Southern Nights:
Unsung Songs of the
Southern Nightingale

One-Act Plays by Tennessee Williams
Enter Tennessee Williams. He speaks in the Tennessee-Mississippi border country accent spoken by many of his characters, which made him a target for ridicule as a teenager in St Louis.

Tenn

Good evening. I'm Tennessee Williams. All right, I am not Tennessee Williams; I'm an actor playin' Tennessee Williams, 'cause after all I passed some time ago. Besides, I am somewhat more comfortable as a character in my plays than as myself. I really don't look anything me, which is acceptable in theatrical circumstances since our outsides are never a faithful representation of our insides. (Touches head to indicate the mind inside its bone box. Looks at audience. Chooses prettiest girl he sees.) Who is this beautiful person here really? Is she tough as nails, or fragile as a delicate flower? Is she Miss Alma or Stella? This young man: is he Stanley given to anger and violence; is he an educated doctor confused by passions twisting inside him? Will he pass through a time of turbulence in his life and come out the other side a good and caring person? (or) Will he turn out like me?

Likely, the best description of me is offered by Tom at the end of Glass Menagerie. Let me read it for you. It's a speech every actor worth their salt want to do, and this is my chance. (He opens a play script and begins to read. It becomes clear; he does not need the script at all.)

(Insert Text from GM)

This was me. A leaf, torn away from my branch, blown by the capricious winds of life from Mississippi to Missouri and on to Iowa, from St Louis to Memphis to New York, to Rome, Paris, Corsican villages, Key West, Hollywood, New Orleans and back again. I'd just decide to move on for seemin'ly no reason and be off, typewriter in tow. I really didn't know if I was runnin' from somethin' or tryin' to find it. I did love the company of strangers.

I was, at best, homosexually promiscuous. Through the years, I had a couple serially "monogamous" relationships, but, when the cat was a way, I'd play, either out of emotional attachment or attraction satisfied by purchase. It's not that I didn't care for my partners; I just couldn't not . . . My life was trying to understand why I, why my family, did the things we did. I never achieved this level of cognition. What I could do was describe in stories, pictures, metaphors, the sounds of words that place where our religious and self-delusions met. I was trying to discover the truth. That something to hold on to that made you safe. I did not succeed.

I did find some pieces of truth though. Mostly they weren't pretty. They are in the plays you will see tonight. My major works, as literary aficionados say, explore the southern cultural. Tonight's plays are not about the south. My major works explore the clash of animal propensities and cultural repression of same,
and the dysfunctional maladjustments that paradoxically keep us sane and make us crazy. Tonight’s plays span my lifetime. The first is a symbolic, cardboard cutout, hopeful play set near Boston, dating to the early 1940’s shortly after I was 30 years old and three years after I adopted the moniker of Tennessee. The second, from 1953, was written for television and concerns the nature of comfort we can provide one another when we are humble enough to recognize mutual needs. The third was written the mid 1960’s and makes use of Absurdist stylistic tendencies to reveal the shallowness, egocentric fixation, the social insanity of straights and gays. The last was written shortly before my timely passing at age 71. It has a clarity, a beauty about it while, at the same time, depicting the vile relationship of dictatorial power and the common persons ineffectual efforts at self preservation as it plays out in the world.

Anthologizers of my plays credit me with seeking and explanation for the madness I saw around me and in me. They politely refrain from articulating that last phrase, but I know, and the director of tonight’s plays knows too, that madness was as much mine as anyone else’s. He marvels, I think, that I could write at all, given my addiction to alcohol and prescription drugs. But in the mornings when I sat down to write there was another me present, one with clarity of mind and the words would just flow out my fingers. Still, I was and inveterate rewriter. I’d kept coming back to a story or play sometimes years after the first drafts. Somehow I knew though the words were adequate the idea wasn’t complete. It takes time, I think, from when we first have an insight to when we have a richer, subtler understanding of the nuances at work below the choppy sea of actions and flotsam of words. Enrichment is continuous.

I’ll leave ya’ll with that thought for now. I’ll visit with you again before we part.
BERT: Knocked it over?

KENNETH: It's disgraceful, what I done. I'm standin' there, havin' a decent conversation, that's all, and before I know it I start rockin' the dammed thing, and it toppled over and broke every glass in the place, and the beer spoutin' out of teh pipes all over the floor. They took all my money; I'll be six weeks payin' them back. I'm for the Civil Service, I think; I'll get back to regular there I think.

BERT: Well — good luck, Kenny. (Blushing.) I hope you'll remember the poems again.

KENNETH (as though they were unimportant): No, they're gone, Bert. There's too much to do in this country for that kinda stuff.

WILLY enters with goods.

TOM: Hey, Willy, get this right away; it's a special for Peckskill.

WILLY: Okay.

WILLY takes the order and goes, and when BERT turns back to KENNETH he is wrapping again. So BERT moves away from the table. JERRY enters, leaves, and JIM enters, drops goods on the table, and leaves. LARRY enters with a container of coffee, goes to the order book, and checks through the orders. BERT goes in.

BERT: I'm goin', Larry.

LARRY (over his shoulder): Take it easy, kid.

PATRICIA enters and crosses past BERT, looking out through the window. TOM gets up and bumbles through a pile of goods on the table, checking against an order in his hand. It is as though BERT twisted it could stop for a moment, and as each person enters he looks expectantly, but nothing much happens. And so he gradually moves — almost is moved — toward an exit, and with his book in his hand he leaves.

Now KENNETH looks about, sees BERT is gone. He resumes his work and softly sings.

KENNETH: “The minstrel boy to the war has gone!” Tommy, I'll be needing more crayon before the day is out.

TOM (without turning from the desk): I'll get some for you.

KENNETH (looking at crayon, peeling it down to a nub): Oh, the damn mice. But they've got to live too, I suppose. (He marks a package and softly sings.)

“...in the ranks of death you will find him. His father's sword he has girded on. And his wild harp slung behind him.”

CURTAIN

The Case of the Crushed Petunias

A Lyrical Fantasy
by Tennessee Williams

CAST
Dorothy Simple
Police Officer
Young Man
Mrs. Dull

SCENE: The action of the play takes place in the C. J. Noop, owned and operated by MISS DOROTHY SIMPLE, a New England maiden of twenty-six, who is physically very attractive but has bared her heart behind a double row of petunias. The town is Peckskill, Massachusetts, which lies within the cultural orbit of Boston. The play starts in the early morning. MISS SIMPLE, very excited for some reason, has just opened her little shop. She stands in the open door in a flood of sun... sunlight, but her face expresses both surprise and indignation. She is calling to a POLICE OFFICER on the corner.

DOROTHY Officer? — Officer!

OFFICER (Strolling up to her.) Yes, Miss Simple?

DOROTHY I wish to report a case of deliberate and malicious sabotage!

OFFICER Sabotage of what, Miss Simple?

DOROTHY Of my petunias!

OFFICER Well, well, well. Now what do you mean by that?

DOROTHY Exactly what I said. You can see for yourself. Last night this house was surrounded by a beautiful double row of pink and lavender petunias. Look at them now! When I got up this morning I discovered them in this condition. Every single lime petunia deliberately and maliciously underfoot!

OFFICER My goodness! Well, well, well!

DOROTHY "Well, well, well" is all going to catch the culprit!

OFFICER What do you want me to do, Miss Simple?

DOROTHY I want you to apprehend a petuniacidal maniac with a size eleven D foot.

OFFICER Eleven D?

DOROTHY Yes. That is the size of the footprints that crushed my petunias. I just now had them measured by a shoe clerk.

OFFICER That's a pretty large foot, Miss Simple, but lots of men have got large feel.

DOROTHY Not in Peckskill, Massachusetts. The shoe clerk assured me that there isn't a man in town who wears a shoe that size. Of course you realize the danger of allowing this maniac to remain at large. Any man who would crush a sweet petunia is equally capable of strangling a helpless woman.
or killing an innocent child!

OFFICER I'll do my best, Miss Simple. See you later.

DOROTHY (Curly.) Yes. Good-by. (Slams door. She returns behind her notion counter and burns restively with her pink polished nail. The canary wheeps timidly. Then tries an arpeggio. DOROTHY, to canary.) Oh, hush up! (Then contritely.) Excuse me, please. My nerves are all to pieces! " (Blows her nose. the doorbell tinkles as a customer enters. He is a YOUNG, MAN, shockingly large and aggressive looking in the flower-papered cubick of the shop.) Gracious, please be careful. You're bumping your head against my chandelier.

YOUNG MAN (Good-humoredly.) Sorry, Miss Simple. I guess I'd better sit down. (The delicate little chair collapses beneath him.)

DOROTHY Heaven have mercy upon us! You seem to have a genius for destruction! You've broken that little antique chair to smithereens!

YOUNG MAN Sorry, Miss Simple.

DOROTHY I appreciate your sorrow, but that won't mend my chair.—Is there anything I can show you in the way of actions?

YOUNG MAN I'd like to see that pair of wine colored socks you have in the window.

DOROTHY What size socks do you wear?

YOUNG MAN I keep forgetting, but my shoes are eleven D.

DOROTHY (Sharply.) What size did you say? Eleven? Eleven D?

YOUNG MAN That's right, Miss Simple. Eleven D.

DOROTHY Oh. Your shoes are rather muddy, aren't they?

YOUNG MAN That's right, Miss Simple. I believe they are.

DOROTHY Quite muddy. It looks like you might have stepped in a freshly watered flower-bed last night.

YOUNG MAN Come to think of it, that's what I did.

DOROTHY I don't suppose you've heard about that horrible case of petunia crushing which occurred last night?

YOUNG MAN As a matter of fact, I have heard something about it.

DOROTHY From the policeman on the corner?

YOUNG MAN No ma'am. Not from him.

DOROTHY Who from then? He's the only man who knows about it except—except—the man who did it! (Pause. The canary chirps inquiringly.) You—you—you—are the man who did it!

YOUNG MAN Yes, Miss Simple. I am the man who did it.

DOROTHY Don't you try to get away!

YOUNG MAN I won't, Miss Simple.

DOROTHY Stand right where you are fill the officer comes!

YOUNG MAN You're going to call the officer?

DOROTHY Yes, I am. I certainly am.—In a minute. First I'd like to ask you why you did it? Why did you crush my petunias?

YOUNG MAN Okay. I'll tell you why. First, because you 'd barricaded your house"—and also your heart—behind that silly little double row of petunias!

DOROTHY Barricaded? My house—my heart—behind them? That's absurd. I don't know what you mean.

YOUNG MAN I know. They're merely such delicate, fragile creatures, these petunias, but they have a terrible resistance.

DOROTHY Resistance to what, may I ask?

YOUNG MAN Anything big or important that happens to come by your house. Nothing big or important can ever get by a double row of petunias! That is the reason why you are living alone with your canary and beginning to dislike it.

DOROTHY Dislike my canary? I love it!

YOUNG MAN Secretly, Miss Simple—you wish the bird-seed would choke it! You dislike it nearly as much as you secretly disliked your petunias.

DOROTHY Why should I, why should you, why should anybody dislike petunias?

YOUNG MAN Our animosity and its resultant action is best explained by a poem I once composed on the subject of petunias and similar flora. Would you like to hear it?

DOROTHY I suppose I should, if it's relevant to the case.

YOUNG MAN Extremely relevant. It goes like this: (With music.) How grimly do petunias look on things with hated in the book, for those dear creatures never move outside the academic groove. They mark with sharp and moral eye phenomena that pass them by and classify as good or evil mammoth whale or tiny weevil. They note with con- summate disdain all that is...
masculine or plain. They blush
down to their tender roots
when men pass by in working
boots. All honest language
shocks them so they cringe to
hear a rooster’s crow, of course
they say that good clean fun’s
permissible for every one. But
find that even Blindman’s
Bluff is noisy and extremely
rough AND—(Stage whisper.)
—Not quite innocent enough?

What do you think of it?

DOROTHY Unfair! Completely unfair!

YOUNG MAN (Laughing.) To orga-
nized petunias?

DOROTHY Yes, and besides, I don’t
think anyone has the right to
impose his opinions in the
form of footprints on other
people’s petunias!

YOUNG MAN (Removing small
package from pocket.) I’m
preparing to make complete
restitution.

DOROTHY What with?

YOUNG MAN With these.

DOROTHY What are they?

YOUNG MAN Seeds.

DOROTHY Seeds of what? Sedilion?

YOUNG MAN No. Wild roses.

DOROTHY Wild? I couldn’t use them!

YOUNG MAN Why not, Miss Simple?

DOROTHY Those Flowers like human
beings. They can’t be allowed
to grow. They have to be
regimented.

YOUNG MAN Regimented? Ahhh. I
see. You’re a horticultural
fascist!

DOROTHY (With an indignant gasp.) I
ought to call the policeman
about those petunias!

YOUNG MAN Why don’t you then?

DOROTHY Only because you made an
honest confession.

YOUNG MAN That’s not why, Miss
Simple.

DOROTHY No?

YOUNG MAN The actual reason is
that you are fascinated.

DOROTHY Am I? Indeed!

YOUNG MAN Indeed you are, Miss
Simple. In spite of your tale
unlamented petunias, you’re
charmed, you’re intrigued—
you’re frightened!

DOROTHY You’re very concealed!

YOUNG MAN Now, if you please, I’d
like to ask you a question.

DOROTHY You may. But I may well
answer.

YOUNG MAN You will if you can. But

you probably won’t be able.
The question is this: What do
you make of it all?

DOROTHY I don’t understand—All
what?

YOUNG MAN The world? The
universe? And your position
in it? This miraculous accident
of being alive! (Soft music
background.) Has it ever
occurred to you how much the
living are outnumbered by the
dead? Their numerical superi-
iority, Miss Simple, is so
tremendous that you couldn’t
possibly find a ratio with
figures well enough above the
line, and small enough low to
represent it.

DOROTHY You sound like you were
trying to sell me something.

YOUNG MAN I am, I am, just wait!

DOROTHY I am not in the market for-

YOUNG MAN Please! One minute of
your infinitely valuable time!

DOROTHY All right. One minute.

YOUNG MAN Look!

DOROTHY At what?

YOUNG MAN Those little particles of
dust in the shaft of April
sunlight through that window.

DOROTHY What about them?

YOUNG MAN Just think. You might
have been one of those instead
of what you are. You might
have been any one of those
infinite particles of dust.
Any one of millions and
billions and trillions of other
particles of mute unconscious
matter. Never capable of
doing, thinking, feeling
anything at all! But instead,
dear lady, by the rarest and
most improbable of accidents,
you happened to be what you
are. Miss Dorothy Simple from
Boston! Beautiful. Human
Alive. Capable of thought and
feeling and action. Now here
comes the vital part of my
question. What are you going
to do about it, Miss Simple?

DOROTHY (Who is somewhat round,
in spite of her crushed petu-
nias) Well, goodness-gra-
cious—that’s alive! I thought
you came in here to buy some
socks?

YOUNG MAN Yes, but I’ve got to sell
you something first.

DOROTHY Sell me what?

YOUNG MAN A wonderful bill of
goods.

DOROTHY I’ll have to see it before I
sign the order.

YOUNG MAN That’s impossible. I
can’t display my samples in
this shoppe.

DOROTHY Why not?
YOUNG MAN They're much too precious. You have to make an appointment.

DOROTHY (Retreating.) Sorry. But I do all my business in here.

YOUNG MAN Too bad for you. — In fact, too bad for us both. Maybe you'll change your mind?

DOROTHY I don't think so

YOUNG MAN Anyway, here's my card.

DOROTHY (Reading it, bewildered.) — LIFE-INCORPORATED.
(Looks up slowly.)

YOUNG MAN Yes. I represent that line.

DOROTHY I see. You're a magazine salesman?

YOUNG MAN No. It isn't printed matter.

DOROTHY But it's matter, though?

YOUNG MAN Oh, yes, and it's a matter of tremendous importance, too, but it's neglected by people. Because of their ignorance they've been buying cheap substitute products. And lately a rival concern has sprung up outside the country. This firm is known as "Death, Unlimited." Their product comes in packages labeled "War." They're crowding us out with new aggressive methods of promotion, and one of their biggest sales points is "Excitement." Why does it work so well? Because you little people surround your houses and also your hearts with rows of tiresome, trivial little things like petunias. If we could substitute wild roses, there wouldn't be wars! No, there'd be excitement enough in the world without having wars! That's why we've started this petunia-crushing campaign. Miss Simple. "Life, Incorporated" has come to the realization that we have to use the same aggressive methods of promotion used by "Death, Unlimited," over there! We've got to show people that the malignantly trivial little petunias of the world can be eliminated more cleanly, permanently and completely by "Life, Incorporated" than by "Death, Unlimited!" Now what do you say, Miss Simple? Won't you try our product?

DOROTHY (Anxiously.) Well, you see it's like this—I do all my buying in Boston and

YOUNG MAN What do you buy in Boston?

DOROTHY You can see for yourself. Look over the stock.

YOUNG MAN (Examining the shelves.) Thimbles—thread—ladies' needlework—white gloves—

DOROTHY Notions. Odds and ends.

YOUNG MAN Odds and ends—of existence?

DOROTHY Yes, that's it exactly.

YOUNG MAN What do you do after hours?

DOROTHY I carry on a lot of correspondence.

YOUNG MAN Who with?

DOROTHY With wholesale firms in Boston.

YOUNG MAN How do you sign your letters?

DOROTHY "Sincerely." "As ever." "Very truly yours."

YOUNG MAN But never with love?

DOROTHY Love? To firms in Boston?

YOUNG MAN I guess not. I think you ought to enlarge your correspondence. I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll meet you tonight on Highway No. 77!

DOROTHY Oh, no! I have my correspondence!

YOUNG MAN Delay your correspondence. Meet me there. We'll have a couple of beers at the Starlight Casino.

DOROTHY (With frantic evasion.) But I don't drink!

YOUNG MAN Then eat Swiss cheese on rye. It doesn't matter. Afterwards I'll take you for a ride in an open car.

DOROTHY Where to?

YOUNG MAN To Cypress Hill.

DOROTHY Why, that's the cemetery.

YOUNG MAN Yes, I know.

DOROTHY Why there?

YOUNG MAN Because dead people give the best advice.

DOROTHY Advice on what?

YOUNG MAN The problems of the living.

DOROTHY What advice do they give?

YOUNG MAN Just one word. Live!

DOROTHY Live?

YOUNG MAN Yes, live, live, live! It's all they know, it's the only word left in their vocabulary!

DOROTHY I don't see how—?

YOUNG MAN I'll tell you how. There's one thing in Death's favor. It's a wonderful little process of simplification. It rids the heart of all consequential. For instance, it goes through the dictionary with an absolutely merciless blue pencil. Finally all that you've
DOROTHY The word you hear at night on Cypress Hill?

YOUNG MAN The word you hear at night on Cypress Hill!

DOROTHY Ohhh. Oh, oh!

YOUNG MAN But on one hears it fill they deal with me. I have a secret patented device that makes it audible to them. Something never processed by Du Pont, But none the less a marvelous invention. It's absolutely weightless and transparent. It fits inside the car. Your friends won't even know you have it on. But this I guarantee: you'll hear that word, that sounds much like the long, sweet sound of leaves in motion!

DOROTHY Leaves?

YOUNG MAN Yes, willow leaves or leaves of cypress or leaves of windblown grass! And afterwards you'll never be the same No, you'll be changed forever!

DOROTHY In what way?

YOUNG MAN You'll live, live, live!—And not just behind petunias. How about it, Miss Simple? Dorothy? Is it a date? Tonight at half-past eight on No. 77?

DOROTHY Whereabouts on Highway No. 77?

YOUNG MAN By the wild plum-tree—at the broken place in the long stone wall—where roots have cleft the rocks and made them crumble.

DOROTHY It sounds so far. It sounds uncivilized.

YOUNG MAN It is uncivilized, but it isn't far.

DOROTHY How would I get there? What means of transportation?

YOUNG MAN Borrow your kid brother's bike?

DOROTHY Tonight's Scout meeting night; he wouldn't let me.

YOUNG MAN Then walk, it wouldn't kill you!

DOROTHY How do you know? It might. I come from Boston.

YOUNG MAN Listen, lady. Boston's a state of mind that you'll grow out of.

DOROTHY Not without some insulin shock treatments.

YOUNG MAN Stop evading! Will you or will you not?

DOROTHY I've got so much to do. I have to return some books to the public library.

YOUNG MAN Just one more time—will you or will you not?

DOROTHY I can't give definite answers—I'm from Boston!

YOUNG MAN Just one more mention of I Boston's apt to be fool! Well, Miss Simple? I can't wait forever!

DOROTHY I guess I—might.

YOUNG MAN You guess you huh?

DOROTHY I mean I guess I will.

DOROTHY I mean I will—I will!

YOUNG MAN That's better.—So long, Dorothy. (He grins and goes out, slamming door.)

DOROTHY Good-by. (She stares dreamily into space for a moment. MRS. DULL comes in.)

MRS. DULL (Sharply.) Miss Simple.

DOROTHY Oh! Excuse me. What do you want?

MRS. DULL I want a pair of wine-colored socks for my husband.

DOROTHY I'm terribly sorry, but the only pair in stock have been reserved.

MRS. DULL Reserved for whom, Miss Simple?

DOROTHY A gentleman who represents this line. (Showing card.)

MRS. DULL "Life, Incorporated"? Huh, I never heard of it.

DOROTHY Neither had I before. But now I have. And tomorrow the store will be closed for extensive alterations.

MRS. DULL Alterations of what kind, Miss Simple?

DOROTHY I'm going to knock out all four walls.

MRS. DULL Knock out—what—? Incredible!

DOROTHY Yes, to accommodate some brand new merchandise. Things I never kept in stock before.

MRS. DULL What kind of things? Things in bottles, Miss Simple, or things in boxes?

DOROTHY Neither one nor the other, Mrs. Dull.

MRS. DULL But everything comes in bottles or boxes.

DOROTHY Everything but "Life, Incorporated."

MRS. DULL What does it come in, then?

DOROTHY I'm not sure yet. But I suspect it's something unconfined, something wild and open as the sky is!—Also, I'm going to change the name of the store. It isn't going to be "Simple Notions" anymore,
It's going to be "Tremendous Inspirations!"

MRS. DULL: Gracious! In that case you'll certainly lose my custom.

DOROTHY: I rather expected to.

MRS. DULL: And you're not sorry?

DOROTHY: Not the least bit sorry. I think I caught a slight skin rash from dealing with your silver. Also you snuff too much. You ought to blow your nose. Or better still, you ought to trim it down. I've often wondered how you get your nose through traffic.

(MRS. DULL gasps, looks desperately about her, rushes out.) You forgot your groceries, Mrs. Dull! (Heaves them out the door.)

(Loud impact, sharp outcry. Music up.) Officer?—Officer! Officer! Did you say size eleven D, Miss Simple?

DOROTHY: Never mind that now, that's all been settled.

OFFICER: Amicably? Out of court you mean?

DOROTHY: Amicably out of court. The saboteur has made full restitution and the case is dropped. Now what I want to ask of you is this: How do I get out to No. 77?

OFFICER: Highway No. 77? That road's abandoned.

DOROTHY: Not by me. Where is it?

OFFICER: It's in awful condition, it's overgrown by brambles!

DOROTHY: I don't care! Where is it?

OFFICER: They say the rain has loosened half the stones. Also the wind has taken liberties with it. The moon at night makes such confusing shadows people on their way, go dangerous places, do outrageous things!

DOROTHY: Things such as what?

OFFICER: Oh—senseless acrobatics, cartwheels in mid-air, unheard of songs they sing, distill the midnight vapors into wine—do pagan dances!

DOROTHY: Marvelous! How do I get there?

OFFICER: I warn you, Miss Simple, once you go that way you can't come back to Prinmopera, Massachusetts!

DOROTHY: Who wants to come back here? Not I! Never was anyone a more willing candidate for expatriation than I am tonight! All I want to know is where it is—Is it north, south, or east or west of town?

OFFICER: That's just it, ma'am. It's in all four directions.

DOROTHY: Then I don't suppose that I could possibly miss it.

OFFICER: Hardly possibly, if you want to find it. Is that all?

DOROTHY: Yes, sir, that's all—Thank's very much.—Good-by! (Music up. DOROTHY softly.) Good-by forever.

Curtain
Talk to Me Like the Rain
And Let Me Listen...

Scene: A furnished room west of Eighth Avenue in midtown Manhattan. On a folding bed lies a Man in crumpled underwear, struggling out of sleep with the sighs of a man who went to bed very drunk. A Woman sits in a straight chair at the room’s single window, outlined dimly against a sky heavy with a rain that has not yet begun to fall. The Woman is holding a tumbler of water from which she takes small, jerky sips like a bird drinking. Both of them have ravaged young faces like the faces of children in a famished country. In their speech there is a sort of politeness, a sort of tender formality like that of two lonely children who want to be friends, and yet there is an impression that they have lived in this intimate situation for a long time and that the present scene between them is the repetition of one that has been repeated so often that its plausible emotional contents, such as reproach and contrition, have been completely worn out and there is nothing left but acceptance of something hopelessly inalterable between them.

Man: (hoarsely) What time is it? (The Woman murmurs something inaudible.) What, honey?
Woman: Sunday.
Man: I know it’s Sunday. You never wind the clock.
Woman stretches a thin bare arm out of the ravelled pink rayon sleeve of her kimona and picks up the tumbler of water and the weight of it seems to pull her forward a little. The Man watches solemnly, tenderly from the bed as she sips the water. A thin music begins, hesitantly, repeating a phrase several times as if someone in a next room were trying to remember a song on a mandolin. Sometimes a phrase is sung in Spanish. The song could be Estrellita.

(Rain begins; it comes and goes during the play; there is a drumming flight of pigeons past the window and a child's voice chants outside—)

Child's Voice: Rain, rain, go away!
Come again some other day!
(The chant is echoed mockingly by another child farther away.)

Man: (finally) I wonder if I cashed my unemployment.
(The Woman leans forward with the weight of the glass seeming to pull her; sets it down on the window-sill with a small crash that seems to startle her. She laughs breathlessly for a moment. The Man continues, without much hope.) I hope I didn't cash my unemployment. Where's my clothes? Look in my pockets and see if I got the cheque on me.

Woman: You came back while I was out looking for you and picked the cheque up and left a note on the bed that I couldn't make out.

Man: You couldn't make out the note?
Woman: Only a telephone number. I called the number but there was so much noise I couldn't hear.

Man: Noise? Here?
Woman: No, noise there.
Man: Where was "there"?
Woman: I don't know. Somebody said come over and hung up and all I got afterwards was a busy signal...

Man: When I woke up I was in a bathtub full of melting ice-cubes and Miller's High Life beer. My skin was blue.
I was gasping for breath in a bathtub full of ice-cubes. It was near a river but I don't know if it was the East or the Hudson. People do terrible things to a person when he's unconscious in this city. I'm sore all over like I'd been kicked downstairs, not like I fell but was kicked. One time I remember all my hair was shaved off. Another time they stuffed me into a trash-can in the alley and I've come to with cuts and burns on my body. Vicious people abuse you when you're unconscious. When I woke up I was naked in a bathtub full of melting ice-cubes. I crawled out and went into the parlor and someone was going out of the other door as I came in and I opened the door and heard the door of an elevator shut and saw the doors of a corridor in a hotel. The TV was on and there was a record playing at the same time; the parlor was full of rolling tables loaded with stuff from Room Service, and whole hams, whole turkeys, three-decker sandwiches cold and turning stiff, and bottles and bottles and bottles of all kinds of liquors that hadn't even been opened and buckets of ice-cubes melting... Somebody closed a door as I came in... (The Woman sips water.) As I came in someone was going out. I heard a door shut and I went to the door and heard the door of an elevator shut... (The Woman sets her glass down.)—All over the floor of this pad near the river—articles—clothing—scattered... (The Woman gasps as a flight of pigeons sweeps past the open window.)—Bras!—Panties!—Shirts, ties, socks—and so forth...

Woman: (faintly) Clothes?
Man: Yes, all kinds of personal belongings and broken glass and furniture turned over as if there'd been a free-for-all fight going on and the pad was—raided...
WOMAN: Oh.
MAN: Violence must have—broken out in the—place...
WOMAN: You were—?
MAN: —in the bathtub on—ice...
WOMAN: Oh...
MAN: And I remember picking up the phone to ask what hotel it was but I don’t remember if they told me or not...
Give me a drink of that water. (Both of them rise and meet in the center of the room. The glass is passed gravely between them. He rinses his mouth, staring at her gravely, and crosses to spit out the window. Then he returns to the center of the room and hands the glass back to her. She takes a sip of the water. He places his fingers tenderly on her long throat.) Now I’ve recited the litany of my sorrows! (Pause: the mandolin is heard.) And what have you got to tell me? Tell me a little something of what’s going on behind your—(His fingers trail across her forehead and eyes. She closes her eyes and lifts a hand in the air as if about to touch him. He takes the hand and examines it upside down and then he presses its fingers to his lips. When he releases her fingers she touches him with them. She touches his thin smooth chest which is smooth as a child’s and then she touches his lips. He raises his hand and lets his fingers slide along her throat and into the opening of the kimona as the mandolin gathers assurance. She turns and leans against him, her throat curving over his shoulder, and he runs his fingers along the curve of her throat and says—) It’s been too long a time since—we levelled with each other. Now tell me things. What have you been thinking in the silence?—While I’ve been passed around like a dirty postcard in this city... Tell me, talk to me! Talk to me like the rain and I will lie here and listen.
WOMAN: I—
MAN: You’ve got to, it’s necessary! I’ve got to know, so talk to me like the rain and I will lie here and listen, I will lie here and—
WOMAN: I want to go away.
MAN: You do?
WOMAN: I want to go away!
MAN: How?
WOMAN: Alone! (She returns to window.)—I’ll register under a made-up name at a little hotel on the coast...
MAN: What name?
WOMAN: Anna—Jones... The chambermaid will be a little old lady who has a grandson that she talks about... I’ll sit in the chair while the old lady makes the bed, my arms will hang over the—sides, and—her voice will be—peaceful... She’ll tell me what her grandson had for supper—
then hang up... I am lost in this—city...
I'll just barely smile and take my key. I won't ever look at a newspaper or hear a radio; I won't have any idea of what's going on in the world. I will not be conscious of time passing at all... One day I will look in the mirror and I will see that my hair is beginning to turn grey and for the first time I will realize that I have been living in this little hotel under a made-up name without any friends or acquaintances or any kind of connections for twenty-five years. It will surprise me a little but it won't bother me any. I will be glad that time has passed as easily as that. Once in a while I may go out to the movies. I will sit in the back row with all that darkness around me and figures sitting motionless on each side not conscious of me. Watching the screen. Imaginary people. People in stories. I will read long books and the journals of dead writers. I will feel closer to them than I ever felt to people I used to know before I withdrew from the world. It will be sweet and cool this friendship of mine with dead poets, for I don't have to touch them or answer their questions. They will talk to me and not expect me to answer. And I'll get sleepy listening to their voices explaining the mysteries to me. I'll fall asleep with the book still in my fingers, and it will rain. I'll wake up and hear the rain and go back to sleep. A season of rain, rain, rain... Then one day, when I have closed a book or come home alone from the movies at eleven o'clock at night—I will look in the mirror and see that my hair has turned white. White, absolutely white. As white as the foam on the waves. (She gets up and moves about the room as she continues—) I'll run my hands down my body and feel how amazingly light and thin I have grown. Oh, my, how thin I will be. Almost transparent. Not hardly real any more. Then I will realize, I will know, sort of dimly, that I have been staying on here in this little hotel, without any—social connections, responsibilities, anxieties or disturbances
of my kind—for just about fifty years. Half a century. Practically a lifetime. I won’t even remember the names of the people I knew before I came here nor how it feels to be someone waiting for someone that—may not come... Then I will know—looking in the mirror—the first time has come for me to walk out alone once more on the esplanade with the strong wind beating on me, the white clean wind that blows from the edge of the world, from even further than that, from the cool outer edges of space, from even beyond whatever there is beyond the edges of space... *(She sits down again unsteadily by the window.)*—Then I’ll go out and walk on the esplanade. I’ll walk alone and be blown thinner and thinner.

**Man:** Baby. Come back to bed.

**Woman:** And thinner and thinner and thinner and thinner and thinner! *(He crosses to her and raises her forcibly from the chair.)*—Till finally I won’t have any body at all, and the wind picks me up in its cool white arms forever, and takes me away!

**Man:** *(presses his mouth to her throat.)* Come on back to bed with me!

**Woman:** I want to go away, I want to go away! *(He releases her and she crosses to center of room sobbing uncontrollably. She sits down on the bed. He sighs and leans out the window, the light flickering beyond him, the rain coming down harder. The Woman shivers and crosses her arms against her breasts. Her sobbing dies out but she breathes with effort. Light flickers and wind whines coldly. The Man remains leaning out. At last she says to him softly—)* Come back to bed. Come on back to bed, baby... *(He turns his lost face to her as—)*

**The Curtain Falls**
The Pronoun 'I' (a short work for the lyric theatre) was first performed at the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival on September 29, 2007. It was directed by Julie Atlas Muz; the set and costumes were designed by Jerry Stacy and Jon Pacheco; the lights were designed by Megan Tracey. The cast, in order of appearance, was as follows:

**MAD QUEEN MAY**
Julie Atlas Muz

**DOMINIQUE, her young lover and a poet**
James Tigger! Ferguson

**A YOUNG REVOLUTIONARY**
Zachary Klause

**A COURTIER**
Daniel Nardicio

**A NUMBER OF BEDRAGGLED MOBSTERS INTENT UPON THE QUEEN’S DESTRUCTION**
a dozen members of the audience

**LEADER OF THE MOB**
Adam Berry

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**QUEEN:** I am May of England, now known as Mad Queen May.
—I wonder why?

**DOMINIQUE:** And I?

**QUEEN:** I doubt that you’re more than partly why.

**DOMINIQUE:** I?

**QUEEN:** My ministers were supposed to report to me on the latest insurrection. The report was to be delivered hours ago. There’s still not a peep out of them and I can hear the rabble louder than ever, as if it were—

[A ragged young revolutionary steals into the room and conceals himself behind a tapestry beside the door, downstage right. The Queen is not unaware of his entrance, but seems unperturbed.]
QUEEN: —Now there seems to be a very, very serious insurrection among my subjects against whom they believe to be still Mad Queen May who is also Despised Queen May. I didn’t despise my subjects, not in any of my earlier impostures and certainly not in the present. I was simply immured from them, I was permitted no contact after Fair Queen May the First could not be passed off any longer as young and fair.

DOMINIQUE [rousing slightly from slumber]: Did you say “fair”?

QUEEN: Did I? Why, Yes, I did—remembering times long past... [She lowers her veil over her face and replaces the mask.]

DOMINIQUE [dreamily]: Were you ever as young and fair as I?

QUEEN: Courtiers told me so but mirrors exposed their deceit. Still—|I had young lovers which is a considerable compensation... No? dear final boy...—my doom. May of England known as Mad Queen May declined to play the game demanded of her. Chose her own rejection of politically advantageous marriages to princes who repelled me, for—gifted young courtiers, lovely of face and figure, excellent dance partners, some of whom could sing sweetly into my ear in bed at night. It didn’t matter to me that I had to apply my fingers and tongue to their privates to make them rise to the intimate occasion. I was young, once, and fair. [She returns to throne steps.] Kiss me, Dominique.

DOMINIQUE: Caress me. Play with my body.

QUEEN: Adorable little narcissus...

DOMINIQUE: Have you read my new poems?

QUEEN: Of course I did, as soon as you gave them to me.

DOMINIQUE: You haven’t commented on them.

QUEEN: By commented, don’t you mean praised?

DOMINIQUE: Naturally. Why not?
QUEEN: I thought them pretty as you. However—I have a suggestion to offer. —Delete from them all sentences that begin with the pronoun “I”.

[He shrugs. His eyes close again. Dominique snores softly. The Queen now addresses the intruder behind the tapestry.]

QUEEN: He’s fallen asleep, the subject of discussion not being himself. —Do you hear me? I mustn’t raise my voice, it might wake him up, and I’d soon be obliged to comment on his latest dalliance with the art of verse. Pretty boys, pretty boys, if I didn’t have them I would have to invent them but preferably none of the literary persuasion. —Come out from behind that arras, this isn’t the chamber scene from Hamlet and you’re much too young for the part of Polonius, Sir.

[The Young Revolutionary, dagger held behind him, emerges from behind the wall-hanging.]

QUEEN: —We offer you our compliments on your youth and beauty. We know your purpose, although the weapon’s concealed behind your back, but we’re not alarmed, somehow. It’s our ancient sovereignty, I suppose, a thing that runs in our blood. A certain chill, almost a thrill, is aroused in us by the abrupt and still not spoken-out meaning of your presence. —Are you speechless because you confront a crowned witch on a throne?

DOMINIQUE [rousing slightly]: What?

QUEEN: Nothing concerning you is nothing and so go back to sleep. [Queen May removes her slippers and descends from the raised level of the throne.] Voluntarily we approach our possible assassin, old veins inflamed by the fearless approach to— [She crosses to the Young Revolutionary with a candelabra.] —challenge of insurrection. . . . [Slowly she lifts the candelabra] Ravishing, your appearance . . . Look! Here’s Fair Queen May. [She removes the mask from her face.] —Well? What say you, Sir?

YOUNG REVOLUTIONARY: I came to assassinate a demented old hag—not you. . . .

QUEEN: Then drop the weapon you’re holding behind your back.

[He stares at her a moment. The weapon falls to the floor.]

DOMINIQUE [dreaming]: I.

QUEEN [to the Young Revolutionary]: Meanwhile I’ll find a way to get rid of that pretty little obstruction. —A critical comment on his verse should do it.

DOMINIQUE [eyes shut]: You’ve made no comment on my latest poems.

[The Queen points to her bedchamber entrance. With a slight nod, the Young Revolutionary picks up the weapon he dropped and enters the bedchamber, leaving the arched doorway uncurtained.]

DOMINIQUE [drowsily, eyes shut]: Where are—why are—

QUEEN [to the Young Revolutionary]: Since the boy never looks at my face why should I bother with this uncomfortable mask. —The charade, the bal masque is nearly over now . . . Now I offer you the secret of my young body . . . [She opens her padded robe.] If your preference is for boys, well, there’s Dominique, all but the genitalia exposed. A lovely-looking boy and his limitless narcissism—sadly amusing. —Victim, yes. We all are. —Victims . . . Our defects are not things chosen but things imposed. My defect—the eroticism that runs riot in my veins, an hereditary thing as common to my House as, say, the arrogance of the Hapsburgs and their pride . . . —collateral relatives. Name them, the Houses, I’ve got a bit of them all. But something entirely my own. [She leans forward.] I am very, very clever! —in that respect at least, allow me to say that I crown the lot of them. You’ll see! —Centuries from now this thing I have in my fingertips, this sensual stroking compulsion—would
classify me as a—“skin-freak”? —So what? [She runs her fingertips over the body of her boy-beloved.] Music! Dance—celebration of the flesh! [She throws off her padded robe and whirls about the room in an ecstastically sensual dance.] —While obscene drawings of one I'm supposed to be are carried about the streets and effigies burned—of one gone long ago.

DOMINIQUE: My new poems! Are you ready to discuss them?

QUEEN: I've advised you not to begin so many with the pronoun "I". [She toys with his curls.] Of course I realize that that would reduce their number quite drastically, yes, to a fraction of—

DOMINIQUE: All of my poems begin with the pronoun "I".

QUEEN: Oh, dear, I suspected as much, since I've yet to come across one not begun with a great gilded assertion of the first person singular, the largest and most brilliantly illuminated letter on the page, appearing not just at the beginning but scattered throughout with a truly staggering succession of the same without variation. Change the pronoun, change it at least to "we".

DOMINIQUE: Meaning include you in it?

QUEEN: No, no, I wish no part of it, dear boy. Collaboration between us? In a literary form? Disastrous, in view of the unpopularity that we both suffer equally at this time. The pronoun "we" could concern a common human condition, a confession of sharing the general human fate. This might disarm certain critics who find you unduly infatuated with the—what do they call it? Enormity of personal concern, disregard of all others on earth.

DOMINIQUE: Detractors are dishonest. —Life commences with the pronoun "I" and probably ends with it, too.

QUEEN: A passable aphorism, dear boy, but not an impregnable defense against your detractors who charge you with total self-concern, complete narcissism.

DOMINIQUE: My narcissism is true.

QUEEN: Unquestionably, sweet plaything, pretty toy of mine. [A trembling courtier enters. The Young Revolutionary retreats from view.]

COURTIER: Madam, the enemy has entered the palace grounds.

QUEEN: Overcome my guards?

COURTIER: They've all deserted you, Madam.

QUEEN: So. That's how it is, that's how it goes. Well, if our defenders do nothing, what are we to do? What action would you advise, Sir?

COURTIER: Take flight at once.

QUEEN: Once there were secret stairs and passageways through which one could take flight, but the stairs have collapsed and where do the passageways go?

DOMINIQUE: What will happen to me?

QUEEN: —That's something best not considered. [She rises.] Why am I seated on this—mockery of what I now am? [She stumbles down three steps from her throne, staggers to the casement windows—throws them open.] Smoke blowing in. The castle's on fire. Gates battered, stormed. —I've no defenders. Have you? Poor shivering boy, you haven't even a voice to answer. Title and position meant little when I had them and mean even less when lost. —I'm going to retire to my bedchamber now. Hadn't you better come with me? —The relation between us is known. —We're condemned together.

DOMINIQUE: You made the mistake of—

QUEEN: What mistake did I make? [To the Courtier.] You're excused, Sir.

DOMINIQUE [as the Courtier rapidly exits]: —Using your ridiculously inappropriate position to indulge your lunacy.
QUEEN: As grave an error as beginning too many sentences with the pronoun “I”?

DOMINIQUE: The consequences appear to have been more fatal in your case.

QUEEN: Only mine, Dominique?

DOMINIQUE: I’m still young. I can escape in disguise. Throw on a monk’s cloak and cowl—there are vestments in the chapel.

QUEEN: Which is across the courtyard.

DOMINIQUE: It’s not yet daybreak. [He runs to the opposite door.] I’ll race quickly across through the wall shadows.

QUEEN: Yes, do that, go quickly, quickly, quickly!

[He dashes out. She seizes a candelabra and rushes to the windows and throws them open.]

QUEEN [crying out]: THERE GOES MY LOVER! THERE GOES MY BELOVED DOMINIQUE!

[She holds the candelabra out the windows. The mob howls wildly below and there is a shrill, despairing cry from the fugitive boy. She closes the windows and crosses slowly to her bedchamber.]

QUEEN: —Poor treacherous young fool. He’s done with the pronoun “I”. —not just with me.

[She enters bedchamber. The Young Revolutionary springs forward—tears her regal clothes off, strips her naked.]

QUEEN: Now when they enter, they will ask “Where is she?” To that, what shall we say?

YOUNG REVOLUTIONARY: Say that she is dead.

QUEEN: Several times over.

YOUNG REVOLUTIONARY [embracing her]: How was that accomplished? By what magic?
The Chalky White Substance was first performed by the Running Sun Theatre Company on May 3, 1996 at Center Stage in New York City on a double bill with The Traveling Companion, collectively titled Williams’ Guignol. It was directed by John Uecker; the set design was by Myrna Daurie, the costume design was by Robert Guy, and the lighting design was by Zdenek Kriz. The cast, in order of appearance, was as follows:

LUKE    Sam Trammel
MARK    Greg Cornell

Time and place: a century or two after our time and possibly an almost equal time after a great thermonuclear war.

At rise: against a cyclorama of sky, which is cloudless and yet faintly blurred by tiny granules of something like old powered bones, a youth of about twenty years of age, Luke, sits upon the precipitous verge of a chasm over what is presumably a dried-up riverbed (it is called, now, Arroyo Seco) with an air of perplexed and anxious waiting. He has a pure and luminous quality in his face when the hood of his monk-like robe is thrown back. Upstage and to the left of Luke, an older man, Mark, is seated watching him with an enigmatic fixity of expression. After some moments, Mark rises and slides stealthily off his upstage perch, disappearing from sight for a minute. He reappears silently behind Luke and stoops to clasping his large, powerful hands over Luke’s eyes.

Throughout the brief play there is a wind that rises and falls, always infinitely sad in its implication as much as in its actual sound, for this is the wind that constantly blows about an earth shrivelled and desiccated as a terminally sick being.

MARK [in a prolonged, deep growl]: Whoooo?

LUKE: Youuuuuuu! — You can disguise your voice but not your hands. What makes you so late?

MARK: Boys are inquisitive, aren’t they? What, why? I wasn’t late. If you’d turned around you’d have seen me sitting back there on that boulder behind you.

LUKE: Why?

MARK: I thought to myself, “It could be the last time I’ll observe him, sitting here, waiting for me.”

LUKE: You’re planning to go away? Somewhere? Without me?

MARK: Make a departure? From you? From this precipice over the Arroyo Seco, this desolation, so beautiful through the con-
LUKE: A secret departure? One I'd not mentioned to you?

MARK: Don't you know departures can be made without warning? You don't say you're going, you don't even know you're going, then—[He snaps his fingers.]—you're gone.—Life's full of sudden departures; what a pity death isn't.

[Mark removes his hands Luke's eyes.]

MARK: Don't pull that cowl over your face.

LUKE: It protects my eyes from the dust always blowing, blowing constantly—from where?

MARK: The shrinking earth's a desert and barren mountains: in our part of it, the vicinity here, most of the chalky white stuff is provided by the Arroyo Seco, down there. I've heard that once, a few hundred years ago, there was a river in it—there's nothing drier and dustier than an arroyo in which there was once a river that's now dried up.

[Luke lowers the cowl over Mark's head. Mark draws it back up.]

LUKE: I thought you admired my eyes for being so clear, not inflamed?

MARK: This evening let me have a long look at your face, memorize it, as if I might never be seeing it again.

LUKE: You said you weren't going away and I told you I wasn't either.—I still don't understand why you kept me waiting here while you were right back there all that time?

MARK: You learn a great deal about someone you care for by observing him without him knowing you are. You notice whether he waits indifferenty, or with increasing concern as it gets later, oh, you learn many things you'd never know otherwise.

LUKE: What did you observe you didn't already know?

MARK: More and more tension in you as the sky started to fade.

LUKE: You know I'm afraid of the dark when I'm alone at night. If it had gotten a bit darker I would have started home and missed our meeting.

MARK: Fear, that's a bad thing to feel.

LUKE: A natural thing to feel. Now that women are so much fewer than men, there are bands of nomads that will seize a boy after dark and—

MARK: I know. Ravage him. And when their lusts are satiated, they leave no witness, just the lifeless body.—Lean back.

[Luke leans into his embrace.]

MARK: It always amazes me, the smoothness of your skin under the robe, not granulated at all by the chalky white substance.

LUKE: I know you like the touch of smooth skin so I keep mine smooth for your pleasure.

MARK: How do you do that?

LUKE: Before I go to meet you here, I bathe myself and then immediately I put on my robe.

MARK: You bathe once a day, before you come here to meet me, not just at night as we're ordered to do?

LUKE: I bathe twice, once for you and again at night, Mark.

MARK: Bathe twice? Did you say twice? But that would mean that you disregard the water restrictions as if they didn't exist. —You know, this confirms my suspicion that you have another protector, one in a high position in the regime, you little—cheater, yes, you get by with violating the restrictions because you give yourself at night to someone of great power among the—
LUKE: I’ve never had more than one protector at a time. That one protector now is you.

MARK: Before me, you had others.

LUKE: They were necessary. I hardly remember my parents. I’ll tell you something that’ll amuse you. On the wall at my place, I have a colored picture of the lady that was called the Madonna.

MARK: Those old mythological pictures are a rarity now and could be sold to the Center for special privileges, you know.

LUKE: I’d rather keep the picture on my wall.

MARK: What were you going to tell me that will amuse me. Something about the picture of the Madonna?

LUKE: Once I had a protector. When I woke up one morning, he was standing there staring at the picture. He said, “Is this your mother?”

MARK: Thought that the Madonna was your mother . . .

LUKE: The funny thing is that I said, “Yes, that is, that was my mother.” —Women were a comfort. —Why are they disappearing? Do they succumb more quickly to the chalk all about us now?

MARK: The earth’s not able to support its shrinking population. There’s little food, and even less water. I’ve heard that a man will use a woman a while and then, when she’s no longer desirable to him, not as she was before, he’s likely to destroy her. You see, Luke, the battle between people that happened so long ago that it’s barely recorded, I understand that it had a brutalizing effect. Do you understand me?

LUKE: Brutalizing—?

MARK: Opposite effect from the care of a Madonna.

LUKE: So that now we have only each other.

MARK: Have I told you that I have a woman at home?

LUKE: A mother? A Madonna?

[Mark laughs harshly.]

MARK: No, what remains of a girl, the remnant of her, used too much, not able now to excite me nor even to—serve . . . only to stagger about, looking more and more frightened. I suspect she knows.

LUKE: You suspect she knows what?

MARK: That her withering, frightened look, her choking sounds at night—

LUKE: From the disease? She has it?

MARK: She’s breathed too much of the chalk. I think she knows that soon it will be necessary to relieve myself of her presence in my place.

LUKE: I don’t think you’ll do that. No, you couldn’t do that.

MARK: You haven’t sat for an hour observing me waiting for you and so you know me less.

LUKE: Since I know you completely—

MARK: Are you sure that you do?

LUKE: I feel secure with you, Mark. And as for the woman you’ve never mentioned before, have you told her about us?

MARK: I say nothing to her now but, “Oh, are you still here? Go lie down in that corner over there and don’t cough and don’t crawl toward me.”

LUKE: You’re making all this up, I know it’s not true.

MARK: You know so little, boy. You know dangerously little. You don’t know enough to distrust.

LUKE: Oh, I distrust them all except you, Mark.
MARK: That might be a mistake. The worn-out girl at my place, she—trusted me once as you do. But when I go home tonight, if she's still there—out she'll go, I'll throw the door open, and kick her living or dead body into the wind she can't stand against, that will sweep her away and bury her in white dust. No, don't trust. So. —You said you bathe twice a day, before you come here to meet me and again at night, violating the water restrictions?

LUKE: When I was very young—

MARK: Younger than now?

LUKE: Little more than a child, I had a protector, my first, who was very clever, very wise, at secret, mechanical things. Did I say that right?

MARK: Perfectly. Go on.

LUKE: One day he put his ear to the earth.

MARK: In or out of the house?

LUKE: Both in and out, and he discovered that not far under the earth running under the house there was water, he said a stream of it, not wide, not deep, but—

MARK: Ohhh . . .

LUKE: He was a strong man, he dug and dug down to it and built steps down with stones.

MARK: But when the house is inspected by the—

LUKE: Inspectors, no. You see, the opening to the steps is covered over with an old, dry animal skin, and even if the inspectors looked under this ragged leather—you know their eyes are bad, half-blinded by the chalk—they wouldn't notice the width of the cracks.

MARK: By which you can lift the cover to the underground spring of water? —How very foolish of you!
LUKE: But I know something, too.

MARK: What?

LUKE: You've told me how completely you love me.

MARK: A thing that I also told the woman when she was desirable to me.

LUKE: She doesn't still attract you. I do. Don't I? Mark?

MARK: You've put in my possession a secret that to keep from the authorities would expose me to the same penalty you're exposed to. You know what such penalties are?

LUKE: A term of imprisonment, but—

MARK: A long, long term, and even if you're alive when it expires, you'd be—unrecognizable, Luke.

LUKE: I'd be disfigured, you mean?

MARK: By more than time, by more than the terminal effect of the chalky white substance.

[He clamps his arms tighter about Luke.]

LUKE: What are you, why are you—!

MARK: I must deliver you to them and repeat your confession and—receive the bounty. Did you know there's a bounty offered for turning in a person who violates the laws, the restrictions? The authorities regard him with more respect, he's given a title, sometimes, and his licenses are extended. The inspectors pay his house a—respectful visit, they smile at him and say, "The place needs some improvements in keeping with your new position. We'll see to that right away."

LUKE: The authorities are vicious.

MARK: I understand that's always been their nature, even before the people of the earth divided into two or three hostile parts that battled for ownership and rule with the great explosive devices.

—Who won? —Nobody. NOBODY!

[The word "nobody" is echoed, after a couple of moments, from the opposite side of the chasm.]

MARK: —Hear that? Know what that was? As if somebody called back? That was an echo. So many of the old words have dropped out of use and aren't known anymore.

[Pause.]

LUKE: The authorities are corrupt but we don't have to imitate them.

MARK: To save our skins we do.

LUKE: Would they still be worth saving?

MARK: I understand that there used to be considerations called moral. And for these considerations, morality, a thing such as the betrayal of someone you love, would be held in contempt. But that was once, long before I remember. Stop struggling. I'm hard and strong. What's the use? You can't escape. Light's faded. We must get going.

LUKE: Where? The cave? Or my place?

MARK: Neither this evening, Luke. We're going to the cabildo where you will stay confined till long out-used, to the end of your time. —TIME!

[Pause. Then an echo of the word "time."]

LUKE: Then kill me. Kill me, Mark!

MARK: And sacrifice the reward?

[The wind rises. Luke thrashes impotently in the grasp of Mark.]

MARK: Call him, the great protector called God. No breath? I'll call Him for you. PRO-TEC-TOR!
Pause. Then an echo of the word “pro-tec-tor.”

MARK: What a huge creature, what an immense beast He must have been to have left such enormous white bones when He died... Endlessly long ago, the bones of Him now turned to powder that blows and blows about His broken—creation...

[Mark bears Luke futilely struggling down the upstage declivity. The stage darkens.]

THE END

THE DAY ON WHICH A MAN DIES

(AN OCCIDENTAL NOH PLAY)

For Yukio Mishima,
in token of long friendship
and much admiration.
Well, there you are. Four by Tenn. If you will indulge me a reflection, Modern drama is a synthesis of 19th century Realism in which characters like those of Ibsen have the ability to change their lives and the Expressionist observation that reality is in the mind. Post Modern plays combine 19th century Naturalism in which characters are trapped by their heredity and environment and can't escape and the Expressionist observation that reality is in the mind. So I may well be the first post modernist, but I think this a false duality concocted for clarity of definition. I don't believe we are "trapped" by our biology and upbringin' but we can't escape them either. Our crazy mothers, ineflectual fathers, and desperate sisters, our addictive propensities for drugs, promiscuity, power or prestige, our asthma, arthritis, or athletic prowess or lack thereof are constantly with us, constant reminders of our inadequacies. They are the governing dynamic of humility on our inflated sense of self-importance. Our failures are more important than our successes for they define our humanity. Without our failures, we would not be subject to the kindness of strangers. If the entire world were an assembly of romanticized hopes, absurd egocentric babble, and sadistic power plays, we'd certainly deserve the disasters we create. But that is not all the world.

Indeed, we are all strangers locked in our heads. But in admitting our inadequacies we ask for comfort, for mercy that "falls like the gentle rain upon the earth below." We can listen to the gentleness of everyday words and accept the kind touch of a stranger's body as it invades our mind and elicits the chemistry of life that makes us one in a moment that never lasts but may be endlessly renewed.