

REVELATIONS ON THE NEW HORROR RENAISSANCE – AN INTERVIEW WITH ITALIAN AUTHOR/EDITOR/TRANSLATOR/POET ALESSANDRO MANZETTI

By David E. Cowen, Author of Bleeding Saffron (Weasel Press 2018) and Editor of HWA Poetry Showcase Vols. III and IV and other books

Alessandro Manzetti has established a name and a brand covering multiple continents. He has earned six Bram Stoker nominations, winning the Stoker for Poetry in 2015, four Rhysling awards, four Elgin Awards, a This is Horror and Splatterpunk Awards nominee. He is a novelist, anthologist, editor, translator and publisher. He founded Independent Legions Press based in Italy which was award the HWA Specialty Press Awards winner in 2017. Having met him personally and exchanged many emails with Alessandro he is ever gracious, ever considerate and always dedicated to producing the best of his craft. His latest volume of poetry, *War: Dark Poems* (Crystal Lake Publishing 2018), co-written with the amazing multiple Stoker winner Marge Simon is a brilliant, gritty collection focusing on the ultimate human horror. Alessandro agreed to sit “in the barrel” for the HWA Poetry Blog. His responses are literally mind blowing.



Q: Your career as a novelist is certainly blossoming and you are steadily gaining recognition in the field. But this is a poetry blog and our interest in talking to you is about poetry. Since you have such a strong background in fiction, editing and translation what brought you to poetry?

A. Poetry was my first love, I started writing poems (not so good) when I was seventeen. At that time I was a voracious reader of French poets, and they mesmerized me. Of course, I've refined my poetry over time, reading and studying all the modern poets, falling in love, for a long time, with the beat ones, like Ginsberg and Corso. Then, I started publishing some collections (the first one in 1993, amateurish stuff). Then, I stepped up my game, in a more serious way, many years later, until to publish my first poetry collection in English, *Venus Intervention*, in 2014, written in collaboration with Corrine De Winter. I think poetry is the most modern form of communication in literature (it's like a bridge connecting each consciousness to the dynamics of the outside contemporary world), representing also the cutting edge of innovation in fiction. These reasons brought me to poetry.

Q: You've had the opportunity to collaborate with some of the best-known names in Horror poetry: Bruce Boston; Marge Simon; Corrine DeWinter. Even while producing amazing collections with these poets you won your Bram Stoker Award in 2016 for a solo project, *Eden Underground*. It must have been very gratifying that for all the wonderful collaborations you've done your Bram Stoker Award was for a collection of your poems. What was the genesis of that volume?

A. I love to collaborate with other poets, specially writing four-handed; it's a great opportunity to expand my horizons. Now I just started writing a new poetry collection (*The Place of Broken Things*, to be released in June 2019) in collaboration with Linda Addison, and I'm sure it will be another fantastic experience. My solo poetry collection '*Eden Underground*' was born from some reflections about certain kinds of 'loneliness', the inability to interact in a positive way with other human beings; in short, what I call the 'transparent prisons' of the modern world. These blocked emotions, deformed and become abnormal, bring many people to get borderline attitudes and personalities, psychosis, dangerous behaviour, and, often, to create artificial little worlds (deviant Edens), relieving their suffering causing pain in others, indulging in abominable rituals, following distorted perceptions of the reality. Both, maniacs and victims, are product of their time. So, *Eden Underground* tells about these stories, and contemporary world; nothing but what we read, every day, reading the crime in the newspapers. Chronicles of abominations which seems so distant from us. But they're not. You know, violent psychopaths are not aliens.

Q. Your mastery of the English language is enviable. Few of us in the US would claim an equivalent mastery of Italian. But I would guess there are challenges in writing in other than your native tongue. Do you first compose in Italian and then translate or are you able to write poetry in English directly? How do you overcome idiom translations where phrases in English and Italian might have different meanings depending on context?

A. Thanks, but I still should improve my English. Fortunately, I'm counting on highly skilled mother tongue editors who support me. You're right, there are challenges in writing in other than my native tongue, but it's very stimulating and exciting to test myself in those matters. I usually write poetry directly in English; I think it's not possible to translate poetry in an effective way. As for fiction, on the contrary, I compose in Italian, (especially when I work on novels), then translate and submit the work to one of my mother tongue editors to polish and check (or I entrusts the translation to professionals, like my talented friend Daniele Bonfanti). Translation is a delicate and sensitive phase of a writing process; you can't manage it in a literal way, idioms are dangerous traps, but that is not the only problem; my writing (also in fiction) is characterized by a careful choice of words, since I think that writing is like to make music, in some ways, so my fiction works are different in Italian and English, they're not a mirrored versions. But this has nothing to do with my poetry, since I write them (necessarily) directly in English. If writing is like to make music, fiction may be 'Rock 'n' roll', while poetry is absolutely 'Jazz', impossible to translate. I'm a lover of the sound and the rhythm of words.

Q. There are so many historical, literary and mythological references in No Mercy. Black Dahlia. Tom Joad. Charon. Route 66. Coltrane and Joplin. Asian. Native American. And so many others. These references are richly intertwined in the works. From seeing your many Facebook posts as well and your other works I sense you are a voracious reader. Are there archetypes you consider your favorites? Which mythological themes do you like to return to?

A. Well, I love history (it's my university education), modern literature and music (when I write poetry I always listen to it), so they're part of my writing process, together with modern visual arts and religions and philosophies (specially from India and the Far East). My 'archetypes', if we can call them that, are simply 'Life', 'Sex', 'Death' and everything in between (I like to call it 'Samsara', in a Hindu way), but they do not refer particularly to mythological themes, but to the visions of certain literary and artistic movements (Beat Generation, Surrealism, all the twentieth century American literature), and the interpretations of some artist in various fields (Henry Miller, Henri Breton, Man Ray, William S. Burroughs, Cezanne, Pasolini, Ingres, Borges, Beckett, John Fante, Henry Moore, Janis Joplin, Coltrane, Miles Davis, Maria Callas, only to name a few). I have a head full of ghosts, mentioning the title of a novel by Paul Tremblay.

Q. You reference musicians a number of times — Coltrane appears in several works. In Apocalypse Mass, found in No Mercy, you intertwine the rhythm of a scene of horror into a mesmerizing chant:

its sound seems like that of chewed flesh,
of a ceiling of welded insects,
and turns the crank of an eternal soundtrack,
a song stuck in the mind of
a buried memory.
If you wear that velvet dress.

Obviously, music influences your poetry. Do you write while listening to music? While there is no meter in many of your pieces there is still a gritty musical lyricism in your poems. Tell us about the craftwork needed to accomplish this. Does this simply come out of your mind or is it a product of editing and rewriting?

A. I already answered to part of this questions, music influences my poetry, and I love to listen to something while I'm working on poetry, (at the beginning I choice a singer or band for each collection or single poem, continuing to listening to the same songs, several times, until I finish to work on the specific book or piece), from heavy metal, to jazz or opera. My poetry simply come out of my mind, since usually, when I start writing, something is already birthed inside me a few days before (it reveals itself slowly, like a ghost, so I only have to describe it with the words, dressing it in a good way, putting a face to a voice). At other times, things suddenly appear as I begin to write, and they run fast inside me. They want to show themselves on paper. Anyway, editing and rewriting are not a big part of my work, in poetry.

Q. In your latest collaboration, *War*, with Marge Simon, you have a poem, *Night of Tears*, that has both of you as co-authors. This poem focuses on the conquest and destruction of the Aztecs by the Spanish explorer Cortes. One set of lines stands out in the poem:

strangers' severed arms and hands
still clutching gold jewelry,
chipped rosaries and escaped moths
whose magic dust swirls in the air
in a rhapsody of wings' squamas
already flown away.

The imagery is both beautiful and horrific. The poem also references the reflection of the armor of dead soldiers as stars in a black sky. Tell us how you and Marge created this gem, from the initial idea of the subject matter to the incredible details.

A. This poem is inspired by 'La Noche Triste' ('The Night of Sorrow', July 1520), a dramatic event during the Spanish conquest of Mexico, wherein Hernán Cortés and his invading army of Spanish conquistadors decided to escape secretly, at night, from Tenochtitlan (the Mexican capital), bringing with them a huge loot of gold, walking on a drawbridge on the Texcoco lake's water. But they were discovered by some Aztec warriors, who alerted the others. Hundreds of canoes appeared in the surrounding watersand, and the battle was fierce and bloody. As a fan of history, I've always been fascinated with those cruel, amazing scenes: the Spanish obsessed with greed, who preferred to die rather than lose the gold, and the Aztec warriors dressed with their colorful clothes, with blue feathers and jaguar's skins. With this poem we tried to recreate the mood of that night, through a series of visual sequences and details, like the one you mentioned. The source was so good that maid our poem endearing and vivid.

[Marge Simon Interview "Bombed" to Add this gem] This stanza is all Alessandro's. Sometimes he'd write several stanzas with irregular lines -- and I'd add more lines before or after his. Sometimes I trimmed his lines so they formed more like a stanza, which I think is what happened with this. But the vivid and breathtaking imagery in this is all Alessandro's genius!

Q. In your fiction there is a strong mix of grittiness and sexual images intertwined. In "The Death of Venus" from *Venus Interrupted* you have one poem that mixes so many images and mythological archetypes — Venus the goddess of the morning and Summer, the Bacchanal god of depravity and corpulence — with the very down to earth street grit of humanity at its most base:

Little woman looks away
grits her teeth
few seconds more, few...
and she has paid the home rent for her father
the unemployed ghost. Summer.

In the introduction to *Venus Intervention* Benjamin Kane Ethridge commented that your poems were full of both anger and malevolence. Much of your work reflects this sentiment. Does this reflect a world view or is it simply part of the craft you have chosen? You deliberately choose harsh, stark and very concrete imagery. I liken it to the motifs used by directors John Woo and Sam Peckinpah — elevating pure and stark violence into an art form. Is that what you are seeking in your poetry?

A. My poetry (as well as my works of fiction) try to portraying humanity in a direct way. We live in a violent world, and sex is one of the keys (and archetypes) which drive human relationships. I think modern poetry should reflect our time, without hide anything, to reach hearts and stomachs of the readers. Life itself is a form of art, both brutal and beautiful, poetry can describe this two-headed reality with its weapons, with its golden bullets. This is what I'm seeking with my poetry.

Q. You have so many notches in the proverbial poetry belt; accomplishing so much in the horror genre. What is next for you? What goals do you aspire to in the next 5 years?

A. As I already said you, I started working on a new poetry collection (*The Place of the Broken Things*) in collaboration with Linda Addison, to be released in 2019. After that, I would like to work on another collection, this time in collaboration with Charlee Jacob (we talked about this some time ago), if her state of health will make it possible. She's one of my favorite writers, both in poetry and fiction. Hope that we will succeed, it would mean a lot to me. For now, I haven't other goals in mind. As for my works of fiction, next year will be released, from Necro Publications, my second novel translated into English: 'Shanti – The Holy City'. I hope this Sci-Fi/Splatterpunk set of novels, started with 'Naraka – The Ultimate Human Breeding', could continue until the end of a tetralogy (I already published in Italian the first three novels) reaching good feedback from the readers. They are the masters of a writer, they are my goal.

Q. As the first Italian to be awarded the Bram Stoker Award, and as a purveyor of hard-core horror and even splatter-punk how would you describe your reception amongst your Italian peers? What inroads do you hope to make in Italy with your publishing and writing?

A. Here in Italy Splatterpunk fiction represents a small market niche (same goes for poetry, and, unfortunately, also for traditional horror fiction, excluding a few big names), anyway I have a good audience, fans of the genre follow me with great passion; they're very fond of some of my main characters, and many of them are women (even if I write hardcore/Splatterpunk horror). Some days ago was released, from Cut Up Publishing, my first dark psychotriller novel, *The Keepers of Chernobyl*, something different from what I wrote so far, and I think that this kind of works could reach a larger audience. My goal is always the same: connect myself to the readers, be their accomplice.

Please share some of your favorite poems with us:

HOLY DIVER

by Alessandro Manzetti

From WAR (Crystal Lake Publishing, 2018)

Beit Hanoun, April 28, 2008

The Israeli cannon coughs,
it has too much sand in its throat.
It missed the target, shooting too high,
between the yellow sky and the boxes
of the Beit Hanoun refugee camp.
Rats escape in all directions,

like stars with tails and too many paws,
suddenly divided into parts,
making their muscles explode.
Cockroaches open their primitive wings
and fly away from the ruins of the house;
they look like like black raindrops,
falling backwards,
reflecting the flames on their shiny shells
while they cross the Gaza Strip
which cannot be seen from above,
which does not exist.

The Abu Matek family, five heads in all,
fills the hallway, the two small rooms
with their Palestinian blood, light red,
painting the cardboard ceilings
with soft brain's arabesques
and spatter of pink, yellow, and silver dreams
without borders and homeland.
Fatima, the mother of the four children,
a Virgin Mary with dark and empty breasts
and a smile without teeth,
who sucks dates and swallows their bones,
is the only survivor of the grenade.
Musaab, one year old, Salah, four years old,
Hana five years, Rudeina six years old;
her sons and daughters, angels with curly hair,
tattooed by the sun and a curse
cut to pieces, scattered everywhere
like pomegranate seeds
freed from their peel.

The cardboard walls of the house
tilt down towards the center
making the blood pour down the hallway
as a dense red river,
fed by such young sources and tributaries
where fins of human organs
draw macabre circles and ovals
with invisible fingers,
intertwining as pieces of ancient chains
wanting to reunite again.

Fatima, without legs,
blown away along with the cockroaches
outside the kitchen mosquito net,
dives into that purple, gurgling funnel,
that hallway turned into a new uterus
for her already born children,
to give birth to them again, all together
the same day, in a new land
without stripes and borders,

militiamen and soldiers,
and too many sacred bricks.

Fatima holds her breath,
swimming in that water dense as ink,
then, tired, she opens her mouth,
making the red river find her lungs,
waiting for the eight hands of the children
to grab her, pushing her body to the bottom
which does not exist.

THE MAN WHO WOULD BE KING

by Alessandro Manzetti

From WAR (Crystal Lake Publishing, 2018)

Nuremberg, October 15, 1946

King Hermann looks at his past
from the window of the cell
lit by an imaginary crystal chandelier,
the transparent constellation
of his new home chock-full
of ticks that suck only white blood,
the thoughts of the prisoners
rotate in their heads
like submarine propellers
swirling the water of the main lake:
the cerebral fluid.

King Hermann sees out there
his enchanted garden,
surrounded by barbed wire,
and the shadow of his favorite tiger
with blue and gold stripes,
which jumps between iron flowers,
catching a wingless bird
with human head;
—Hey! You're wrong!—
shouts the little man
miniaturized into a Eurasian collared dove
covered with red feathers,
and a Star of David tied around his neck.

Above an altar, between two ash trees
that sweat black manna, like sun-baked rubber,
King Hermann admires his shiny crown,
and, beside it, his Renaissance dagger,
encrusted with diamonds, emeralds
and eyes of slaves, of Jewish pigs,
who are still staring at their young death:
a twenty year old girl approaching them

indefinitely, with her scent of mango and instinct,
an armed virgin dressed like Wagner's Brunhilde,
with wings on the helmet and a long spear
able to pierce and plague, every time,
the livers of inferior races.

In that sky so yellow,
yellow as the illusions hard to break,
King Hermann can see in the distance
his old World War I biplane flying,
and singing with its machine guns
while the fat Mercedes engine
tunes the sounds of arrogance, and immortality.
—Here it is, coming back to me—
A lion cub bites his boots,
and a golden cigarette case falls on the floor
sounding like the last round bell.

Past can't swallow other days,
the enchanted garden disappears, out there,
and now King Hermann sees himself
reflected on the window glass
wearing too wide white funeral gloves,
a noose around his flushed neck
and a black medal pinned on the chest.
—It's not me—
He crunches a cyanide candy between his teeth,
the medicine of the Kings;

Wagner's music resumes playing
leading him towards the Great Pit
where the choir of the dead
is waiting for him.

FRIDA'S MONSTER

by Alessandro Manzetti

From NO MERCY (Crystal Lake Publishing, 2017)

September 17, 1925

The iron monster, Xochimilco,
was waiting for me round the bend
with electric wires instead of hair,
and his long, curled tail
nailed to the asphalt like a rail.
When he saw me with my strawberry necklace,
eighteen years around my neck,
so red and soft, so delicious,
he shouted and whistled,
screaching on the road with his nails.

So, he stared at me for five seconds,
while he ate a big peach,
or maybe a woman's severed yellow head.
Xochimilco turned his eyes,
his headlights, his square muzzle,
toward the San Juan Market,
then he started looking at my dress again,
scattered with red euphorbia flowers,
and the rod between his legs,
a giant erection, a steel pipe,
a handrail for dozens of hands.

You are mine, he whispers in my ear,
stretching his rusty tongue through the window
of my still-intact youth,
only crossed by the sun, so far,
and touched by the colorful parrots
of a virgin imagination
and by the fast drumming-fingers
of curious monkeys
who want to taste my strawberries.
Then he breaks all the windows
overturning my thin-legged life,
and emptying my bag full of tomatoes,
sending them rolling on the floor,
through the blood of other victims,
of the monster who strikes without looking,
blind and drunk as fate.

I'm surrounded by red, liquid and solid,
Xochimilco scratches my legs to get in,
and now I feel his steel pipe inside me,
squirting his warm yellow, pink, blue, green.
Filling my belly with all the colors,
which you can see in the morning
walking through the narrow streets of Coyoacan,
among the grenade-colored buildings
and their blue skeletons.
Now I'm in my bed
with all my broken bones
and I look at the ceiling;
I'm the one up there, in the mirror,
my muse,
in armor, painted with black swallows,
that clutches my torso,
and white flowers of pain
that blossom in my eyes.

Bio: Alessandro Manzetti (Rome, Italy) is a Bram Stoker Award-winning author, editor, and translator of horror fiction and dark poetry whose work has been published extensively in Italian, including novels, short and long fiction, poetry, essays, and collections.

English publications include his novel *Naraka - The Ultimate Human Breeding*, the collections *The Garden of Delight*, *The Massacre of the Mermaids*, *The Monster, the Bad and the Ugly* (with Paolo Di Orazio) and the poetry collections *No Mercy*, *Eden Underground*, *War* (with Marge Simon) *Sacrificial Nights* (with Bruce Boston) and *Venus Intervention* (with Corrine de Winter). In 2019 his new novel in English, *Shanti – The Holy City*, will be released by Necro Publications, leader in modern hardcore horror since 1993.

He edited the anthologies *The Beauty of Death Vol 1*, *The Beauty of Death Vol. 2 - Death by Water* (with Jodi Renee Lester) and *Monsters of Any Kind* (with Daniele Bonfanti)

His stories and poems have appeared in Italian, USA, and UK magazines, such as *Dark Moon Digest*, *Splatterpunk Zine*, *Disturbed Digest*, *The Horror Zine*, *Illumen*, *Devolution Z*, *Recompose*, *Polu Texni*, *Nothing's Sacred Vol. 4*, and anthologies, such as *Splatterpunk Forever*, *Bones III*, *Rhysling Anthology* (2015, 2016, 2017, 2018), *HWA Poetry Showcase Vol. 3* and *Vol. 4*, *The Beauty of Death Vol 1* and *Vol. 2*, *Best Hardcore Horror of the Year vol. 2*, *Mar Dulce*, *I Sogni del Diavolo*, *Danze Eretiche vol. 2*, *Il Buio Dentro*, the forthcoming anthology *Midnight Under the Big Top* (Cemetery Dance) and many others.

Awards and Nominations:

- Bram Stoker Awards 2015 winner
- Bram Stoker Awards 2017 two-time nominee
- Bram Stoker Awards 2016 two-time nominee
- Bram Stoker Awards 2014 nominee
- Splatterpunk Awards 2018 nominee
- Rhysling Awards 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018 nominee
- Elgin Awards 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018 nominee
- This is Horror Awards 2017 nominee
- HWA Specialty Press Awards 2017 winner (as CEO of Independent Legions Press)

Furthermore, he received 20 honorable mentions (for stories and poems) in Ellen Datlow's *'The Best Horror of the Year'* Vol. 7-8-9-10.

He has translated works by Ramsey Campbell, Richard Laymon, Poppy Z. Brite, Edward Lee, Graham Masterton, Gary Braunbeck, Gene O'Neill, Lisa Morton, and Lucy Snyder.

He is the CEO & Founder of Independent Legions Publishing, an HWA Active member and a former HWA Board of Trustees member.

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