expected
and fatter, definitely fatter.

And who still wears tie-dye these days?
I mean, really.

To be honest, the five minutes or so
during which I peeked at It until I lost interest?
Those are minutes that I'll never get back.

When this flight touches down
I'm heading straight for Customer Service
even before I hit the luggage carousel.
I deserve a partial refund
for the disappointment
of It all.

(Published in *Star*Line*, Summer 2013)

Inspired by the classic (and very traditionally car-wreck scary) *TWILIGHT ZONE* episode entitled "Nightmare at 20,000 Feet" (1963) that starred **William Shatner** and was based on the dark story written by **Richard Matheson**, the poem takes a humorous approach to the "monster on the airplane wing" theme of the original *TWILIGHT ZONE* episode, while also taking a swipe at the at-times unrealistic expectations and self-absorption of modern-day airline travelers.

Pulling Weeds

But they're all so very pretty
my daughter exclaimed
asking if we could keep just a few.
She loved the variety of their colors.

I gently explained the difficulty
the deceptiveness of their beauty.
Faithful to the laws of their nature
they advance invasively,
displacing all in their growing path.

I reminisced how at her age
my own father explained to me
the innate nature of weeds
entreating me to join with him
in that long-ago season's clean-up.

And so she joined me
reluctantly at first
then with growing enthusiasm
a father-daughter field project.

Well, that's that, she declared
when we were done.
I had a pet name for them
she confessed, a silly thing, really
a non-scientific nickname
just because I liked their colors.

Confiding that at her age
I myself did the same
What did you name yours? I asked.
Humans, she said
I called them Humans, so pretty
so many nice colors. And yours?

I smiled in remembrance
Martians, I recalled. I called them Martians.
Did they have pretty colors? she asked.
Yes, I replied.
They were green
such lovely, lovely shades of green.

(Published in *Star*Line*, Summer 2013)

An example of subtle darkness, we never directly witness or learn details of the destruction of the human race. The *TWILIGHT ZONE*-like dark reveal concludes with an unexpected twist on the ever-popular science fiction question regarding the fate of the Martians. This thread pays tribute to **Ray Bradbury's** *Martian Chronicles* and emulates Bradbury's particular approach to dark writing.

My Favorite Year

Some like to travel back in time
to grand historical epochs
or nestle into some quiet,
special memory-place.
Others go back to visit family
returning to long-ago relations
or themselves in younger days.

Me, I like to jump ahead
to about 50 years from now:
it's all so quiet;
quite peaceful, actually.
Well worth the discomfort
of wearing the radiation suit
for the loveliest sunsets
you'll ever see.

(Published in *Star*Line*, Autumn 2013)

Another example of darkness approached with subtlety/finesse. The poem has an even quieter tone than "Pulling Weeds," with the narrator focusing on the beauty and peacefulness of The End of Days. To paraphrase **T.S. Eliot's** "The Hollow Men," the world ends here not with a bang, nor with a whimper, but instead with a soft, contented sigh.

So I hope to some small degree I've illuminated the range of dark creative possibility one can utilize in selecting a creative approach to the wider world of darkness. As dark writers and creators we can choose at times to explore the dankest dungeons and swim in pools of blood. But at other times it might be appropriate and opportune to take a less-heavy approach. Rather than rage against the dying of the light (or succumb to it) a la **Dylan**

Thomas, we can occasionally light a creative candle and just laugh out-loud at the darkness swirling around us. Or at least give it a sly, subtle knowing wink as it inexorably draws us down into its eternal nighttime fold.

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