



## 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.

---

[Contents](#) [Advertising](#) [Members Only](#)

---