

## FOREWORD

In a chapter devoted to Tennessee Williams in her study *The Trip to Echo Spring: On Writers and Drinking*, the critic Olivia Laing wrestles with the incongruity between the voice evident in Williams's journals, which tends to be self-absorbed and even petty, and in his plays, which are defined in large part by his generous sympathy for his characters. She concludes that a reader perusing Williams's journals must keep in mind that "one has entered no more than a single room in what might be called the mansion of the self" (111). It is a wonderful metaphor, and it is particularly useful in considering Williams's work more broadly: for those who know him as a playwright—the author of now-canonical plays such as *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, for example—encountering Williams's short fiction can sometimes feel like slipping up a back staircase of Williams's "mansion," opening doors to rooms that are just as likely to thrill us with their familiarity as they are to disorient us with their dissonance. We are pleased to spend time wandering among these rooms in this issue of the *Journal of the Short Story in English*.

As Williams's *Collected Stories* makes clear even in its Table of Contents, Williams saw himself as a short story writer throughout his life, from the publication of his first story in 1928 at the age of sixteen until the time of his death in 1982. Perhaps predictably, the stories range in quality: many of the first ones bear the marks of amateurism while the final ones show the same evidence of decline as his plays do—the result of alcohol, pills and despair. Yet, when Williams was at his best, his work stands up to the scrutiny of time. As Gore Vidal observes in his introduction to *Collected Stories*, Williams "has something rather more rare than mere genius. He has a narrative tone of voice that is totally compelling" (xx). Williams himself recognized the value of his

fiction, telling oral historian Studs Terkel, “Sometimes I think my stories..., really, are better writing than my plays.”

Williams saw the boundaries between genres as porous: often, he used stories as a way of entering a narrative that he would later expand and explore in a play. His work in fiction also almost certainly bleeds into the lyrical, sometimes lengthy stage directions that, while hidden from audiences, speak to readers of his plays. And, undoubtedly, just as Williams was committed to the craft of playwriting, he approached fiction with both ambition and seriousness. Vidal recalled that during a period in which they shared a writing room, “if there was no play to be finished or new dialogue to be sent round to the theater, [Williams] would open a drawer and take out the draft of a story already written and begin to rewrite it.” Once Vidal caught Williams working on a story that had already been published, and when he questioned the value of the exercise, Williams simply replied, “Well, it’s obviously not finished” (xx).

In this commitment to his work, as Vidal puts it elsewhere, Williams achieves “a tone of voice the like of which had not been heard since Mark Twain.” Vidal credits Williams’s stories as serving as evidence of “a comic genius within a dark universe that the innocent persist in calling home sweet home” (*Point to Point Navigation* 114). It is also the nature of home that the contributions in this issue of *JSSE* endeavor to refine and redefine while reflecting upon Williams’s art of fiction. The guest editors, Sophie Maruéjols-Koch and Laura Torres Zúñiga, have gathered work from scholars who consider a range of Williams’s short fiction, from experimental ephemera to stories he labored over, from “weird tales” to those rooted in autobiographical elements. The contributors also carried out archival work and present not only thematic readings but also reflections on Williams in translation. A never-before-published poem is included as well as a story found among his papers, in both cases showcasing the author’s versatility. This issue features an interview with Williams scholar Emmanuel Vernadakis, who reflects not only on Williams’s short fiction but also on the literary affiliations between Williams and Oscar Wilde, and on the literature of the American South and Irish literature. Finally, the guest editors present a bibliography of primary and secondary sources that will be helpful to future scholars.

It is worth noting that there is an undeniable pleasure for us in the creation of this issue. We are both unabashed fans of Williams’s work, and, like so many of his readers, we tend to approach his biography with both interest and sympathy. Catherine lived in St. Louis for many years, and on occasion would pay tribute to Williams at Cavalry Cemetery, where he is buried alongside his mother, Edwina, his sister, Rose, and his brother, Dakin. Cavalry is a lovely, tree-filled cemetery—Kate Chopin, another master of the short story, is buried there as well—but it is impossible not to feel a sense of injury in Williams’s final resting place. He had stated quite clearly that he wanted to be cremated and spread at sea; certainly, if he had to be buried, one can presume he would be

conflicted about being returned to St. Louis, a city that held painful memories for him. There is a bit of cruelty, too, in that Cavalry abuts Bellefontaine Cemetery, an equally historic but decidedly more energetic place. Bellefontaine, the resting place of St. Louis beer barons and the explorer William Clark, among others, has been reenvisioned as something of a community space: there are themed trolley tours, seasonal 5k races, and even regular “Sips, Strolls, and Souls” events. When at Cavalry, it is hard not to conclude that Tennessee Williams ought to be at the party next door.

Significantly, though, in his final resting place, Williams is not forgotten. His headstone is often decorated with mementos—coins, stones, and bottles, the last serving as evidence that fans have “poured one out” for him. There is something deeply pleasing in this evidence of Williams’s readers seeking him out, and it is satisfying to think of this special issue of *JSSE* as another act of homage. By considering Williams’s oft-neglected short fiction, the international scholars included here invite another return to Williams, one that we hope you will take up.

Gérald Préher  
*Université d’Artois, JSSE Editor*

Catherine Seltzer  
*Virginia Commonwealth University, JSSE North American Editor*

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