

THE ROAD TO TENNESSEE

As I slung my suitcase into the airport van, I felt the kind of smoldering anger usually reserved for acts of sudden, insensate rage. My cheeks were flushed; my head was spinning. Where was all this hostility coming from? I was leaving Scotland after a week spent interviewing Konrad Hopkins, an elderly eccentric who had written to me out of the blue, wanting to meet and share his correspondence with the incomparable Tennessee Williams, creator of some of the most vulnerable characters in the history of the theater—Laura and Amanda Wingfield, Blanche Dubois, Maggie the Cat. But instead of illuminating our mutual love and admiration of this great artist, his story left me with feelings of disgust, mixed with fury at this playwright, for whom I had felt such kinship.

My journey began, appropriately, in New Orleans, where I was going to deliver a modest paper on an obscure play at an academic conference. The

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play was a short one-act entitled *Me, Vashya*—probably the oddest, most idiosyncratic thing Williams ever wrote. Despite its obscurity, the play is of historical importance because the reception of *Me, Vashya* was one of the chief reasons for his abrupt departure from Washington

University and his hated St. Louis—the other was a failing grade in Greek—resulting in the birth of the Tennessee Williams we know today.

Williams was twenty-five when he enrolled at Washington University and had already experienced some theatrical success when two of his plays (*Candles to the Sun* and *The Fugitive Kind*) were produced by The Mummers, a small community theater group with a taste for the avant-garde. For this reason, Williams held himself aloof from his younger, less experienced classmates in Professor G.W.B. Carson's English 16 Playwriting Class. Indeed, he sat himself alongside Professor Carson, instead of amongst his fellow students. One classmate, quoted in Lyle Leverich's biography *Tom*, observed, "In 1937, I was nineteen and Tom seemed ages older. He did not sit with the class but to the left of Professor Carson facing us. I remember him vividly because of his sallow complexion, nasal voice and the fact that he wore the very same brown suit all year, so worn that it was purple and shiny at the elbows and seat. My recollection of his droning voice and boring play [is that they] prompted me to do my next class' homework during the reading."



Because of the gap in age and experience in relation to his peers, it was naturally assumed that Williams would win the impressive fifty dollar first prize in the one-act playwriting contest associated with Professor Carson's class. Williams had turned in a handful of brilliant sketches of his family: fragile little vignettes about a mother, daughter, and son in St. Louis, leading classmate and Hemingway biographer A.E. Hotchner to surmise that these early sketches were precursors to Williams' first great Broadway success, *The Glass Menagerie* (1945). According to Hotchner in an interview in *Washington University Magazine*, "They were quite lyrical, and we took it for granted that he would turn in a play based on these people."

For whatever reason, Williams chose not to submit the play based on his family as his entry for the contest. Instead, he submitted *Me, Vashya*, a bizarre little play about a megalomaniac arms manufacturer named Sir Vashya Shontine, who has locked his mentally unbalanced, aristocratic wife in their bedroom, and "whose secret operations virtually control the affairs of all nations participating in the next world war." As the play opens, Vashya is seated at his desk, smoking a cigar before the

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bust of some great dictator, "meditatively twirling a large globe of the world, which, throughout most of the play, he...twirls or strokes with his fingers." At the end of the play, his neurasthenic, delusional wife emerges from her bedroom wielding a gun and intends to avenge her dead lover, a young boy whom Vashya has sent to the front to die, along with countless others. "Don't you see them, Vashya?" Lady Shontine says of the imaginary soldiers she sees marching before her. "They're all coming into this room. They're standing around you now. They're waiting for you to go with them." She shoots her husband, and as he dies, Vashya stoops and kisses the hem of her garment.

Williams' classmates found his attack on capitalist greed and global politics less than illuminating and greeted his effort with stifled laughter. Hotchner called the play "pretentious pap" and noted that Williams "rose slowly from his seat, suffused with anger, and left the room. None of us ever saw him again."

From all accounts, the incident was devastating for the young playwright, and he commented in his notebooks, "Never a more ignominious failure! My play for English 16 rejected for presentation—given fourth place—Went to Carson's office this morning and he gave me the news—without any apparent compunction—But why should I expect sympathy from anyone—especially a Washington University Professor—

the stronghold of the Reactionaries!” Thirty years later, the wound inflicted by his disgrace was still fresh enough to have him tell a *New York Post* interviewer, “It was a terrible shock and humiliation to me. It was a crushing blow to me. I had always thought I was shy, but I discarded all humility. I stormed into Carson’s office. (He was a good professor.) I screamed at him. I forgot what my parting shot was, but I remember it was quite a shot. I surprised myself.”

The failure of *Me, Vashya* to win the prize for best play (Williams was awarded Honorable Mention but did not turn up at Graham Chapel to accept his prize.) was not only devastating to the playwright but was an unfair assessment of the play’s worth. As I contended in the paper that brought me to New Orleans, his peers, anticipating realism in the style of his autobiographical sketches, did not realize that Williams had written an expressionist anti-war fantasy deliberately employing grotesque exaggeration and caricature. His intent was to show *Vashya* as a larger-than-life capitalist villain, and when performed in an expressionist style as a little man’s outrageous hunger for absolute power, the play actually worked. I added for the contemporary academic audience that this slight one-act was more than redeemed by its portrayal of Lady Shontine, a woman whose melancholy reflections about a dead lover (“A young man who was very nice to me last winter when I was feeling so badly.... He had a quiet, pleasant voice that made me feel calm inside...he was drafted...sent to the front...later I learned that he was blown into little pieces....”) suggest the sad, wistful poetry of later Williams heroines, including Blanche Dubois.

But the failure of the play was only the first of two disasters that led Williams to leave school. The second occurred when he failed the final examination in ancient Greek. Generously supported by his grandfather after having been obliged to leave the University of Missouri some years earlier, this new failure meant that Williams would not only have to withdraw from school again, it meant that he had let down his “sainted” grandparents. In his journal entry for May 30, 1937, he seems somewhat resilient about the *Me, Vashya* debacle, but depressed about his inevitable failure in the examination: “Blue devils all morning. I’m going to live this down—not dodge it but charge straight through it. I know I can beat it all right. Tomorrow Greek final which I will undoubtedly flunk.”

I didn’t realize when I traveled to New Orleans to speak on the first of Tennessee Williams’ school disasters that I would uncover more proof of the second. Browsing around Faulkner House Books at 624 Pirate’s Alley the same day I gave my paper, I glimpsed a shelf of signed copies of most of Williams’ plays, including a copy of *The Glass Menagerie* signed by the playwright and the entire original cast. Since I had recently directed





Karen Bauer

“Browsing around Faulkner House Books at 624 Pirate’s Alley”

The Glass Menagerie, merely holding the book in my hands with its signatures by the legendary Laurette Taylor, the first actress to play Amanda Wingfield, and Eddie Dowling, the play’s director and its original Tom, was of course exciting to the scholar and theater practitioner in me. Inspired to ask the owner what other Williams ephemera he might have, the shop’s owner, Joseph DeSalvo, brought out a dusty plastic folder stuffed with photographs and letters to and from various lovers and friends. As I thumbed through the strange collection of materials, I came upon something so odd that it seemed to be waiting there expressly for me. As soon as I saw it, I knew immediately what it was—how could I not? On a Washington University Blue Book virtually identical to those still in use



today, I saw the young man's failed Greek examination. There in the upper right-hand corner, his name was scrawled, "Th. Williams." "Tennessee" had of course not been invented yet, and would only come to birth once he left St. Louis the following year. But now it was still 1937, and the student was just an unhappy and frustrated young man called Thomas Lanier Williams.

As remarkable as it was to come across the very examination I had been thinking about in conjunction with *Me, Vashya*, another, greater shock awaited me. As I leafed through page upon page of Greek answers written in pencil—then erased—then copied over again, I felt I was peering into some private closet, witnessing the young man's humiliation all over again, some seven decades later. There were the grades for each section: C-, D+, D-, C, D, F—all written in the red pencil of his professor. But having intruded on this disaster, something made me turn over the last page. And then I saw it: a poem written in pencil in the same hand as the Greek exam. The poem was entitled "Sad Song," but the word "Sad" had been erased, and in its place the word "Blue" was substituted for obvious reasons.

BLUE SONG

I am tired.
I am tired of speech and of action.
If you should meet me upon the
Street do not question me for
I can tell you only my name
and the name of the town I was
born in—but that is enough.
It does not matter whether tomorrow
arrives anymore. If there is
only this night and after it is
morning it will not matter now.
I am tired. I am tired of speech
and of action. In the heart of me
you will find a tiny handful of
dust. Take it and blow it out
upon the wind. Let the wind have
it and it will find its way home.

"Blue Song" by Tennessee Williams. Copyright © The University of the South. Originally appeared in *The New Yorker* (December 25, 2006 & January 1, 2007 issue). Reprinted by permission of Georges Borchardt, Inc.



Murmuring the poem aloud to myself there in the back room of the bookstore, I was moved not only by its simplicity and clarity, but by its remarkable pathos and sense of hopelessness. I felt myself instantly respond to the poem's drama and the young author's sense of utter exhaustion and confusion. Clearly this young man was not the Tennessee Williams the world would one day know; he bore no resemblance to the familiar photograph of the flamboyantly dressed artist lounging in an oversized wicker armchair dangling a mother-of-pearl cigarette holder, a large ring sparkling on a pinkie. Neither was this the man who aged prematurely and squandered much of his immense talent through decade-long bouts with alcohol and Seconol tablets. This was little more than a depressed undergraduate with few options, crumbling under the strain of tremendous pressures he and others had placed on him.

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The decision to travel next to Scotland to meet with Konrad Hopkins was not easy, but upon reflection I felt I had no choice. Days after my discovery of the unknown poem by Tennessee Williams, there had been a modest stir. A news release was run on the Associated Press wire service and was picked up nationally; this was followed by an interview with National Public Radio. Soon afterwards, several newspapers published interviews, including *The Independent of London*. Two weeks later, I heard from Konrad. He informed me in a typed letter (he confessed he did not know how to use a computer or send email) that he had sixty-eight single-spaced pages of correspondence with Williams from February 21, 1952, to November 10, 1956. He had never shared these letters with anyone before but had read the interview with me in *The Independent* and felt that it was time to share them with someone else whose interest in the playwright rivaled his own. To whet my appetite for what he termed "our project," he enclosed his first letter to Williams, along with the playwright's reply. Perhaps I was interested in seeing the rest?

Konrad's first letter to Williams might be characterized as an extremely literate fan letter, and began

After some consideration, I have decided to write to tell you how very impressed I am with your plays, stories, and poetry.

But what is praise now? In the wake of prizes and awards and



screen adaptations, what is one more laurel wreath? When you needed a favorable word was after *Battle of Angels*. None the less, I say to you honestly that I admire your work. Can I say more?

I first read *A Streetcar Named Desire* at college, and since then I've read it so many times I feel I know it by heart....

The young man was a twenty-three-year-old Harvard graduate, stationed in Tallahassee with the Air Force. He went on to ask permission of the playwright to ask him questions in relation to a class he was taking, and concluded by commenting on how impressed he was with Williams' essays, especially one about the poet Hart Crane which reveals "what you think of the poet in America, and what you think, I am sure, is essentially true. 'I think the problem that we should apply ourselves to is simply one of survival. I mean actual physical survival!'"

In his cover letter to me, Konrad indicated that he was now 77 and had recently retired from teaching English at the technical college in Paisley, Scotland, where he had lived for the past thirty years. My hesitancy about traveling all the way to Paisley to meet this man was overcome when I read Williams' reply to Konrad's letter, which was astonishingly personal and illuminating. The playwright's characteristic phrasing, "Crane remains closer to my heart than any other modern artist...he is a sort of archetype of the martyred artist in our times," dispelled any lingering doubts I had about the letters' authenticity, and I felt sure that a treasure awaited me on the other side of the Atlantic.

* * *

It was mid-July, and the temperatures were approaching 90 degrees as I stepped outside Glasgow Airport, peering around for my ride to Paisley. A little old man crept up alongside me, smiling broadly and bearing a large sign welcoming me to Scotland. Despite the intense heat, he was wearing a navy pea coat, woolen hat, and scarf. The coat was festooned with buttons, including a red one that said *Player!*, and he wore a silver medallion which he later told me he had designed himself. The medallion was an odd combination of ankh and heart, the symbol of a religion he had "invented" based on peace and love. He introduced himself to me as Konrad Hopkins. On shaking hands, he theatrically doffed the wool cap, revealing a bare skull fringed with white hair which tumbled down around his wrinkled cheeks in long, greasy strands. The image that came to mind was of the troll under the bridge in "The Three Billy Goats Gruff"; then I thought of an old photograph of the actor Alvin Epstein as Lucky in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. At that instant, I cursed myself for coming all this distance to meet up with a madman.



The week I spent there felt more like a month. Paisley turned out to be a depressing little town whose textile industry, once responsible for its prominence as a center of fashion in the mid-Nineteenth Century, had vanished. It had little to recommend it now but a profusion of discount electrical appliance stores, so-called “One Pound Shops” where nothing cost more than a pound, and a cavernous historical museum commemorating Paisley’s once proud heritage. The sole security guard on duty at the museum was an elderly man more preoccupied with minding his grandson than the museum traffic. As we wandered through the museum, Konrad regaled me with endless stories of Paisley’s history.

What I did discover in Paisley, however, was that (appearances to the contrary) my host had told me the truth. Konrad showed me his collection of letters, which documented a mutual seduction followed by a brief affair with the playwright following a meeting in

New York in 1953 at the time of the premiere of Williams’ play *Camino Real*. After the preliminary exchange of letters, during which the forty-one-year-old Williams repeatedly asked the young Air Force sergeant for his signed photograph, they met in the playwright’s hotel room just prior to the premiere of his new play. Williams dreaded *Camino*’s opening night

and had premonitions of impending disaster. Elia Kazan, the great director of *Streetcar* both on Broadway and on film, relentlessly urged him to rewrite even during final dress rehearsals. In one of his letters leading up to Konrad’s visit to New York, Williams described two framed photographs crashing to the floor during the night, an occurrence which he labeled “baleful omens.” Such omens turned out to be all too accurate, as preview audiences walked out of the theater hissing. The playwright described it later in an essay in the collection *Where I Live*: “At each performance a number of people have stamped out of the auditorium, with little regard for those they have had to crawl over, almost as if the building had caught on fire, and there have been sibilant noises on the way out and demands for money back if the cashier was foolish enough to remain in his box.”

Konrad took the Greyhound bus all the way from Tallahassee to New York to try and calm his friend’s anxieties and arrived at Williams’ hotel, dripping wet in his military uniform. Just before leaving from his base, Konrad sent his friend another signed photo with a poignant wish:

I am sending you another photo. It was taken a year or so ago, and it is one of the best I have. It is a studio pose; enormously

Konrad showed me his collection of letters, which documented a mutual seduction followed by a brief affair....



flattering. But I want you to have it, anyway, and I hope you will like it.

I do wish you luck on “Camino.” I am not really the praying kind. I believe in luck, I believe in chance. If luck were a material thing, I’d send you a box of it for “Camino,” and perhaps you could spread it over the stage, like leaves, for the actors to walk upon, and the aroma would make Success for you.

Although their correspondence does not refer to the actual physical encounter in New York, Konrad made it quite clear in excruciating detail what happened: Williams not only initiated the young man sexually, he raped him.

“He crushed me with his heavy body and bit my nipples till they bled,” Konrad told me. “Then, he turned me over and held me by the nape

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of the neck with his teeth—you see? I still carry his mark here.” He pulled down his sweater so I could see faint marks on his neck. I did not know what to say, but he went on. “Yes, like the great Zeus who came to Leda in the shape of a swan...he held me in his mighty beak...and when he

discovered I couldn’t take him from behind—I began to plead and to cry for him to stop—remember it was my first time—he became cruel....”

“What are you saying, Konrad?” I asked.

He fell silent.

During the week of my visit, Konrad repeated this story often, in detail and even with some relish. Although he always maintained that Tennessee Williams had forcibly sodomized him, there was never a hint of recrimination. Rather, there was almost a sense of gratitude that his sexual initiation, however painful, had been consummated by a genius. As he approached his eightieth year, Konrad wanted the tale of his violation told, and apparently I had been designated as the teller. His affair with Tennessee had been, I soon realized, the apotheosis of his life.

But if the event was his life’s zenith, it was also its nadir. After sex, Williams unceremoniously disposed of him. Konrad told me another story of how they went together to visit the playwright William Inge at the latter’s luxurious apartment in The Dakota on 72nd Street. Inge was at the height of his fame in 1953, and his play *Picnic* was playing to sold-out crowds on Broadway. Konrad was thrilled to be rubbing shoulders with arguably the two most important playwrights in the country, but as the



three of them were having tea in Inge's place, the buzzer rang—it was Frank Merlo, Williams' partner. According to Konrad, Tennessee and Inge suddenly changed expressions, and Tenn (Konrad called him "Tenn" now) literally dragged the young man's slight frame through the kitchen and out the back door; it was the same Service Entrance where garbage was left for pick-up in the morning. Konrad was forced to leave without his jacket, and it was a bitterly cold and windy March afternoon. He had to walk all the way downtown to the YMCA without his jacket. The next day, Inge—not Williams—contacted him and told him if he wanted to pick up the jacket, he should come back at precisely 2:00 p.m. When Konrad arrived at The Dakota, according to Konrad, Inge merely extended his arm—bearing Konrad's jacket through a tiny crack in the door. Konrad took the jacket from Inge's hand, and the door was abruptly slammed in his face. He never saw Inge again.

I had gone to Scotland hoping to examine a previously unknown trove of letters by Tennessee Williams, but I found something else. After Williams' brilliant and astonishing first letter about Hart Crane, the letters grew increasingly gossipy and trivial. After their brief tryst in New York, it became clear to me (though not to Konrad) that Williams simply lost interest in his needy friend. Konrad was just another casual one-night stand in a long line of anonymous sexual encounters with soldiers and sailors conducted over the course of a lifetime. Of course, there was a difference. Unlike the anonymous "cruising" which Williams engaged in throughout his life, Konrad was highly educated and had deep devotion for Williams' work and friendship. But the correspondence revealed that the young man's loyalty was eventually outweighed for the playwright by the nuisance of his voluminous correspondence and obsessive need for attention. For all his promises (and Konrad's constant reminders), Williams never sent him his photo in return. As he did throughout his life, Williams put a stop to anything that even remotely threatened his privacy and independence. In his last letter to him, he accused Konrad of deliberately sending him "pressed flowers." In Williams' lexicon, this alluded to the fact that Konrad had mailed him tabloid gossip (which the playwright termed "carefully culled clippings from scandal sheets and from the snot-grey pseudo-intellectual journal") out of some sort of sublimated desire to inflict pain. As the playwright put it, "perhaps...you want to believe that you like me but really don't, or perhaps more accurately... your liking [sic] for me is tinged with a bit of sadism, a reprisal or something."

On my last day in Paisley, Konrad came to meet me at my hotel with a shopping bag full of autographed plays—but was struck by a car on Paisley's sole busy intersection. Fortunately, his injury was not life-



threatening—he had been sideswiped by the rear-view mirror of a passing motorist, and had been knocked down and was bleeding. He never lost consciousness and even had the presence of mind to ask a passerby to come and fetch me from my hotel and tell me he was injured. I went by ambulance to the hospital, stopping first at the spot where he had been hit, and saw the still-fresh blood congealing on the street.

Once he was examined and X-rayed, I was allowed to enter his room. He was propped up, still clutching the bulging, plastic bag he had been rushing to show me when he had been injured. On the bright yellow bag

His head was bandaged, and the white strands of hair were scooped up inside the bandage....

in bold, black letters were the words *Schiphol Airport—See! Buy! Fly!*, and inside was his collection of signed, first editions of Williams' works. He was fine, he said, smiling. His head was bandaged, and the white strands of hair were scooped up inside the bandage and comically flopped down

around his temples. But his eyes were full of fire. He hoped his accident would not get in the way of showing me his treasures before I returned to St. Louis.

I spent all that afternoon with him in the hospital listening to him talking and reminiscing about Tenn. His love and enthusiasm for their friendship were undiminished by what had happened. He spoke again in detail of the physical pain their intercourse had caused him, but never of the mental and emotional repercussions. He asked if I knew the word "Catamite." When I said I did not, Konrad explained the word was a corruption of the Greek "Ganymedes," the name of the lovely boy who had been abducted by Zeus (in the shape of an eagle) and became his cup bearer. Later, he said, the boy's image was set amongst the stars as the constellation Aquarius, the water-carrier, although in current parlance the word was gay slang for a young boy "who has become the plaything of an older gentleman." As I looked down at the wounded old man lying before me, I realized Konrad still saw himself as the plaything of his own personal divinity, Tennessee Williams. I also knew that by telling me the story of his defilement after more than fifty years, he hoped to somehow acquire a shred of immortality.

My journey almost over, I rode to the airport with the image of the smiling, bandaged old man haunting my thoughts. My exhilarating discovery of the poem of Thomas Lanier Williams' miserable experience in St. Louis had brought me to Paisley, Scotland, where I found Tennessee—a man who could be as brutal as the young Tom was vulnerable. Who was he really? I tried soothing myself by arguing that the



“real” Williams was, like most of us, a complex mix of many contradictions, with both Blanche’s fragile femininity and Stanley’s male bestiality coursing through his veins.

But it didn’t always work. The whole flight home I kept thinking about the aspiring artist who wrote “Blue Song” in a moment of despair when he had no idea where his life was headed. Then I thought about the narcissistic, 41-year-old artist at the height of his fame, a man whose brief correspondence and show of affection had redeemed another man’s life—and crushed it as well. Both were a part of the mystery of my search for, and discovery of, Tennessee. 🎸

