

# The Ghosts in the Back Yard: An Interview With Poet Alexander P. Garza

By David E. Cowen, Bram Stoker Nominated Author of *Bleeding Saffron* (Weasel Press 2018)

I first discovered Alexander P. Garza as part of serving as a member of the jury for the HWA's 2019 Dark Poetry Scholarship Award. As a group the jurists were keenly impressed by Alexander's writing and promise and he received that year's award.

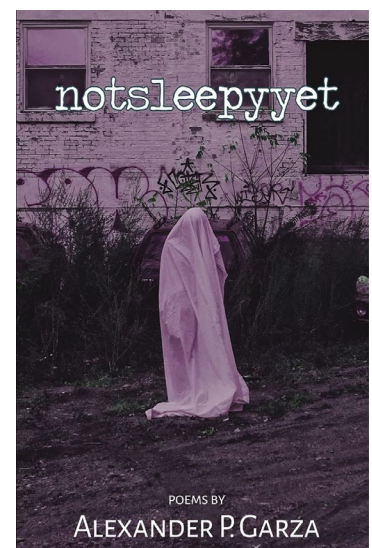


Alexander's talents are many. Alexander graduated with a BA from Texas A&M University and a Master's from University of Houston Victoria and is a current candidate in the MA Program for Writers at the University of Illinois – Chicago. He has worked at the Alley Theatre in Houston, the Houston Grand Opera, Main Street Theatre and on independent films in Houston and Austin, TX. Alexander is certainly an HWA Dark Poetry Scholarship success story and I wanted to talk to him about that.

**Q: You were an early recipient of the HWA's Dark Poetry Scholarship. Did that award help you in your development as a poet?**

**A:** I was very pleased to learn that I was going to be a recipient of the scholarship. The award was honestly one of the most important achievements thus far in my journey as a poet, because in some way it validated my work, but it also encouraged me to continue learning about the craft and how it ties into speculative poetry. With the award, I was able to attend a few writing workshops in Houston, get my first book edited, purchase many influential books, and also, I will be attending Stoker Con next year (hopefully in-person). I think this is a fantastic opportunity for new writers, and I'm overjoyed that this category is being recognized and funded through the HWA. It sets the groundwork for future generations of speculative poetry.

**Q:** You just released your first volume of poetry, *Not Sleepy Yet* (Weasel Press 2021). The collection mixes dark speculative verse with contemporary free verse. Much of the focus of the poems is around your family and shared experiences with



**death, birth and survival. Give us the backstory about this volume and dealing with your publisher. What inspired the major themes of this book?**

**A:** My first collection went through many phases. The idea started in High School (1998-2002) as an artistic one with a vision, but without direction. That is when I first came up with the title. I have always had trouble sleeping at night, and I would stay up writing songs on my guitar and writing in my journal. I also started to have a lot of fears about the world- and these began to fester as I got older. These fears turned into nightmares at times, so I began getting into horror during college. Through the years I've found that this genre calms my nerves. I had at least fifty to seventy pieces that were cut from the initial manuscript. Most of these poems were from my early years as a writer with a sporadic writing practice before my son was born in 2014. I read *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron and I was catapulted into a steady daily writing practice. Once I was able to see that I had amassed hundreds of poems by 2017, I knew that I could start sifting through them to see which ones aligned with the themes of dreams and nightmares,

fear, as in what really scares me, family and how those relationships develop, and ones that I might be able to tie together into an informal narrative format. After getting it edited, and many rounds of rearranging and revision, I sent it out to a number of publishers. I focused on smaller publishers and micropresses because I wanted to work with more personable and approachable people. Weasel Press fortunately picked up the work, and a year later it was released. Working with the publisher has been a great experience, all through the editing, proofing, and design process.

**Q: In the acknowledgments to *Not Sleepy Yet* you reference Marge Simon. Marge is certainly well known in HWA and other speculative poetry circles. I get amazed at how many people, myself included, who list Marge as a major influence and help with their poetry careers. I do not know how many times I find authors making mention of her help. A while back I was interviewing former Corpus Christi poet laureate Juan Manuel Perez. In researching his work, I found a volume of poems with both artwork and an introduction by Marge. Marge has truly made it a life mission to**

**find and mentor fledging dark poets such as you and I. How did you come to know Marge and why did you give her a special mention in your volume?**

A: Marge reached out to me to write an article for QuickBites, and one of the things that stuck out to me was how much freedom she gave me in writing the article, which I hadn't experienced before while writing blog articles for businesses and theatre reviews. I had many questions that she was able to answer, and she was so helpful that it was something that I couldn't forget. She treated me as a colleague instead of some kind of inferior novice poet. This experience along with her actual poetry influenced me greatly

**Q: Which other poets do you consider having influenced your work and why?**

A: There are many poets that influence my work. The most influential poets for me have been Emily Dickinson, Sylvia Plath, and William Shakespeare. Though not usually considered as speculative poets- all three of them had a dark side that revealed itself subtly through their work. Also, many science fiction

and horror writers influenced my work such as Stephen King, Michael Crichton, Robert Heinlein, Ira Levin, Edgar Allen Poe, and many many more. In middle school I'm pretty sure I read every Goosebumps book released so far at that time, so I've got to throw R.L. Stine into the mix. I have also been influenced by poets such as Houston Poet Laureate, Leslie Contreras Schwartz, and two poets from University of Illinois - Chicago: Christina Pugh and David Borzutsky. I never like to limit myself to experiencing or writing in only one genre. I find that these other influences can make a speculative work stronger.

**Q: Has your work as an actor influenced the way you write? Even if just the part of how an audience would react to hearing what you have written on paper?**

A: My experience acting has most definitely impacted my work positively and sometimes negatively. My experience studying, reading, and acting Shakespeare allowed me to dive right into iambic pentameter and traditional sonnets. The use of rhyme by Shakespeare also helped me hear the

musicality in my writing. Many of my poems began as persona poems and this came easy for me early on, since I had to practice many monologues. However, I discovered a pitfall in writing just any persona poem: it can lead to appropriation of another person's experience. I have written some persona poems that I had no business writing- writing a persona poem about a Black American's experience for example. These poems ultimately never see the light of day, thank goodness. I found much better success in writing a persona poem like "Addictions" from my collection, which is from the perspective of a modern day vampire at a conference in Houston.

**Q:When I get the opportunity, I love to plug the Houston writing community. Many folks in the HWA seem shocked that Houston has such a large and vibrant community. What thoughts can you share with the HWA community about the Houston writing and arts scene? Has, in your opinion, being in Houston furthered your career both in what you have accomplished and inspiration for your work? Do you hope to return someday?**

A: The Houston arts scene is thriving as much as ever even during the pandemic. Houston provided me with so many surreal experiences such as getting a laugh on stage in front of an audience of a thousand people at the Houston Grand Opera. Getting to work backstage at the Alley Theater and performing at other theaters such as Main Street Theater and Mildred's Umbrella Theater Company. In addition to that, I was able to parlay this experience into writing theatre reviews for BroadwayWorld, which led me to interview actor Stephen Lang. But those weren't the only experiences I had- I was part of a couple of bands and we performed at venues such as Fitzgerald's and Warehouse Live. I took multiple writing and poetry workshops which changed the way I thought and approached writing. I am not sure yet what the future holds in store- while right now we have no set plans to move back to Houston, the possibility is still on the table. I'll be there this Summer.

**Q: Now you are back in graduate school working on your MFA. Are you going to emphasize your work on speculative poetry or fiction? What are your hopes with this degree?**



A: I am hoping to merge the horrors of reality into speculative poetry. A lot of the work we do in the program revolves around social justice in various forms. Some of these horrors that I can relate to and would like to delve into deeper include those of detention camps and keeping children and parents separated at the U.S.-Mexican border, the atrocities in war torn countries around the world, racially motivated crimes, mental health disorders, and the horrors and deep pain that transcends generations from my ancestors. My third manuscript will likely focus on the horrors experienced by my ancestors—there is a silencing of these past experiences and in a way we enter a conversation with the dead when we begin to devolve their experiences to the public.

**Q: I saw on your Facebook pages that you will be teaching college level coursework soon. I believe you taught high school before that. Years ago, my mother changed her career path from teaching 8<sup>th</sup> grade English on the Texas border to going back to school and later teaching at a college on the border. Besides a very brave transition, she loved the maturity, freedom and intellect of her older**

**students. I think she found it to be her highest calling. Do you plan to try to bring in speculative writing into your teachings? Did you do this with your earlier students and were they receptive to it?**

A: The first two courses I'll be assigned will be introductory composition classes- so while there won't be a direct topic or theme of speculative work, I will use examples and excerpts from speculative writing to expand my students' perception of what writing can be.

**Q: I try to ask this of every poet I have interviewed. Poets I have met often fall into two camps. Some claim only to write when inspired. When the moment or the "Muse" takes them. Others, tell me they are methodical, writing every single day for some set time, perhaps even working on a goal of writing so many poems per day or week. How do you approach your writing, both in determining what to write about and the form of expression you will choose for your piece?**

A: My writing has gone through many different phases throughout the years. For a long time, I only

wrote when inspired, but as I developed a regular writing practice from about 2014 up until the pandemic, I found myself forcing myself to write everyday- and on some days, I would write until inspiration found me. I take on different forms when my muse dries up. I have incorporated artwork, painting, and music into my work at times to stir things up. I would write anywhere between three to five poems a day during the aforementioned time frame. I typed them up almost every day- sometimes later in the week, revising and revising as I went. This is one of the reasons I had so many poems in the first draft of my collection. Once the pandemic hit, my writing suffered greatly. I am not sure if it was the stress of having a third child, the stress of the job I had, my mental health, or getting ready to transition into an MA program across the country, but my writing went nowhere quickly in 2020. 2021 has already proved to be a more productive year for my poetry and look forward to getting back to a regular writing routine.

**Q: As a follow up to the previous question, and one I often repeat, deals with the avoidance of cliché in speculative poetry. I do not see your work falling**

**into that trap. There is a crisp freshness to your use of words and images. What advice can you give the fledging poet on how to use archetypes without resorting to cliché? How do you write dark poetry without imitating the poets that inspired you to write dark poetry?**

**A:** The greatest advice I could give to newer poets is to read- a lot. This is how you start to notice cliches and tropes. Once you begin to see patterns, then you can use these ideas in new ways in your poetry. Changing cliches up with a single word can spark surprising new directions. If I write something overly trite or a cliché, I try rearranging the words endlessly, rewriting the phrase in various ways, using different words, synonyms, antonyms and so on. Experimentation is your friend. I think that imitation is a great learning tool for the fledgling poet. Obviously, if the poet is just outright stealing entire passages, then that is not conducive to creating quality work.

**Q: What is next for you? Are you working on any new volumes or even scholarly works relating to speculative poetry we should be looking for?**

A: I recently got my second manuscript back from my editor, and I will be revising and rearranging the work throughout this year. I hope to have it out to a publisher by Winter. The title is to be determined at this point. I am cutting about thirty poems from this collection and will have to reevaluate the themes. I am also currently working on new poems for my third manuscript.

**Please share with us a few of your favorite pieces:**

### **Addictions**

“There are vampires. They are real, they are of our time, and they are here, close by, stalking us as we sleep.”  
-Dracula by Bram Stoker

My coffee thermos is filled with blood.  
A mid-afternoon Saturday snack, winter.  
My ceramic Houston night skyline,  
Majestic cylinders, black and blue bruises.  
I fill her up to the top, then suck her dry.  
Revitalize. She's empty, running on empty.

Let it sit.

Her soul, metal-cold, wishing for  
console.

But I feed on her,  
I fill myself  
with her life,  
drain her again,  
for a little boost, a fix,  
fleeting, but necessary,  
or not, I don't care. It's wrought  
with desire, the savage smooth wine.  
And a surge of energy and a dopamine kick later  
I'm at a course for professional development at Rice  
University.  
I speak to peers and respect the speaker. I am engaged.  
And least to suspect is the one who is next.  
To fill up my thermos and enslave them.  
Their chrome orbs sinking into their face  
and bottomless ice source for eye sores and abyss  
leave you completely empty.  
No other way, really.  
No other way, except the slope.  
Emotions keep age lines moist,  
ash lace domes corrupted.

## **Honduran Refugee in My Classroom**

*“Mira a mi tia.”* Look at my aunt.

*“La mataron.”* They killed her.

She shows me a photo on her phone:  
a black honduran woman, motionless,

face down, half-naked, nalgas exposed,  
top torn. The girl tells me her aunt’s just been

raped and murdered, left dead.

She got the photo via text from a family friend.

The image forever ingrained in my brain  
during our history class, right then.

“Another one down,” she says in Spanish.

“Glad we got out,” she says.

## **Mom’s Candle**

My mom buys those cylindrical candles  
with images of either Jesus or Virgin Mary.

She lights them at night or day

And sends prayers into the world.

She calls upon higher powers

Or angels or spirits  
To lift any curses, to heal wounds,  
To fight off demons, and mend severed limbs.

Her dreams take flight  
Sometimes into the heart of demonic spirits  
And she screams silently in her sleep  
And avoids bumping ghosts on the street.

She has that extra sense,  
That many brujas have,  
The one that listens to the dead,  
The one still soaked in past.

## **Dead Squirrel**

There's a dead squirrel in my garage  
decomposing, closing in on  
itself, body sculpture, lifeless eyes,  
maggots forming,  
feasting.  
The stench  
of death.  
And trash day isn't for three days.

I arrived to find it  
on the fringes of earth,



the lawn, head on the grass,  
rump on the sidewalk,  
feathery and windless,  
Its side-eyed stye staring  
in me, and I waited  
for the killer-still-alive-surprise  
horror movie drill,  
the thing leaping at my face,  
claws drawn, deep hiss.

But it never comes.

Just a whisper.  
Just cold dead eye balls,  
black orbs.

I called the HOA  
but they were off today.  
So no one left, but  
a broken branch,  
a lifeless squirrel,  
a trash bag,  
and me.

Breath drawn and held,  
I maneuvered the carcass  
into the bag and into another,  
assigning numberless knots to each

and threw it in the bin.

Now, I'm at happy hour with my wife and her co-workers.  
and it's still there, the dead squirrel, in the garage,  
it's rotting body caving into nothingness, and here  
I am having a beer with the aroma of death in my head.

Three days is a long time  
to wonder whether, through  
plastic bin walls in the garage,  
one hears a whisper or not.