



Curbside Splendor e-zine | October 2014

Curbside Splendor Publishing

Curbside e-zine
October 2014

ISSN 2159-9475

Poetry:

Three Poems by A.J. Huffman

Cyber War Refugee by Chandramohan S.

Fiction:

Vulnerable by Colby Ornell

Either You're In or You're Out by Jennifer Schomburg Kanke

The Caves by Xenia Taiga

Cover and photography by Susan Chong

Editor – Joey Pizzolato

A.J. Huffman

has published seven solo chapbooks and one joint chapbook through various small presses. Her eighth solo chapbook, *Drippings from a Painted Mind*, won the 2013 Two Wolves Chapbook Contest. She is a Pushcart Prize nominee, and her poetry, fiction, and haiku have appeared in hundreds of national and international journals, including *Labletter*, *The James Dickey Review*, *Bone Orchard*, *EgoPHobia*, *Kritya*, and *Offerta Speciale*, in which her work appeared in both English and Italian translation. She is also the founding editor of [Kind of a Hurricane Press](#).



Photograph by Susan Chong.

Three Poems by A.J. Huffman

Neon Erupts

after *Downtown*, artist Osnat Tzadok

against cold, steel. Beams breathe
electric in wavering post-midnight hours,
throb with a pulse dawn could never decipher.
Silver and blue battle for control of the shadow-
walkers. Zombies of the disco-apocalypse,
they wander velvet pathways, feeding
on the music, leaving trails of more
than blood on the dance floor.

- -

Streetlights Lose

their echo in winter's dark. Something
about the night soils the snow, steals its refractive shine,
and the quickly covering pathways become grey
mawing mouths, swallowing every watt expelled
by the sentinel luminaries. These obscure soldiers of sight
fight on, burning, however dimly they are perceived, as beacons
of undaunted radiance.

- -

From a Distance

The skyline rose and fell like a printout
from an EKG. I could see the city breathing,
beating. It was all so very much more than alive,
and I was to be Karloff to its Frankenstein. Feeling
the electricity from here, I pressed my foot
deeper into the acceleration, heedless of cautionary limits
and legal repercussions. I was racing my own
destiny. Every mile marker passed was a lifetime gained.
I was dizzy with anticipation, already addicted
to a predetermined pulsing that called to me as one
of its own. I would charge blindly into this
metal monstrosity, embrace its heat, mimic it.
I would become mirror of towering inferno. I was certain
my destiny was to burn.

- -

Colby Ornell

is currently a student at Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts where he is pursuing a degree in English literature. The product of a small town living in a slightly larger (but still tiny) small town, he relishes the time he gets to spend in Providence, Boston, and New York City.



Photograph by Susan Chong.

Vulnerable

by Colby Ornell

It's Christmas in New York City and the lights make me feel less alone. Bad holiday music is playing in a bar where I'm surprising the men with how well I can drink. "West Virginia," I say, bringing up another shot to my mouth, pausing before I do so, almost in a salute.

I am learning how to be vulnerable again and telling my secrets to the city. I find bathroom stalls and write them in places people will see but are less likely to erase, where the cost and effort of painting over them isn't worth it. My secrets are unobtrusive. Little confessions or bits of knowledge I've seldom or never told. They are not big or bold. I thought they had to be, at first. Moments that were mountainous or grand. The worst day and the best day. Instead I have learned that the deepest secrets are the small ones. The little things you wouldn't think to tell: idiosyncrasies and images that are severely personal, distinctly me, intensely mine, like that the first time he kissed me he put his thumb at the corner of my lips, pressing down in a way that was both delicate and firm. I keep a fine point Sharpie marker on me at all times and am refusing to keep track of where I have written or how many there are and am letting them go like doves in the darkness. They are ugly and beautiful and I am trying to be okay with that. I am learning how to be vulnerable again.

- -

Chandramohan S.

is an English poet based in India. His poems reflect the socio-political struggles of the marginalized, the working class and the nomadic outcasts of the World who are victimized and then forgotten as nations clash and wage relentless war. His work has been profiled in *New Asia Writing*, *Mascara Literary Review* and *About Place Journal*. *Counter-Punch Poetry*, *Thump Print Magazine*, and *The Sentinel*.



Photograph by Susan Chong.

Cyber War Refugee

by Chandramohan S.

A rat furrowing through
optic cables and air waves
into a granary of eagled eyed codebooks
munching away grain bits of ones and zeros
letting the cat out from the virtual locker
flee the cat paws of uncle Sam
cyber war refugee seeking
asylum in a virtual no man's land
a pawn in the geopolitical chessboard.

- -

Jennifer Schomburg Kanke

is a doctoral candidate at Florida State University. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Prairie Schooner*, *Pleiades*, *Court Green*, and *Goblin Fruit*. She previously served as the poetry editor for *The Southeast Review* and is currently the advisor for *The Kudzu Review*, Florida State's undergraduate literary journal.



Photograph by Susan Chong.

Either You're In or You're Out

by: Jennifer Schomburg Kanke

I've never been a badass, but I've often been badass adjacent. My new neighbor seems to make a decent living doing something that involves kicking the shit out of people, but it's in a ring and there's an audience, so it's legit. I don't know what the wife does, but I think she works at night because I hardly ever see her except on the weekends when she's walking Amber, their Pit/Rottie mix. I'll be out working in the yard, nothing big, just trying to get the dandelions under control, and the wife'll come by with that big slober of a dog who's always half-way down the street and neck deep in the McGonigle's pork bones and tampons before the woman realizes that she's the one holding the leash. And when she yanks on it Amber always does the same thing. First she'll pull her head out of the trashcan, looking as confused as Taylor Swift on *Celebrity Jeopardy*, then she runs left, right, then left again as if the leash can't follow her, as if it isn't attached around her very own neck. Dumb dog.

The guy who lived in that house before them was also pretty admirable, and by admirable, I mean hot. I saw him take out a whole hedge of boxwoods once in under fifteen minutes using just a dull-edged shovel. Which is pretty much my dictionary definition of badass these days. I tried to ask him out after that, but somehow our signals got crossed and he thought I wanted him to hard prune the forsythia by my front walk for me. Double entendre has never been my strong point.

Like in high school when we were reading *Romeo and Juliet* and Mercutio said "for the bawdy hand of the dial is now upon the prick of noon," I thought he was just talking

about the time until my best friend and first badass, Dina, nudged me and made a few rude gestures under her desk until I caught on. She almost got me in trouble that day because Ms. Starrett was giving us the pre-stink eye, which we knew meant we had about two seconds to focus ourselves. It's not like it was our fault Shakespeare was a dirty old perv.

Dina was always getting me into almost-trouble back then, like when Mrs. Allen, the principal, asked if I'd been the one to slash the bus tires, I said, "no." Just because it was my knife didn't mean I'd done it. Dina was going to do what Dina was going to do, and you either went along for the ride or tried to stay the fuck out of her way.

The night the first Gulf War started (or second, or third, depending on who's doing the counting), I probably could have guessed that Officer Haak, the Eastland Mall security guard with the pants an inch too short, knew we had permanently claimed the keys to lockers 92 and 93. In addition to being our class years, they were across the way from the General Nutrition Center, just the right size to hold the loot Dina would pocket to make into those blood pressure reducing smoothies she convinced herself were some kind of magic spells.

"Drink this." It'd be wheatgrass before wheatgrass was a thing, or at least between when it was a thing and when it got to be a thing again. I'd drink it.

"Now say 'Gaia, Gaia, mother, mother, *om*,' like you mean it this time." I'd say it.

Nothing would happen, but my fingers would tingle (from all the niacin), and we'd call it good enough.

Although it was known around our side of Columbus that Haak would ban a two year old for life if it cried too loudly or touched the coats at Berman's Leathers with sticky hands, he never seemed inclined to do much to us. He'd have his notepad out and a hand on the phone ready to call in the real cops, then he'd set those unforgiving eyes on Dina and put the phone down. Whatever their arrangement was, it worked for me.

Last year I was still having nightmares about running out of the mall toward her Citation with its bad locks and worse engine block, of Dina trying to hold a door shut with one hand while cranking the key with the other. Of never being able to get away. When I have those dreams I'm thankful I live alone. I'll bust up a chair rail in the kitchen (outdated anyway) or maybe call my mother a few times and ask if her refrigerator's running. Even sleepwalking I'm not a badass.

It's not like that with Dina, she's the real deal. She'd get with the Spanish teacher (who I'd called dibs on) and then give me a look, "Who, me?" (but in Spanish), or she'd put "Ragdoll" on the jukebox at Mickey's Pizza, even though she knew I hated that song because it had been me and Roger Kiley's. But sometimes she could be real sweet, like when Roger and me broke up and she offered to beat him up for me (I said no, he wasn't worth it) or later, when he started dating Melanie Hardrow, with her big hair and stubby little troll body, and Dina had teepeed her house for me without even asking. She could be a real friend like that, but then other times it was like someone was yanking on her leash and she couldn't figure out how to get free. I once overheard Mr. Toms, the guidance counselor, telling Mrs. Allen to go easy on Dina after the incident with the bus tires. He told her that

she'd been (whisper) *abused*. Which even then I thought was bullshit. Who hasn't?

- -

I saw Dina for the (hopefully) last time back in September.

"What do you want?" I said with my eye to the peephole and my hands bracing the door. I was sure it was locked, but to check would have drawn her attention.

"Who says I want something? Can't a friend come to chat? Hash over old times with a cup of tea?"

It had been fifteen years since I'd seen her and five since I'd sent my last Christmas card to the Franklin County Jail.

"No."

"I've changed." Liquid liners were now readily available but she was still heating a Cover Girl pencil over her Bic lighter. I could smell the Marlboro Reds through the door.

"Just a place to hang, let some stuff cool down."

"What stuff?"

"Stuff stuff." She tested the handle.

When I was still in college, this would have gotten her in. My roommate Allison could barely stand her, said all the Diet Peach Tea Snapple disappeared whenever she was around. Whether she'd robbed Aladdin's Arcade down at the mall or stolen fifty bucks from her step-dad, I couldn't shut

her out. To add to all that, Officer Haak always seemed to be trying to find her and would come pounding on the door late at night.

“Don’t open it,” she’d say, and I wouldn’t.

Sometimes she’d have Kelsey in tow, who would have been around two or three by then, which teed Ali off. I think another reason she didn’t take to Dina was she was still pulling all that spell crap instead of going to Planned Parenthood like the rest of us.

“Gather ye’ some pennyroyal,” she’d say, pulling a bottle from her purse.

“That’s essential oil, you’ll jack your liver,” Ali would warn.

“I must be pure, only pennyroyal can make me pure again.”

And Ali, a real honest-to-God “harm ye none” pagan, would roll her eyes and go back to taping her name to the Snapple, mumbling, “Ain’t nothing make you pure again.”

“It’s the dark forces man, they can’t handle my powers.” And I’d push her bangs away from her forehead as she cramped and writhed.

There’d been no falling out between us, just mutual boredom and drifting. I always had work in the morning and I liked being at the library, it made me feel smart even though it was basically just a customer service job, so staying up late to hear Dina’s same stories over and over again just wasn’t worth the risk of dragging the next day. When I heard she’d

been taken in for child endangerment, it wasn't surprising. It's those little daily things that get you. Then it was grand theft auto. And trafficking, which was starting to get cliché. I sent her Christmas cards with robins on them mailed with snowflake postage stamps, and she'd sometimes send me back a note she wanted taken over to Kelsey, who even by eleven was an unforgiving child. She'd let me in and let me watch her throw the unopened envelope in the trash before seeing me back out.

"They're not apologies you know," a foster mother said once.

I made a noncommittal noise, something between a *hmmph* and a *meh*, something that said both, "Why'd you think they would be?" and, "I'm sorry," something that let her know I was on the right side of Social Services.

- -

She tried the door handle again.

"I saw him Kelly, I saw Haak." I could have cared less. Now when I go to the mall, I just shop. Actually, I can't even remember the last time I went to a mall.

"He's two doors down from me in Haven House."

"You're back at Haven House?" She'd been there after each of her releases, so I don't know why it had surprised me she was back there again. Some people don't know when to give up on someone like Dina.

"Been clean six weeks, longest time yet."

“Have you talked to him?” Although I knew better than to ask questions, since questions just invited answers, I couldn’t help myself.

“Yeah, and he was a total dick to me.”

“Are you okay?” No, no, don’t ask any more questions. Questions lead to answers which lead to the door getting unlocked and her coming in.

“Sure.”

“You don’t sound okay. What did he say to you?”

“He said he’s been seeing Kelsey almost every month for the past two years. Even went to her graduation. You know she won’t even return my calls?”

“I’m sorry to hear that, it sounds like it hurts you.” I did my best impression of the counselor I’d gone to during college as I leaned against the door, my hand reaching for the lock.

“I’m going to get back at him. Either you’re in or you’re out.”

How many of my worst stories start that way?

“We’re going to the abandoned Coke factory. Either you’re in or you’re out.”

“Got tickets to see Dimebag Darrell tonight at the Arosa. Either you’re in or you’re out.”

“I snagged some Chronic from my stepfather’s stash. Either you’re in or you’re out.”

I dropped my hand and walked away from the door. I was tired and had work in the morning.

The first text came around 1:30.

“Last chance. Either you’re in or you’re out.” I didn’t respond to that, or the fifteen ones after.

“What’s better? A wooden bat or a golf club?”

“Does a Sentra have a release in the trunk?”

“What’s the name of that park next to the Krogers? I can’t remember which road the entrance is on.”

I turned my phone to silent after the fifth one and let her night play out while I broke the chair rails in my sleep.

- -

Xenia Taiga's

work is in *Litro: Dystopia Issue*, *Four Way Review*, *The Molotov Cocktail* and other cool places. She's a contributing editor for *Eastlit*. She lives in southern China with a cockatiel and an Englishman. Her three dollar website is up and running: xeniataiga.com.



Photograph by Susan Chong.

The Caves

by: Xenia Taiga

At night we like to sit in the treetops and look over the great gloom of the city in the far distance. We fantasize about the pink clouds swirling above it, calling them pink cotton candy. We heard before that if you say it often enough, it becomes real. In the treetops we chant like birds, saying the words quickly, slurring them in our mouths till we could almost taste the soft pink fluff. We keep chanting till the sugar melts on our tongues.

Our stomachs growl and rumble, reminding us it's time to head back to the caves, but we don't. We ignore our stomachs to feast on something more beautiful than the food our parents would be preparing for us. Our eyes focus on the swirling pink clouds and together we feast on the sight of pink cotton candy.

Our parents long ago, feeling the rumblings under our feet, came here. They worried, fretted, and wondered and then finally sought the perfect solution, which is here in these giant caves. A simple loading dock was dug into the mountain. The walls and ceilings were carved out of limestone. It was once owned by the military and is now owned by a billionaire who divided up the lots and sold it to us.

He said it was coming. Our parents agreed.

He advertised it as the perfect setting: an attractive destination both before and after the world's end. He encouraged us to come again and again, claiming that this

place could be our resort destination as well. So, we came here for our holidays, for our vacations.

Our parents at first mingled with the others discussing and improvising our slots in the caves. Decorators and carpenters hauled themselves up the mountains. A radio was set up throughout the caves. The first time the alarm was played we almost peed our pants. It was so loud, scary, deafening.

Afterwards when they finally managed to turn it off, we all had a laugh but it was the adults who were laughing nervously. When it dawned upon us that their laughter was nervous, we turned mighty fast to stomping the floors looking for any wicked spiders or ants that might be crawling there. There were none, but we stomped nevertheless.

In the caves it is seventy degrees every day and it never rains, but we all prefer to stay outside. Barbecues were held there and we children would run around the surrounding rolling hills and through the lush stands of trees. But something changed. Our parents felt more of the rumbling. We stayed longer and longer till one day we knew we wouldn't be heading back. The parents had set up classes for us in the caves and took us out on expeditions into the depths. But they changed. They didn't come to the classes any more. They sat in their slots, staring at the walls, mumbling.

There is something coming, we can't put a word to it, but something like the rumblings of our stomachs. High up in the trees, we get into our hidden stash. Chocolate and cream cover our faces and afterwards we beat off the ants climbing up our legs.

We go back to the caves to search out more food for our stash, but our parents discover us. They lecture us. "Think about the end of the world, what will we do for food then?"

We head back to the trees and pull from them long strips of bark. We dare the smallest of us to eat, and wait to see if he dies. When he does not die, we join in eating the bark. It tastes bitter and dry like dirt. We move onto the leaves and then onward to the flowers, but the berries we stay away from. The berries for sure will make you dead.

We mumble to each other the goodies that are left behind: Starbucks, McDonalds, Pizza Hut, Chipotle, pastrami, jelly beans, lollipops, popcorn with artificial butter, string cheese, Olive Garden, bubble gum. We make lists. We break off branches and draw the words on our arms to make them permanent like tattoos, but they only looked like weak bloody marks, like chicken scratches, although none of us had ever seen a chicken. On hot days, we dream about cold things: ice-cream sandwiches, Caramel Frappuccinos, blue slushies, Rocky Road and popsicles. We make our feasts of plants and flowers declaring this one to be pizza and that one to be apple pie. We gobble them up happily, dreaming, rubbing our stomachs.

The rumblings get louder. They are not from our stomachs.

The sky's pinkness explodes. First, into large bursts of orange and then large cream-colored puffs of clouds roll up and flow outward. Burnt orange reddish sparks scatter across the sky. Black clouds gather and swirl on the ground in the city. We gasp. We scream.

“Pumpkin Spice Lattes!”

“Caramel Frappuccinos!”

“Whipped cream!”

“Oreos!”

The alarm blares. Our parents scream for us. The doors around the mountains slowly crank down. Some of us run back, hurtling through the trees, snapping the twigs in half like wolves in fear. The rest of us climb higher in the trees, one hand clenching the tree’s branches and the fingers of the other reaching out to touch the cinnamon specks that are flying and twirling like the quick shifting of a bubble gum machine that exists in our dreams. Our eyes close in ecstasy. Our mouths are wide and open. Our tongues curl out, long and thin, waiting.

- -

About the Artist

Susan Chong

is a young single mother who currently lives in Seattle, Washington. She is a full Korean Asian American, born in Munich, Germany. Susan and her family lived in Germany until about 1985, when her family moved to Lacey, Washington. They resided there for a couple of years, then moved to Arizona.

Due to her father's Army assignments, Susan and her family moved every couple of years. From 1994-2002, her father was assigned to move overseas to Seoul, South Korea. There, she learned more about her origin and nationality, and also taught herself to read, write, and speak Korean. She also worked as a full-time voiceover actor and on a number of English entertainment shows.

In 2002 she returned back to Seattle to attend University of Washington and received her bachelors degree. She has been living in Seattle with her only daughter, Isabelle, ever since.

Susan has always had a passion for adventures, nature, and photography. It was through her own curiosity for the world that she soon discovered that she had a natural eye for photographing objects, people, and places. Recently, she has become more involved in mobile photography with her iPhone 4S, and had the opportunity to work with the Igers_Seattle Team for a short time. Her most recent trip was to Yellowstone National Park in Wyoming, featured here.

Curbside Splendor

www.curbsidesplendor.com

