

# **The Alchemist Review**

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*The contents of this magazine were selected by a student editorial board from among numerous entries. The awards in each category reflect the judgment of that board rather than those of the faculty and administration of Sangamon State University.*

## **Cover Photo**

(Second Place Award)  
John F. Kauffmann

ron deverman - second place  
poetry award

## **in the corner of the room where she was rocking**

*in the corner of the room where she was  
rocking*

*it is quiet, as quiet as house-shift,  
as wind lifting the batiste curtain.*

*i came as my father's friend, to visit,  
to listen, to cradle her despair.  
now from the middle of this room i see her  
her legs stockinged, crossed at the ankles,  
her once almond hair now drifted with  
white and grey.  
the book she was reading has fallen  
from her lap, the rough palms of her small  
hands left open as in prayer.*

*near her, crumbs flecked on a china plate.  
above her a portrait of some ancestor  
with a face as anonymous as black cloth.*

*she does not speak.  
i notice the forehead beaded slightly  
the mouth open, the eyes  
crow-lined, and moist---squinting.  
i touch the leathery pulse of her neck.  
it is then i know we are alone  
in the dust of our memories;  
when she would come to family dinners  
and sit  
hunched no bigger than an embryo in the  
same chair  
all afternoon, too old to be of no bother,  
or significant in conversation.*

*yet when i was younger she would not tell  
me of rug-making or her weaving,  
she took me back through her gathering  
of lovers her visions of a man with a  
woman.*

*and i so wanted to tell her that i have loved  
loved beyond the images and words of  
those moments she lay in the shelter of  
their skin.*

*would it be different if i sat in her rocking  
chair and, for a time, was loved by men  
who wandered?*

*i look at the yellow scar on her forearm  
like the scar of his old house,  
and it occurs suddenly that we are defined  
by the moments we most understand.  
house dust, a cricket  
racing sun-blind from light to shadow,  
or that skin-sheer curtain junctured by  
wind.*

*i pick up the book she was reading  
as if to re-catch some image of myself.  
and i think of the china plate flecked with  
crumbs, of her chair silent as a handprint  
over the red and blue loop rug, of her  
immutable sleep,  
of a kiss harder than shards of bone.*

## Heat Wave

Everything that summer seems to have had an ominous cast to it. The sky, normally a bright July blue, was overcast and angry or else it was pale, a sun-washed yellow. And the heat. The heat gripped the prairie in its fist and showed no mercy. It was enough to drive anyone mad, the townsfolk said and, indeed, madness was in the very air.

Our house, sprawling, dingy and gray, like the rest of our little community, sat at the northern edge of town, a forlorn looking sentinel keeping watch over its lesser counterparts and their inhabitants. It had twelve rooms, once filled with the raucousness of eight children. I was the ninth. And by that summer of my tenth year the others had long since taken their leave, gravitating to the bright lights of Chicago, Peoria, and St. Louis. And so the house sat, silent for the most part, while my parents and I went about our daily tasks of living with few words, few gestures, few visible emotions.

My parents. When I think of them now it's always in connection with the word "sparse." They were both sparse in word, sparse in build. Their lives were an illustration of sparseness. They had labored hard, done without, to raise eight children and by the time I came along, sparseness had won their emotions, too. And so I learned early on to become self-reliant. I escaped into a world of fantasy, where my parents were a king and queen and I their pampered princess. Later I replaced this outworn fantasy with my beloved books. I surrounded myself with them and read nearly all of them in the pitifully small library in our town.

I wouldn't say I grew up a neglected child. Not exactly. I just had the feeling that my parents were simply too tired to expend much effort on me.

By that July, it seemed that everyone was too tired. Tired of the

merciless heat, the hot breath of the wind, and the monotonous sameness of the days. It was an especially hard time for me. I was running out of books to read and my old fantasies weren't working any more. My parents seemed even more withdrawn than usual, so that my essential aloneness seemed to be seared into my soul by the summer heat.

It was that sense of aloneness that drove me from the house. At first my excursions were short and unsatisfying — a walk down the main street, dragging sandaled feet through the ever-present dust or a trifle longer once-around-the-town jog, testing my powers of observation by trying to see things I'd never noticed before. I rarely succeeded. Then I hit upon a way to make my trips both longer and more satisfying. I decided to become a spy. Soon I had a whole new fantasy worked out. I was a spy behind enemy lines and I was to ferret out any information I could and relay it to headquarters. It was essential that I remain undetected. That's why I began my night-time wanderings.

It's a well-known cliché that everyone in a small town knows everyone else's business and, like all clichés, it contains a measure of truth. And yet the night can cover a multitude of sins, even in a small town.

I soon discovered that old Mr. Black held long conversations with his cats, that the Youngs didn't speak to each other at all at home, and that Linda Myers liked to write dirty words on sidewalks and fences.

But my most fascinating discovery was that piety was not the reason for the dour look on the face of Mrs. Evans, wife of the Methodist minister. One of my night-time excursions led me directly to the trysting place of the Reverend Mr. Evans and a mysterious blonde woman who I'd never seen before. I had



recognized the minister's battered old Ford parked near the edge of town and, naively wondering if something were wrong, had started toward it when I heard strange muffled sounds. Thinking someone might need help, I stole silently up to the car and peered in. Nothing in my isolated life had prepared me for what I saw. The years have undoubtedly altered some of the details but the images will never fade in my memory: teased blonde hair above parted red lips, oddly angled limbs, long crimson fingernails scratching mottled flesh, and the incredible paleness of the Reverend Mr. Evans' buttocks glistening above his partially removed black trousers. Shock riveted my eyes to the scene. The full moon, high in the summer sky, flooded the car and its occupants in a sickly light. A number of emotions vied for control of my mind. I wanted to run, to flee from this strange thing, and yet my feet refused to carry me away and my eyes continued to stare, as the two kept up their frenzied gyrations oblivious of the fact that they were being watched.

Of course, I knew some things about sex — mostly what I had read in books and the few rudimentary facts that my mother had imparted to me in a dry, toneless voice. But the books I had read talked about "the act of love" in such lofty, pristine tones I found it hard to equate it with this sweaty, bestial act I was witnessing. As my mind struggled to reconcile my childish fantasies with this present reality, the moon was suddenly covered by clouds and the car was cast into darkness. Lightning split the heavens and thunder rumbled a background for the now distinctly pleasurable sounds coming from the car. The first few drops of rain brought me out of my frozen state and set my feet in motion. Feeling strangely excited, I ran all the way home, thinking the Reverend Mr. Evans'

lovemaking must be considerably more fiery than his sermons.

I didn't go out the next night but my excitement, rather than abating, continued to grow. I had strange fevered dreams, punctuated by shafts of lightning, in which I was alternately the mysterious blonde woman, the Reverend Mr. Evans, and myself, watching...watching.

The temperature continued to climb that week until it became unbearable but no more so than the tension which claimed my mind and body and sent strange thoughts eddying through my churning brain.

The nights brought little respite from the heat, which by this time had devastated everything for miles around — crops, animals, and people. Those townsfolk whose custom it was to go to bed at ten o'clock took to sitting on their porches until midnight or after, hoping to catch a bit of stray breeze. Even the old men who gathered outside of Patterson's Dry Goods for their nightly gossip began staying later and later, only shuffling their way home when the conversation had run completely down and the promise of sleep finally exerted more influence than the heat.

All of his unusual nocturnal activity played havoc with my spying. I couldn't walk down any street in town without a "Hi-yuh. Where you headed this time of night?" or a "Gracious, child! You should be home in bed." And so I sat silently on the porch with my parents, sharing an uneasy camaraderie forced upon us by the heat.

During the fourth week of the heat wave, a series of bizarre events began to take place. First, our neighbor's dog went mad, attacked a child, and had to be shot. Then, a scruffy motorcycle gang came roaring into the quietness of a steamy Sunday afternoon and systematically broke

every window on the main street of town. The next Sunday, George Mattieson, a quiet, fortyish farmer, burst into the Baptist Church with a loaded pistol, aimed it at his wife who was sitting in the choir, shouted "Ellie, forgive me. We'll both be better off dead!" and proceeded to shoot her and then himself.

At their funeral there was much whispered talk about the heat, madness, the work of the devil, a warning from God, and the shiny new Russian Sputnik which circled ominously over our hitherto unsuspecting heads.

My dreams had reached a fevered pitch. In addition to the Reverend Mr. Evans and the blonde woman, they now contained sequences of the heat madness that gripped the town. I was being chased down a dark unfamiliar street by not one, but ten, huge dogs, all foaming at the mouth and growling savagely. I was surrounded by hairy, leering men on motorcycles. Running, running. Where? Always at the end of the street my escape was blocked by the old Ford, its headlights staring at me, its chrome mouth grinning lewdly and the moans from the back seat spewing out the window and ricocheting around in my head.

I would wake with a start, leaving the tangle of sweatsoaked sheets and wander down to the front porch. The moonlight, far from being the romantic thing songwriters saw, always seemed to bathe our little town in an evil and unnatural glow and I often found myself shivering in spite of the heat.

A fear began to take root in my soul during those sleepless nights, a fear that was kept alive by the whispered town gossip and my own disturbing dreams. Fear seemed to be the only thing the heat would allow to grow.

And grow it did. A hush of expectancy fell over the town as it held its breath waiting for the next evil to befall it. But none came.

Gradually things began to get back to normal. New items of gossip were born, discussed, and allowed to die a natural death. Only the heat remained the same.

And I found myself giving in to it. I allowed it to drain from me all sense of

adventure. I lost my taste for spying and any other fantasies while struggling to adjust to the overpowering reality of the heat. My days were long, boring and insufferable, but my nights were short and frightening, filled with the staccato bursts of my continuing nightmares.

Then one morning in early August, I awoke to find a thick fog enveloping the town and bringing with it a coolness such as I'd almost forgotten. I felt refreshed and more alive than I had for weeks. Quietly dressing so as not to disturb my still sleeping parents, I resolved to have an early morning adventure in the fog. I stole my way downstairs and onto the porch, where I entered the swirling cloud and was soon swallowed up entirely in the clammy gray world. I headed for the main part of town, my mind already busy conjuring up my first new fantasy in weeks. I was alone on an alien planet where my spacecraft had just landed amidst swirling fogs and now I must determine if the planet was friendly or hostile.

I was just beginning to get really involved in this new world and to enjoy my sense of freedom when I saw it. There, not five feet in front of me, sat the battered old Ford, now hidden, now revealed by the parting of the ever-moving fog. My heart began to beat wildly and I was filled with an irrational fear of this inanimate object. What was it doing here on the main street of town at such an early hour? Or had my dreams finally taken substance and left the night world to haunt me in the daytime? As I moved closer, the car seemed real enough and yet strangely, unnaturally quiet. Afraid to look yet somehow afraid not to look, I peeked cautiously inside.

Shock, like an electric current, rooted my body to the ground and made motion or sound impossible. I was staring into two pairs of open eyes set in two bloated faces with tongues hanging out of their mouths. The Reverend Mr. Evans and the blonde woman lay, one in the front seat, one in the back, with rope twisted around their necks and ankles. Both were naked, and in the Reverend's lifeless hand was his bloody, discolored sex organ, which had been completely severed from his body.



I don't know how long I stood there before I started running. I do remember running for what seemed like hours. And when I grew tired of running, I walked, zombie-like, unaware of my surroundings. When I finally recovered my senses, I found myself on the Wingate farm, three miles outside of town. I slowly turned and walked toward home with a deliberate, plodding pace which belied my state of mind. As soon as I reached my front porch, I collapsed.

The rest of the summer is a blur. I remember talking with the police on three different occasions but all else I have erased from my mind. Shortly after the murders, I became very ill. It was impossible for me to eat or drink or function in any normal way. I wanted only to sleep. The doctors were baffled by my strange malady, but I think I understood, intuitively, that if I could just escape from the world for awhile, I would recover.

By the time I did recover, a migrant farm worker had been arrested and

charged with the murders. People breathed a sigh of relief, anxious to put the blame on someone and to have done with the whole gruesome thing. However, when the migrant worker began to talk, their sensibilities were once again assaulted. It seems the blonde woman was a cousin of Mrs. Evans who, evidently, shared the secret knowledge of the affair. She and the blonde woman's husband had hired the farm worker to do the killings for \$5,000. When it was learned that Mrs. Evans had specifically requested the mutilation of her husband's body, her picture was blazoned on the front pages of newspapers all across the state. I noticed right away that her usual dour look was gone. On her face was the merest hint of a smile.

The town, now released from the jaws of the heat, straightened its collective shoulders and determinedly set about forgetting the whole incredible summer. And by Christmas time, a mantle of tranquility had descended upon it with the snow.

*mark bennett*

## **In the Sights**

*We rolled our emotions up like bullets  
and shot one another, you got me while my  
arms were raised and tore my soul apart.  
Now memories hang like nerve endings  
stretched out tentacles grasping life.  
Your fingers again grip the handle,  
and looking in the barrel of your eyes  
and that hallow-point smile,  
I see the sights of the aim you take.*

mark bennett

## **Stopping at Glendalough**

*I stood at Glendalough behind an  
evergreen by the decayed ruins of some  
long buried monks, a sixth century tower  
pointed heavenward, and the Wicklow  
Mountains stood like an altar before me.  
Here at this sacred spot of St. Kevin I  
rested from my travels.*

*Ancient grave markers were half  
swallowed into the earth, the urine hissed  
as the steam rose, and a small bird  
perched itself on one of them and looked  
at me as though I were performing some  
great sacrilege;*

*but I was just a traveler from  
America saying hello to my ancestors.*



ron deverman

## **letter to a prostitute**

dangling their weaknesses through the  
city like a bell, you walk  
along the blueprint of an ordinary street  
climbing through an alphabet of names.  
the fragile ones, the spidery ones, the thick  
skinned,  
those stuffed with offices and big decisions  
that ruffle you to bind their desires with  
your openness;  
or the nervous ones, mouths burning of  
mints,  
that hold you like cut glass.

the mirror of your face flatters them.  
your scent caresses their absurd lips  
with freshness. and for that moment you  
are caught up in their single fantasy  
tightly gloved in fake orgasms and false  
addresses,  
stop lights, taxis, and black eyes.  
they forget your kiss is merely a transaction.

when they surface again, they arrive on time  
at the room with the trick key  
to retrace the circle of your beautiful lies  
while you dream of one, possibly two, sugar  
daddies that someday will love you.

with you they breathe the sound of  
your name, opening the prayer  
that rages at the silence within.  
yet you walk away, pocketing their secrets,  
forgetting the taste of their emptiness.  
to again balance on the night-shift scaffold  
possessing no hint of the calling you do not  
know  
or have not yet heard.

# Oil

A fly buzzed fitfully in the folds of the sheer priscilla curtains. Somewhere in the echoing house a clock chimed the quarter hour. Lying across the white, tufted bedspread, the morning sun warmed the thin, motionless hand. Orinda Holland slept.

From their frames hanging against the yellowed wallpaper, faded sepia faces stared impassively down at the still figure. At the north window a slender woman stood looking out at the tangle of grape vines clinging to the garage, the tan Buick splotched by the shade of a large beech. Her back was rigid, and her hands were clasped tightly behind her.

A screen door slammed. Irene turned on her heel toward the doorway, her pale, sharply-lined face accented by dark, black hair. Footsteps hurried across polished wood and up the uncarpeted stairs. The woman who appeared in the doorway bore a marked resemblance to her younger sister: high, flat cheekbones and deeply set eyes. Nevertheless, the older woman, hair graying and waist thickening, contrasted obviously with the chic, carefully preserved younger woman.

"Where have you been?" Irene asked, a slight emphasis on *you*.

"I was just across the street, returning Evelyn's cake pan. It's only been a minute. I saw you drive in." Her voice came in short bursts; the stairs had been an exertion.

"You said she was dying; she looks the same to me," Irene said. Both women looked at Orinda. The transparent skin clung to the straight nose, the slightly flared nostrils, the high cheekbones. The fine white hair was pulled severely from the domed forehead. The eyes, sunken in their hollows, were closed; the rise and fall of her chest was scarcely perceptible.

"She was really bad when I called. Dr. Griffey said he didn't think she'd last the night. I tried to call you this morning, but

you'd already left. I'm sorry." Grace twisted the band of her wedding ring, moistened her lips with her tongue and then bit against her lower lip.

A neighbor's power mower coughed uncertainly, and the fly fidgeted in annoyance.

"It's only been the third time in two weeks," Irene's voice was hard and flat. She looked directly at Grace.

Spots of color rose in the faded cheeks. "Well, I'm sorry. You did say to call." She walked around the end of the bed and over to the window, where she loosened the curtains; the fly escaped into the room. Across the shaded lawn, the sidewalk, the narrow street, lay a string of houses, all ranch style, equally small, yards devoid of trees. When she was young there had been a pasture separated from their yard by a dirt road which led to the center of town: a few two story buildings, one with the name HOLLAND blocked clearly in the gray stone across the upper windows. In the late summer, on days like today, there had been trestle tables set up under the beech trees in the side yard, and she had helped Mama fix meals for the farm hands, platters of cornbread and bowls of steaming soup, thick with vegetables and meat. Mama never served cold meals. "Would you like a cup of coffee?" she asked her sister.

"It's not as if gasoline were cheap." Irene turned again toward the side yard, looking resentfully at the Buick. Doug had insisted on another large car, even though it looked like gasoline prices would keep on rising. She and Mark had tried to persuade him to buy a Horizon, but he was stubborn. Every trip was well over twenty dollars.

Grace sat in the maple rocker at the foot of the bed. She picked up some yarn from the wicker basket on the floor and began to knit. The rockers squeaked softly, wood against wood. Irene searched her

handbag for cigarettes and a lighter. "Perhaps we could help with the gas...." Grace began tentatively.

"We don't want your charity," Irene snapped. She was having trouble with the lighter.

"I didn't mean it as an insult. I know it's expensive driving back and forth, and I know you're, well, I know how it is having children in college."

"Don't tell me you know how it is," Irene turned to face her sister. "You've never had to pinch a penny in your life. Always poor mouthing! I know how much this farm brings in. I know what those wells are worth." The bitterness echoed against the yellowed wall paper, the high white ceilings.

Orinda Holland lay quietly, fragile as a nestling, under the light summer spread; her breathing was shallow as a whisper. A gust of air billowed the curtains gently, and the sunlight danced across the bed.

Grace licked her lips and rocked in silence for some moments. "Let's not argue about the farm," she said at length.

"No, let's not," replied Irene, her face white and drawn with anger. "It might make you feel uncomfortable."

Grace deliberately bound off four stitches to begin the shaping of the sweater sleeve. Although she had completed one sleeve already, she could not remember the instructions. Her face felt hot and flushed, and she was acutely aware of Irene's presence, of the acrid smell of cigarette smoke.

"I said," Irene hissed, "it might make you feel just a little uncomfortable."

"I've been up most of the night, and I'm tired. I don't want to argue with you. The land is fairly ours." Grace lifted her head, her eyes locking firmly with those of her sister.

"That's what you tell yourself; there's nothing fair about what's happened here." Irene's nostrils flared, and her breath came heavily.

"You and Doug came to us about buying your share, not the other way around, and..."

"And you got it dirt cheap," Irene broke in.

"Just let me finish, if you will. We paid

your asking price without quarreling. Both of you were perfectly satisfied with the whole deal. Nobody made you sell your land. You could have stayed here and farmed just like we have, but you didn't want to. You didn't want to live here. I know it's expensive driving back and forth, and I was just trying to be helpful." The knitting needles trembled in Grace's hands. Nervously, she moistened her lips with her tongue.

Irene moved from the window to sit opposite from Grace on the edge of the bed. She leaned forward slightly. "What's happened about this whole thing is a crime, and everyone knows it. If Mama had known what would happen, she'd never have wanted it this way."

"That is a lie," Grace retorted. "You know as well as I do that there isn't a lot of oil on the land you sold us. I suppose you've been out telling everyone that we cheated you out of it."

"If she had known there was oil, she'd have divided it equally."

"You are crazy," Grace persisted. "Papa divided the farm, and he did it as fairly as he could. You were here when Garland Boyd came and rewrote that will, right here in his room, and Papa asked both of us if it seemed fair."

"But then it was farmland," Irene replied. "And there's a big difference between farmland and oil land."

"How could Mama have changed that? Those wells don't amount to much anyway, a few thousand a year at the most. We have what we have because Carl and I have worked hard and saved our money all these years, not because of those oil wells. So what is there to haggle over?"

"What there is to haggle over is that you've made the most out of everything Mama ever had. You even took this house away from her."

"She wanted to go to Aunt Vi's after Papa died," Grace made a noticeable effort to control her voice.

"And all the furniture," Irene continued, "and the new washer and dryer, whose money did you spend? And the new dishwasher, whose money paid for that?" The words came out like sour pits.



"She paid us fifty dollars a month when she moved back here," Grace replied. "That's not a lot. She had to have someone with her all the time. Why shouldn't we use her money to pay someone to come in while we were gone? You never offered to have her come to stay with you. There was a lot more laundry after her stroke, and my machine broke down. Why not use her money? She has lots of it. It won't be all gone by the time she dies. And the dishwasher, we paid for." She looked at Irene defiantly.

"I've got a mind to ask for an accounting of every penny of hers you've spent."

"Go ahead. Carl keeps a record. I'll get it." Grace put the yarn and needles back in the basket and rose from the rocker. She stepped quickly from the room, her faded house-dress brushing against the pink chintz cover of the chair in the opposite corner. Irene moved to stand in front of the window again. The fly had settled on the white bedspread; she watched it pick its way over the cotton tufts towards Orinda's hand. In another room the desk drawer was pulled open; a few moments passed before the sound of its shutting. Grace appeared again in the doorway, her hand extended, holding the maroon account book. Irene took the book silently, then sat down in the cushioned chair and opened it. Her cigarette smoked in her hand.

Grace reached over the bed and brushed at the fly, which had crawled onto Orinda's thumb. It flew toward the screen of the open window. The room lapsed into silence broken only by the leafing of the pages in the account book and the clicking of the metal needles. The lawn mower droned. Irene studied the figures carefully, her mouth drawn tight. At

length she looked at Grace. "This doesn't have anything to do with the fact that you have gotten the most out of her just like you always have. She would want us to share equally; and if she could, she'd change her will, and you know it."

"That's ridiculous," Grace retorted, rising in fury, "What's there to change? We both share equally in the will. What do you want? For us to redivide the property so you get half the oil and then we buy out your share again? That's crazy. We've spent a lot of time and money on this house and on the farm; there's no way to go back and do this over. And if you think she'd change her will, you're crazy about that, too. Why do you think she came back here to stay? Because she knew you didn't want her."

"My God, didn't want her? And I suppose you did. Why, what you've always wanted is her money. Look at the way you got her diamond ring for Jane -"

"Jane is the only granddaughter -"

"And how you kept her car for Eddie -"

"We bought it from -"

"Cheap, cheap, and you know it -"

"For God's sake, keep your voice down," Grace implored, glancing at the bed.

"I don't care who hears," cried Irene. "You're the one to be ashamed."

"Get out of here. Just get out. I'll call you when she's gone. It won't be long." Grace was looking in her pocket for a tissue.

Irene grabbed angrily at her purse straps and stalked past the bed and into the hall. Unnoticed, a tear seeped from the corner of Orinda's eye, slid down the wrinkled skin and disappeared into the fine, white hair against the pillow.



*Trees — Mark Bennett*

*mark bennett*

## **In the Guts of the Living**

*Yeats running there as a refrain  
making young poets dream  
while older ones louder scream.*

*All attempting to unite the trinity  
of spirit, soul, and intellect.*

*Long dead bodies live again,  
there in the room within the hand  
and anguished pen.*

by don dorosheff

## Maggie James

In the restroom of the Yellow Cab Barn, someone wrote: "Fifty percent of all cab drivers have hemorrhoids, the other fifty percent are perfect asses." Maybe. But we've all had the usual number of emergency runs to the hospital with a guy's blood all over the back seat; and we've confronted the scared black kid in the front seat with a cocked silverplate telling us: "I'm gonna *pop* you, Honky."

My story begins one Friday evening as I answered a call at the emergency entrance of the General Hospital. When I pulled up the hospital ramp, this tall, good looking red-head jumps in the front seat.

"Lady, I'm sorry, but I'm looking for a..."

"That's O.K. I called."

"No, no. I gotta pickup a Mr. Wong."

"I know. I called for him, but it's really for me."

She wore a hospital issue green gown, baggy tie-string pants, and paper slippers. In a semi-private hospital room she would have looked perfect, but in my cab, she carried trouble.

"Lady, are you supposed to be out of the hospital?"

"Yeah. I have to go to Western Union. Please, let's go."

I eased the cab from the curb and sorted out the situation. Half a block away I pulled over. No purse.

"How you gonna pay for this?"

"I'm getting some money sent. I'll pay you, don't worry."

"It's gonna be about eight bucks, round trip."

"I'll pay." She laughed, reaching over and squeezing my arm. "Don't worry. Everything's O.K."

Every day before my shift starts, I spit on each tire. This de-hex-a-bugs my cab and protects against traffic accidents and random mischief. But this dame, AWOL from the hospital; when security sees her:

"Oh there you are, we been looking for you. Thanks for bringing her back, pal. Wish we could pay you for her fare, but we're not set up for that." This dame tests the power of my saliva.

She bummed a cigarette. As she leaned over for a light her gown fell open. She casually pulled it closed. She wore no make-up on her round pale face.

"What're you in the hospital for?"

"Nobody knows. I passed out last Tuesday and they've been running a lot of tests. They did a spinal tap yesterday. God, I hate that place. They're driving me crazy. I just got the bandages off my eyes today."

"What was wrong with your eyes?"

"I stared at the sun till I couldn't see."

"That's bright."

She stared out the window and didn't say any more until we arrived at Western Union. She hopped out and strode across the sidewalk just like it was an everyday thing. Her gown flipped open in back revealing the small round band-aide from the spinal tap. The clerk inside looked out the window for an ambulance. The meter clicked on waiting-time.

After a few minutes of transaction she swept back across the sidewalk and plopped down in the front seat. She held up five twenties and six one hundred dollar bills. "Will two twenties cover the fare?"

"Thanks. Looks like someone cares."

"Take me to Potrero Hill."

"The Hill?"

"The Hill."

"They kill cab drivers up there."

She smiled and touched my shoulder.

"It's all right. I gotta make a connection. You'll wait for me."

"We'd better go back to the hospital."

"If you don't take me, someone else will. I need you to wait. I'll never make it back if you don't."

"Jesus. Listen..."



"I'm gonna shoot up then go back to the hospital. If you don't take me, I'll get another cab."

Ten minutes later we were on the Hill. I hid my money and watch under the floor mat while she stuffed five hundred dollars down her panties. We stopped in front of a run down stucco tenement, sprayed end to end with graffiti — Lisa con Carlos...Off Whitey...Don't Buy Wine, Buy Guns. I averted my eyes from the stares of the blacks in T-shirts drinking wine on the front porch.

My red-haired beauty said, "I'm going in and hit up. Whatever you do, don't leave me."

"Hurry it up. By the way, what's your name?"

"Maggie James."

She hopped out, tall and sure as any woman in a flimsy hospital gown could be in the middle of the ghetto. She strode up the walk, passed the drunks, went in the door and disappeared. I never saw her again.

I waited. Ten, fifteen, twenty minutes, the engine running, my hand on the radio mike. It was a struggle not to call the dispatcher and have him send the cops. It was a struggle not to drive away — let humanity work itself out. It was a struggle — then this guy came out the door and walked toward the cab. He came to kill the witness — me. Sunken cheeks, missing front teeth, white male, 34, black hair, black eyes, considered armed and dangerous.

"She's staying."

"O.K."

I drove off and left her. What else could I do? I put the Yellow back in the Barn early and went drinking. It didn't help. In the morning the first thing I thought of was Maggie. I knew she was dead.

The operator answered, "General

Hospital."

I planned to tell her doctor what had happened and where I let her off, without identifying myself. They could take it from there

"Maggie James' room please."

I'd just talk to whoever answered; the doctor, a nurse, her roommate...

"Hello."

"I'm calling about Maggie James..."

"This is she."

"MAGGIE! What are you doing there?"

"Who is this?"

"The cab driver. Thank God you're safe. How'd you get back?"

"They gave me a ride."

"I figured you were a gonner."

"Hey, what're you doing now?"

"Driving cab."

"Good, pick me up. I need to go back up the Hill."

"Jesus. Maggie, I'm glad you're safe. But listen, you gotta take care of yourself. You get well and out of the hospital first..."

"O.K. See you sometime."

Epilogue: One night, several months later, I saw Maggie. She was dressed to the nines in a satin evening dress, and she came bouncing out of a fine hotel where she'd been "selling leg." I offered her a ride anywhere in the city. She laughed and we shook hands. A fare came up, Maggie bowed, opened the door and helped the lady in. She winked, I blew her a kiss, the Yellow eased into the night traffic.

*nancy sue pistorius*

## **All gone**

*i strain*

*to hear your voice  
in the wind  
and learn  
once again  
how alone i am  
you will not be back  
to call my name  
your garden grows wild  
without you  
your dog leaps up  
at the sound of all footsteps  
but then drops back  
heavily  
and i  
grow dimmer every day  
your very absence  
has made me  
less real*