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Tennessee Williams and "the Arkansas Ozark Way"

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Tennessee Williams seems never to have lived in or even paid an extended visit to Arkansas.[1] Yet the self-proclaimed "Natural State"—both its delta region and the Ozarks—exerted a particular hold on his imagination, figuring prominently in two of his earliest and sexually most troubling short stories, as well as in the last story published in his lifetime. In "Twenty-seven Wagons Full of Cotton,"[2] "One Arm,"[3] and "The Killer Chicken and the Closet Queen,"[4] Arkansas represents a dark yet liberating sexuality. This sexuality is presented as a force of nature—rough, masterful, dangerous, yet deeply fulfilling. Arkansas thus signifies for Williams a raw, natural state of unencumbered desire, opposed to the artificial social norms supported by religion and commerce; it is more of an imagined construct for Williams—a sexual fabulation—than an actual place. When viewed in this light, much of Williams's work may be seen as a romantic plea for the modern world to return to what is termed, in one story, "the Arkansas Ozark way" (*CS* 569).

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Williams countered his mother's and sister's dismay over the initially comic, but progressively raw and disturbing, sexual contest that occurs in "Twenty-seven Wagons Full of Cotton" by dismissing the story as "an affair between a crude Arkansas couple" (*SL* 1:90). That the story meant considerably more to Williams, however, is suggested by the fact that over a twenty-six-year period he reworked it into a one-act play of the same title (completed in 1943 and published in 1945), which provided the basis of his script for the controversial 1956 film *Baby Doll* starring Karl Malden, Eli Wallach, and Carroll Baker. The film script, in turn, was converted into a full-length stage play titled *Tiger Tail*, which premiered in Gainesville, Florida, in 1979. Thus, while the story may initially have been written to depict "an affair between a crude Arkansas couple," the liaison clearly contains something central to Williams's imagination. "Twenty-seven Wagons" is Williams's first use of a specifically Arkansan setting, and the short story itself would remain the only one of his works to be set entirely in the Arkansas delta.

¶3 The key word in Williams's dismissal of the story is also the most telling. Arkansas proved thematically significant to Williams precisely because it was so "crude" or raw. In "Twenty-seven Wagons," an initially lazy, playful attempt at sexual seduction is acted out against the ginning of raw cotton into a substance more refined. The raw cotton stuff fills the air and combines with the heat of the cloudless September afternoon to create the atmosphere of heavy, languorous sensuality that colors the story's action. As Mrs. Meighan and the syndicate plantation manager sit together in a swing on the front porch of her house waiting for her husband to finish ginning the twenty-seven wagon loads of cotton that the neighbor has brought for processing, "a fine lint of cotton … float[s] through the air" (*CS* 43), sticking to Mrs. Meighan's sweat-dampened skin. Repeated references to the woman's extraordinarily ample size ("Jake says that I'm the biggest woman in this part of the state," *CS* 45) conclude in a comparison of her body to the cotton over which she lazily watches.

> The woman looked vaguely out across the country. The miles of white cotton, voraciously sucking the life from the soil, seemed to have left it desiccated and dull as an old woman at whose bosom children have sucked again and again and on whose body men have lain till her breasts hang dry as locust pods in the summer wind and her emaciated limbs are crumpled beneath her swollen belly. The woman herself was not like the country but like the cotton. She had grown big upon the land. Like the cotton, too, she had reached her September season. She was full and bursting with ripeness. . . . (*CS* 46, ellipses Williams's own)

¶4 "Twenty-seven Wagons" borders initially on being a sexual comedy of manners. Drugged into "a voluptuous passivity" (*CS* 46) by the swaying of the swing and coming down from "the stimulating effect of several cokes drunk during the long, blazing afternoon" (*CS* 43), Mrs. Meighan is at first indifferent to, or barely conscious of, the sexual overtures of her visitor. The thought of sexual congress surfaces in her indirectly delivered stream-of-consciousness, however, only to be rejected as too physically grotesque to be taken seriously.

> She guessed it must be the heat that was getting her like this. It certainly couldn't be anything else. She never had liked little men, especially when they acted fresh. And this little man from the syndicate plantation was hardly more than half her size. Why it would be just the same as . . .
>
> A picture so ludicrous entered her mind that she chuckled out loud. (*CS* 44–45)

The reader is invited to share the comically grotesque image of a "little man" ("no bigger than a flea") physically conjoined with a corpulent woman ("no bigger than an elephant") that reduces the parties themselves to "uncontrollable" laughter (*CS* 45). Alerted at the opening of the story to Jake Meighan's having burned down the syndicate plantation's processing plant the night before in order to divert their business to his own less prosperous facility (*CS* 43), the reader might initially view the little man as a devious figure seeking to avenge the arson by cuckolding the arsonist. Although Jake may think that he has shrewdly pulled off a coup, his daylong preoccupation with ginning the plantation syndicate's cotton actually provides the little man an opportunity to trespass upon Jake's own temporarily unprotected "property"—that is, his wife's body.

¶5 But sexual violence simmers beneath the comedy, breaking through with a ferocity as unexpected as it is sudden. The seduction takes on an increasingly darker note as the little man uses his riding crop initially to swat flies from Mrs. Meighan's leg, and then sadistically to raise welts on her ample flesh. "You play too rough!" she weakly protests (*CS* 46), while actually finding herself oddly stimulated by the sensation. Paradoxically, only when he begins aggressively to tickle her does she understand the depth of his desire and summon the energy to bolt from the porch swing and seek safety indoors. Despite her attempt to withstand his assault, the little man pursues her into the house where the window shades have been drawn to resist the heat of the midday sun. The story concludes with Mrs. Meighan being prodded down a darkened hallway to the bedroom, "a tremendous, sobbing Persephone" (*CS* 48) driven by Hades to the underworld. "'Please, for God's sake,' she whimpered, 'don't hurt me!'" (*CS* 48).

¶6 The story leaves the reader uncertain as to the outcome of Mrs. Meighan's encounter with the syndicate plantation's manager. The little man's intentions—like the extent to which Mrs. Meighan is willing to participate in a sexual encounter turned vaguely sadomasochistic—are disturbingly ambivalent.[5] Williams suggests, however, that Mrs. Meighan experiences a sexual awakening that is as terrifying as it is exciting, and that this is in keeping with the cycle of nature in the Arkansas delta.

¶7

The word "full" in the story's title suggests the richness or amplitude of the delta region, while summoning the image of a parade of wagons overflowing with the area's most valuable produce. But cotton must be ginned, a violent action by which the raw fruits of the earth are refined. So too must Mrs. Meighan—whose body, the reader remembers, was "like the cotton"—be "ginned." The little man drives her down the hallway of the house towards the bedroom in an action that recalls his driving the twenty-seven wagons full of cotton to Jake's mill earlier in the day. And the sharp swishing of the riding crop against Mrs. Meighan's flesh vaguely parallels the action of the plant's machines as they gin the cotton to remove its seeds and compress the rough stuff into a bale. Like the cotton, Mrs. Meighan has grown fat off the land, depleting the soil. The story suggests that the little man will, in turn, deplete her, leaving her—like the land—"desiccated and dull" (*CS* 46). Like Persephone, abducted from the world of light to spend half the year underground in darkness, Mrs. Meighan is initiated by the little man into a sexual rite that terrifies as well as gratifies, one that is told in terms of the Arkansas delta region's natural cycle of growth, harvest, and depletion. At the story's end, one cycle of Mrs. Meighan's life is concluding even as the next—an uncertain one—begins.

¶8 As John M. Clum notes (while commenting on another of Williams's short stories), in Williams's world "[t]he fulfillment of desire is death. Christianity offers a pale symbolic approximation of the Dionysian sacrifice at the heart of real passion" ("Gender" 74). "Twenty-seven Wagons" may indeed be the story of an encounter between two crude Arkansas figures, but it is a story of "real passion" as well, one that ushers the reader into the Dionysian world of dark, painful, crushing desire. The fullness of life demands darkness as well as light, seasons of fallowness as well as seasons of fruition, sexual darkness and violence as well as comic incongruity. Mrs. Meighan's sexual awakening is, thus, as disturbing as it is comically grotesque. Her release into sensual languor and her possible gratification at being sexually desired by a man other than her husband are accompanied by pain, terror, and loss. And such a Dionysian rite is grounded, Williams suggests, in the natural cycle of Arkansas' delta soil.

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¶9 A similar sexual darkness colors the story "One Arm." Twenty-year-old Oliver Winemiller is a sexually vibrant male who, having lost his right arm in an automobile accident, has been reduced to prostituting himself to other men in order to survive financially. Like Brick Pollitt, the protagonist of Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) who stumbles about his room on a crutch following a drunken accident—and like Chance Wayne, the paid companion in *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1956) whose hair is thinning and who will be castrated before the play's end—Oliver is a golden boy whose physical decline or injury dramatizes the extent to which he has been crippled emotionally by a devastating experience of loss. All three men are haunted by memories of the world of possibilities that lay before them when their bodies were whole. Late afternoon every day, for example, Brick begins his slow decline into an alcoholic stupor as he waits for

> [t]his click that I get in my head that makes me peaceful. I got to drink till I get it. It's just a mechanical thing, something like a—like a—like a [. . .] Switch clicking off in my head, turning the hot light off and the cool night on and—[. . .]—all of a sudden there's—peace! (*Cat* 935–36)

¶10 Similarly, Oliver has numbed his senses through repeated, emotionless sexual contacts, dulling his consciousness so that he cannot feel in the loss of his arm the frustration of his ambitions as a boxer. Although

his reckless generosity may stem, in part, from an attempt to demean himself, he is surprised in his last days to learn the extent to which he has liberated many of his partners from their own prisons of anxiety and self-doubt.[6]

¶11 I disagree with the conclusion reached by Brian M. Peters, the story's most recent commentator. In "One Arm," he asserts, "homosexuality emerges as a bizarre, even occult practice. And by linking homosexuality with prostitution, Williams suggests that queer desire is tantamount to sexual deviancy" (113). Rather, in a world where sexual desire has been socially "tamed," the access to sexual freedom and "wildness" offered by Arkansas-born Oliver must be dismissed as "deviant" by those who have acquiesced in their own neutering. Whatever shock the story offers the reader is due more to the reader's tameness than to Oliver's supposed deviancy. In prison awaiting execution following the murder of one of his customers, however, Oliver begins to receive letters from former johns testifying to the life-affirming experience that he allowed them to know through sexual communion. The young man dies in the electric chair with these letters pressed tightly between his thighs.

¶12 Significantly, Oliver, whom the reader first meets plying his trade on New Orleans's Canal Street, is originally from "the cotton fields of Arkansas" (*CS* 176). This delta origin suggests that he is a force of nature. However, his natural beauty is so perfect that, paradoxically, he seems a work of art, the loss of his right arm actually enhancing his resemblance to a damaged piece of sculpture recovered from antiquity. The story emphasizes the "uncommon excitement he was able to stir" in others (*CS* 176), his sexual allure exerting such a strong gravitational pull that he "stood as a planet among the moons of their [his admirers'] longing, fixed in his orbit while they circled about him" (*CS* 178). Chief among his satellites is a young Lutheran minister who visits Oliver in prison the day before his execution, and who associates "the baby-faced killer" (*CS* 183) with a golden panther encountered, years earlier, in a zoo, and about which he was dreaming when he experienced his first adolescent involuntary ejaculation. Although "a sign on its cage had admonished visitors to keep their distance," the youth felt "an unfathomable longing that moved through all of his body" (*CS* 184). In Oliver, the minister rediscovers "the innocence in the danger" (*CS* 185) that he first knew in the golden panther.

¶13 Thus, like the little man in "Twenty-seven Wagons Full of Cotton," Oliver offers to those who come within his orbit an experience of "joy" that is disturbingly "dark" (*CS* 179). The sexually repressed, physically frail cleric finds Oliver's robust sexuality to be as seductive as it is dangerous, as alluring as it is threatening. The scene in which Oliver—who is perspiring heavily in the close confines of his unventilated prison cell—asks the minister to wipe the sweat from his naked back suggests the ambivalence at the heart of the sexual challenge that the one-armed hustler offers the world: his sweat is something crude, yet its smell is not offensive (*CS* 187).

¶14 In Williams's work, as John Clum notes,

> it is the man who is the object of the gaze and of sexual desire, not the woman. Without being able to name it, this eroticization of the beautiful, sexy male was no doubt one of the shocking, supposedly immoral aspects of Williams's work that so outraged conservative, homophobic critics. ("Gender" 76)

"One Arm" is the first published instance of Williams's homoerotic scopophilia and, significantly, the man whose physical presence arouses such desire is from Arkansas. The story repeatedly asks the reader to imagine Oliver naked or near-naked. Standing on the street corner waiting to be approached by a customer, Oliver "looked like a broken statue of Apollo, and he had also the coolness and impassivity of a stone figure" (*CS* 175).

Greek sculptures of Apollo invariably depicted the god naked, and it is Oliver's "coolness and impassivity of a stone figure" that licenses the appreciative, even intrusive, gaze of others. Even clothed, the hustler's stance invites onlookers to consider his naked limbs, for no matter the season, "Oliver remained in his skivvy shirt and his dungarees which had faded nearly white from long wear and much washing, and held to his body as smooth as the clothes of sculpture" (*CS* 175). In the close confines of Oliver's prison cell, the young Lutheran minister nearly suffers a heart attack when Oliver "arched his body and pulled his shorts further down. The narrow and sculptural flanks of the youth were exposed" (*CS* 187). In effect the hustler allows the nervous man of the cloth a *visio dei* similar to Moses's, who was allowed to see unveiled the "back parts" or buttocks of God.[7] Even in death, Oliver is the object of other men's worshipful gazes, the story concluding with a group of medical students studying Oliver's corpse which, unclaimed after the execution, has been relegated to the state medical facility for dissection. "One Arm" documents a homoerotic engagement that is as threatening or intimidating as it is liberating. However much male onlookers, embarrassed by their sexual response to Oliver's body, try to look away from him in shamed self-consciousness, his beauty commands their gaze and releases their most deeply repressed desires.

¶15 Oliver Winemiller thus represents a subversive male sexuality, one that disturbs the young Lutheran minister as surely as Williams understood that his story would disturb the casual reader. The professional man of the cloth proves to be, not spiritually superior to Oliver (as he assumes himself to be as he enters the condemned man's cell), but physically and emotionally in need of Oliver's saving touch.[8] To Williams's thinking, Oliver offers a far greater physical communion and spiritual exuberance than any organized religion can provide. And in Williams's imagined universe, such sculpted perfection coupled with dangerous animal ferocity can only rise out of "the cotton fields of Arkansas."

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¶16 Oliver's "narcotic touch" (*CS* 185) recalls the effects of the little man on the cola-bedrugged and heat-exhausted Mrs. Meighan. In "The Killer Chicken and the Closet Queen," sixteen-year-old Clove liberally—indeed aggressively—dispenses Quaaludes to relax the willfully self-ignorant Stephen Ashe and Stephen's censorious, tight-fisted, politically conservative mother. This progression from a metaphorical to a literal drug-induced euphoria provided by a sexually provocative male from Arkansas parallels a progression from threatened violence to cold-blooded murder in Williams's three stories associated with the region: the little man "plays rough" with an ambivalently acquiescent Mrs. Meighan, while Oliver kills without premeditation a wealthy man who was exploiting him sexually; but Clove breezily strategizes with a complicit Stephen to murder the latter's millionaire mother for financial gain. As the violence grows more intentional from story to story, Williams's social satire becomes more pronounced. The tone alters from a "crude" comedy of manners that turns suddenly threatening in "Twenty-seven Wagons," to a disturbing meditation on sexual repression as a form of spiritual imprisonment in "One Arm," to an outrageous black comedy in "Killer Chicken" in which the violence is as blunt—yet, curiously, as unthreatening—as that found in a children's cartoon. Significantly, in this final story, the most free-spirited of the three, Williams specifies what is to be gained by living "the Arkansas Ozark way."

¶17 "The Killer Chicken and the Closet Queen," possibly Williams's most wickedly funny sexual comedy of manners, remains among the author's least examined texts. Dennis Vannatta groups it among those works of short fiction in which "the wit and the stories are shallow and more irritating than engaging"; "The Killer

Chicken and the Closet Queen," he complains, "is every bit as bad as the title would lead one to believe" (69). The story is implicitly dismissed elsewhere as the product of Williams's own debilitating dependence on alcohol, barbiturates, and the kindness of a particular class of strangers: paid male escorts. In its own way, however, the story is as politically engaged as the early *Not about Nightingales* (written 1938–39) and the relatively late *The Red Devil Battery Sign* (1975), and is best read alongside the novella *The Knightly Quest* (1966) as a dark satire of the self-indulgent cruelty and venal hypocrisy of the American social-political power elite.

¶18 A narrative of artful evasions, crude disclosures, and disturbing revelations, "The Killer Chicken" challenges the sexual-political-fiscal hypocrisy of society's most self-satisfied. Written in the aftermath of President Richard M. Nixon's resignation, the story associates sympathy for a mendacious Nixon with self-serving venality and cold indifference to the needs of others.[9] Fifty-nine-year-old senior law firm partner Nathaniel Webster "the Fifth," for example, "suffered a stroke the day of President Nixon's resignation and another on the night of his wedding to his nephew's adolescent widow from the Arkansas Ozarks" (*CS* 552). And Stephen's mother, who feigns patrician ignorance of her financial affairs while in actuality watching the market like a hawk, expresses dismay that "nobody's net worth is what it is on paper, not since they forced Richard Nixon to resign and put that peanut-vendor in the White House" (*CS* 557).

¶19 However, while Webster and his firm are quick to take the moral high road and fire a junior accountant "on suspicion of homosexual inclinations, a suspicion based on nothing more than the fact that he was still unmarried at thirty-one and was sharing an apartment with a younger man whose photograph had appeared in a magazine advertisement for Marlboro cigarettes" (*CS* 553), they apparently see nothing morally offensive about a fifty-nine-year-old "hound dog" (*CS* 554) marrying his nephew's "adolescent widow." That Maude comes "from the Arkansas Ozarks" seems only to compound the crassness of the situation, suggesting that an act of statutory rape is being socially condoned as "marriage," an underage but unsettlingly astute girl from an economically deprived region having been appropriated sexually by first one and then another male member of a wealthy, socially powerful northeastern family. It is absurd that Webster should object to his teenage brother-in-law, Clove, "peddling his goodies" (*CS* 553) when Webster's own marriage to Maude is nothing more than legalized prostitution: Webster is simply paying with a wedding ring for the right to enjoy his Arkansas Lolita. Likewise, Mrs. Ashe is willing to overlook her son's supposed extramarital relationship with a woman named Sue Coffin as long as this fictitious mistress "is connected with the Nantucket Island Coffins with which all the socially acceptable Coffins are connected" (*CS* 558). The sexual hypocrisy of the wealthy is reaffirmed every time a partner pats Stephen on the buttocks as one by one they take him aside to discuss the likelihood of his being made partner, for these are the same men who dismissed the junior accountant who was merely suspected of homosexuality (*CS* 552, 553).

¶20 As deplorable as their hypocrisy is, however, Williams is more particularly concerned with the extent to which the sexually insecure Stephen not only accepts his mother's and colleagues' double standard, but practices it himself. As a closeted homosexual, Stephen is reduced to spending his evenings sitting in a vibrating chair in "a state that verged upon entrancement" (*CS* 554) while looking at old Tarzan movies on television in the hopes of catching sight of Boy's shapely backside (*CS* 556). He studiously ignores opportunities to talk about gay matters with his colleague Jerry Smythe, no matter "how frequently Smythe's hands would brush against his thighs and, once or twice, even his crotch" as the two men undress in the cubicle they share at the

Ivy League Club before their daily workout (*CS* 553). Stephen hesitates to respond to his colleague's implicit overtures for fear that

> Smythe's freedom of speech and behavior with him were not a kind of espionage. It was altogether possible that Eggleston and Larrabee [two senior partners] were using Smythe's closer familiarity with Stephen to delve a bit more into his, Stephen's private life. It was more than altogether possible that this was the case. (*CS* 553)

His fear of self-exposure or of entrapment by others is so powerful that in his conversations with colleagues he strikes a pose of "affected indifference" (*CS* 554) or gives "a totally false little chuckle of incomprehension" (*CS* 555) when discussing the very sexual issues that most vitally interest him. In a particularly destructive and self-defeating act that stems from his inability to acknowledge his desires either to others or, apparently, even to himself, Stephen formally proposes the dismissal of the junior accountant suspected of homosexuality lest the firm be found guilty by association "with this sort of deviation from the norm" (*CS* 554).

¶21 As strong as Stephen's impulse to conceal his sexuality may be, his repressed desires prove even stronger, nearly breaking through to the surface during a drive to the airport to meet his mother on one of her periodic visits to New York. Having learned, at the last moment, that her arrival has been delayed until the following morning, Stephen relaxes on the way home from the airport by pouring himself a drink from the courtesy bar in the rear of a hired limousine. Suddenly conscious of "the chauffeur's elegantly tapered back" (*CS* 559), Stephen lowers the soundproof glass panel and engages the driver in small talk. Something "soothing, almost caressing about the voice of the young Italian chauffeur" (*CS* 560) lures Stephen into confessing to the sympathetic stranger his frustrations with his mother's overbearing, inconsiderate behavior.

¶22 Reading only too clearly the nature and cause of Stephen's complaint, the chauffeur pulls the limousine onto a darkened street and joins his inebriated passenger in the back seat. Stephen is at first excited to discover that the chauffeur "was not only young and good-looking but there was a redolence about him, a musky fragrance" (*CS* 560). Overstimulated by both the alcohol and the chauffeur's physical presence, Stephen finds himself in danger of passing out. He slumps against the chauffeur, his head in the latter's lap. Soon recovering his composure, he withdraws into the frigid hauteur that he has learned from his mother and feigns outrage with the chauffeur's sexual familiarity. "Young man, I believe you are taking liberties with my person!" (*CS* 561), Stephen sniffs archly, initiating the following telling exchange:

> "The person you are is a goddamn closet queen."
>
> "And what is a closet queen, that curious expression?"
>
> "A queen in the closet with a broomstick up his butt," replied the chauffeur, slamming the back door shut and returning to the wheel. (*CS* 561)

¶23 The scene reveals Stephen to be like so many sexually repressed and emotionally overwrought female characters and closeted homosexual characters in Williams's work. Like the young Lutheran minister in "One Arm" or Alma Winemiller in *Summer and Smoke*, for example, Stephen suffers heart palpitations caused, Williams suggests, by emotional extremes that are denied any satisfactory outlet of expression. Made tense by the impending arrival of his overly critical parent, Stephen begins the limousine ride by taking his own pulse and is alarmed to discover "how it was racing. One hundred and twenty a minute!" (*CS* 559). And, like the minister in "One Arm," Miss Edith Jelkes in the short story "The Night of the Iguana" (1948), and even to some

extent Blanche DuBois, Stephen is a creature of "unsettled components" (*CS* 230) who, at a critical moment, resists the very sexual gratification that he so ardently craves when it comes in a form too bold or crude.

¶24 The closet door of Stephen's world is blown open by the liberating sexual frankness of Webster's new bride, Maude, and her "sweetest, cutest little sixteen-year-old" kid brother, Clove (*CS* 555). Maude's directness unsettles Stephen precisely because everyone else in their circle is so patently dishonest. She recognizes, for example, that although Stephen is thirty-five, he is "unnerved" to have his "Mom coming up to check on" him (*CS* 563). And she is the only person in the story to challenge his feigned naïveté about homosexual matters, accusing him point blank of "playin' dumb" (CS 555). Clove, conversely, "had a definite attraction to deception as a practice in life" (*CS* 563)—but the story implies that he learned early in life that those who are socially or economically vulnerable must rely upon deception to resist being exploited by the cold-hearted. Everything in life is a trade-off, Clove instructs Stephen; having money has "got a price, all of it's got a price, that's one piece of education that I took with me out of the Arkansas Ozarks" (*CS* 568). Clove, thus, admits frankly what Nathaniel Webster and Mrs. Ashe are too hypocritically genteel to acknowledge.

¶25 Gossip at the law firm holds that Clove left "an old homo" in traction in a Hot Springs, Arkansas, hospital (*CS* 554). But whatever hesitation Stephen has about associating with the patently dangerous Clove is overcome by the boy's sexual intoxication. In Stephen's mind Clove is "the Ganymede younger sibling of Nat Webster's adolescent bride from the Arkansas Ozarks" who brings Stephen not the elixir that the original shepherd boy served Zeus and the other immortals on Mt. Olympus, but a more contemporary mixture of Bloody Marys and Quaaludes (*CS* 564). The story concludes with Stephen in a private train compartment mesmerized to watch Clove slowly remove his "fine-textured flesh-colored briefs" (*CS* 569).

> Dear God, thought Stephen, You must have said *Let there be Clove* before you said *Let there be light*, because what this Arkansas Ozark kid is now unveiling surely equals or takes precedence over all other works and wonders that You performed in Your six days of creation! (*CS* 569–70)

It is unclear whether Clove is facing Stephen or has turned away from the older man as he shimmies seductively out of his briefs. If the former, Stephen's view is of the boy's genitals. If the latter, Stephen is presented with the same view of the "back parts" or "glory" of a god-like male that caused the young Lutheran minister nearly to collapse with excitement in the close confines of Oliver's prison cell in "One Arm."

¶26 "The motor that drives most of his best work," Michael Paller writes of Williams, "is the conflict between a never-quenched desire to reveal sexual truth and all the social and personal conditions that militated against such revelations" (Paller 227). In "The Killer Chicken" the impulse to reveal a sexual truth not only wins out, but the sexual truth in question proves to be the one that society struggles hardest to suppress: sodomy, variously the "sin" or "crime" that traditionally cannot be named.[10]

¶27 An anal eroticism governs "The Killer Chicken" more so than any of Williams's other works. While watching television, Stephen judges that "the nearly nude backside of Johnny Sheffield," the actor playing Boy, "was as close to perfection as, well, his *own*, when he looked at himself in the triplicate mirror in his dressing room, in the right sort of light" (*CS* 556).[11] Stephen's own buttocks are indeed so enticing that three of the senior partners in his law firm cannot resist surreptitiously groping him whenever the opportunity presents itself. And when Stephen is fired after being discovered in a compromising situation with Clove, Jerry Smythe lingers behind to offer a final "butt-pat […] of a fondly valedictory nature" (*CS* 565). Even the ordinarily staid

Mrs. Ashe giggles, "coy as a skittish schoolgirl," when Clove pats her "on her behind" (*CS* 566). Later, rendered physically unstable by the alcohol and pills that Clove has fed her, she parodically reenacts the scene of Stephen's own earlier sodomization by Clove:

> Mom attempted to rise to her feet to embrace Stephen as he entered the hall but she nearly hit the carpet. Clove caught her buttocks to his groin, and then Stephen witnessed a scene the shock of which even his Quaalude washed down with a double [Bloody] Mary did not insulate him completely. Mom was now seated in the lap of Clove. (*CS* 567)

The tension in "The Killer Chicken" is, finally, not so much between secrecy and revelation as between a riotously eroticized body part and society's insistence that this particular body part remain carefully concealed as an object of shame.

¶28 It is within this pattern of anal eroticism that Williams's allusion to "the Arkansas Ozark way" must first be addressed. Most literally the phrase refers to the delight in anal intercourse that Clove suggests is widely practiced in the hills of Arkansas. Maude arrives at Stephen's apartment with Clove in tow, supposedly to help Stephen prepare the Sunday morning brunch in honor of his mother to which he has invited his law firm colleagues and their spouses. While Maude busies herself in the kitchen, Clove joins Stephen in the bedroom where the latter has retreated to dress. Stephen is unnerved to feel Clove "running his hot little hand down the gracefully, just-enough-swaybacked curvature of Stephen's spine and right onto that ellipsis of his posterior which Stephen had only a few minutes past admired with such satisfaction in the mirror-back of the front door" (*CS* 563). The narrative likewise fades into an ellipsis as, drunk on the multiple Bloody Marys and Quaaludes that Clove has served him, Stephen relaxes control of his desires and finally gives himself over to another man's sexual ministrations—only to awaken later, conscious of "a very precisely located physical sensation, one bitch of a pain where he had never experienced one before" (*CS* 565).[12] Whatever discomfort Stephen may initially feel following this first experience of anal intercourse is apparently quickly overcome by his enjoyment of the acts's pleasures, for the story concludes with Clove undressing and asking Stephen: "'Feel better? Feel good? Like when I'm teaching you the Arkansas Ozark way?'" (*CS* 569)

¶29 But more than simply indicating the act of sodomy, "the Arkansas Ozark way" refers to a liberality of spirit that frees one from a lifetime of painful self-doubt and humiliating frustration. By giving himself over to "the Arkansas Ozark way" Stephen replaces the figurative "broomstick up his butt" with what Maude indulgently refers to as Clove's "youth and natural gay spirits" (*CS* 555). To come out of the closet is to open oneself to penetration, to forego the protective shield that prevents one from being touched or moved by another person. In doing Stephen "the Arkansas Ozark way," Clove phallically batters down the protective wall that Stephen has built around himself and frees him to take pleasure from the touch of another person. Nor is Stephen the only person in need of Clove's liberation. Mrs. Ashe's voice bears no trace of "its usual cool restraint" (*CS* 565) when in the presence of "the Arkansas chicken" (*CS* 568). Indeed, both Stephen and his mother respond with such similar delight to the Quaaludes to which Clove introduces them that the boy shrewdly comments, "Must run in the family but it took me to bring it out" (*CS* 567). The voice of Clove, with its "Dogpatch drawl" (*CS* 569)—its "hillbilly coarseness, outright abrasiveness of intonation" (*CS* 566)—is the crude voice sounding liberation from artificial social conventions, from emotional and political illiberality.

¶30

The "Arkansas Ozark way," then, implies the unleashing of natural desires that have been constrained by hypocritical social standards, however dangerous the consequences. As Clove tells Stephen on the train, while laying out his plan for Mrs. Ashe's demise,

> You got to come out of the closet, I mean all the way out and for good, and you got to lock the door of it behind you and forget that the goddamn closet ever existed, because—now you hear *this*!—You are alone on this Amtrak with a *killer chicken*! An' when this chicken infawms you that Mom is afflicted with a tragic sickness, you better rate this chicken's word higher than words out of any medical mouth in the world." (*CS* 570)

For thirty-five years Stephen has been smothered emotionally by his mother, and Clove plans now literally to smother her and liberate both Stephen and the Ashe family fortune. Presenting Stephen with an alternative authority to those rigid social standards which have intimidated Stephen all his life, Clove is the enemy of judgmental bigots like Anita Bryant, who led a national campaign in the late 1970s to demonize gays and deny them civil rights. At one point in the story, as Stephen is watching the evening news, a photograph of Bryant "with a banana cream pie on her face" appears, which the announcer reports was "thrown by a militant gay with a shout about bigots deserving no less . . ." (*CS* 556). Williams intends his story to be a rhetorical pie-in-the-face to all those in society who censure other individuals for the expression of their natural sexual desires.

¶31 In later life, Williams spoke frankly of "the contradiction between two sides of my nature: between gentleness and violence, between tenderness and harshness" (qtd. in Devlin 297). A similar contradiction is present in "The Killer Chicken," which ambivalently concludes with a reference to "events proceeding in this world whose one and only crisis is not the depletion of its energy resources" (*CS* 570). As liberating as Stephen finds his sexual relationship with Clove, performing sexual intercourse "the Arkansas Ozark way" leaves him with "one bitch of a pain where he had never experienced one before" (*CS* 565). Like Mrs. Meighan and the young Lutheran minister, Stephen finds the sexual intensity offered by a man from Arkansas to be as disturbing and threatening as it is liberating and exciting. To live "the Arkansas Ozark way" is to enter bravely into an unmapped moral terrain where social strictures no longer apply, and where one is free both to acknowledge one's needs and openly to pursue gratification. Such an individual, however, must now set his or her own balance "between gentleness and violence, between tenderness and harshness."

¶32 Stephen goes more willingly into the darkness inhabited by his Dionysian lover than Mrs. Meighan, and he is clearly more willing than the young Lutheran minister to take the sexual risks that are necessary to enjoy satisfaction. He is confronted, though, with a new "crisis" which is never discussed on the front page of newspapers: how to balance between the self and the other, pursuing pleasure without becoming exploitative or destructive.

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¶33 In the short stories of Tennessee Williams, Arkansas is, thus, the home of the sexually hypnotic male who, no matter how seriously maimed physically or wounded emotionally, exerts a sensually hypnotic influence upon those around him, awakening within them an awareness of physical need so powerful that it borders on being self-destructive. Williams imagines Arkansas to be a place so unsophisticated and raw that some of the people who still live close to the land resist being refined socially and seeing their desires fettered by artificial decorum. Arkansas stands for the "rare form of moral anarchy" shared by Billy and Cora in Williams's "Two on

a Party" (*CS* 292) and for the "wildness" of the delta region in Mississippi whose disappearance Carol Cutrere laments in *Orpheus Descending* (1957):

> Something is still wild in the country! This country used to be wild, the men and women were wild and there was a wild sort of sweetness in their hearts, for each other, but now it's sick with neon, it's broken out sick, with neon, like most other places . . . . (*Orpheus* 86)

¶34 The wildness may be disappearing on the east bank of the Mississippi River, where *Orpheus* is set, but in Williams's imagination it continues to flourish on the west bank, in Arkansas. Neon has not yet destroyed the "wild sort of sweetness" in the hearts of the "little man," one-armed Oliver, and Clove the "Killer Chicken." The little man tickles Mrs. Meighan and causes her to laugh uncontrollably, even as his sexual overtures grow so intense they frighten her. Oliver Winemiller is the golden panther of the young Lutheran minister's dreams that simultaneously excites, terrifies, and comforts the frustrated man. And Clove has the same effect on Stephen and Mrs. Ashe as the spice for which he is named, so pungent that it threatens to overwhelm the plain taste of the meat that it is meant to serve, even as it stimulates the diner's taste buds. Williams pities or mocks Jake Meighan, who puts his energies not into sex with his wife but into destruction for his own profit of other people's property; the young Lutheran minister whose heart palpitates erratically from suppressed emotion; the friends of the murdered millionaire who were present when Oliver acted in his pornographic film but who later testified that nothing of the sort had occurred lest they be publicly associated with something unseemly; and the members of a Wall Street law firm who surreptitiously pat Stephen on the behind but dismiss an employee who is living with a man who *may* be his lover.

¶35 Williams is not naive in his idealization of the Mississippi River delta in general, or of Arkansas specifically. As a native of the delta, he understood quite painfully, for example, the propensity for sexual repression that can be found in a censorious small town in the "Bible Belt." As he wrote in a 1950 letter to Paul Bigelow complaining of an overzealous police crackdown on homosexuals in Key West, Florida, he found such tactics to be "funny, but also pretty frightening and disgusting as an example of how Fascistic little southern communities can become when they have a mind to" (qtd. in Paller 86). So sexually repressive did Williams find the South to be at times that in 1956 he initially declined director Elia Kazan's invitation to join the film crew of *Baby Doll* on location in rural Mississippi, confessing that "Those people chased me out of there. I left the South because of their attitude towards me. They don't approve of homosexuals, and I don't want to be insulted" (qtd. in Paller 111).

¶36 Williams's geographical distinctions symbolize entirely relative values or states of mind. For Williams, the Mississippi River delta region is more sweetly wild than New York City or the "city of St. Pollution," as he was wont to call St. Louis, the Midwestern, industrialized city to which his family was unhappily forced to relocate as a child. Likewise, even within the delta region, Arkansas is to be preferred to Williams's native Mississippi. Williams understood that the "sweet wildness" of the world was fast disappearing. In later life he repeatedly lamented the "neonization" of Acapulco, Key West, and even his beloved New Orleans—bohemian spaces in which he had sought refuge in the 1930s and 1940s as he was first exploring his sexuality and developing his artistry. In a letter composed as he was rewriting *Battle of Angels* as *Orpheus Descending*, Williams rages against "the destruction of the wild and lovely by 'the dismembering Furies' that our civilized world produces" (*SL* 2:504).

¶37 Thus, because Arkansas remains relatively uncivilized, this relatively unsophisticated region functions as a poetic idea rather than a real place to Williams. Arkansas is the home of sexual forces so natural and vital that it takes on an almost mythic aura: Mrs. Meighan is a great sobbing Persephone; Oliver resembles nothing so much as a broken statue of Apollo; and Clove is Ganymede, the cupbearer to the gods and the object of Zeus's homosexual desire. Such characters share mythic status because they have learned or are learning to live "the Arkansas Ozark way."

Notes

[1] In their chapter on Williams's preoccupation with the Delta, Holditch and Leavitt (21–55) focus exclusively upon his references to Memphis and the delta region of the states of Mississippi and Tennessee, failing to note the references to the Arkansas delta that pervade Williams's short fiction.

[2] "Twenty-seven Wagons Full of Cotton" was written in 1935 and appeared in 1936 in *Manuscript*, a serious "little" magazine whose editor was among the first to encourage Williams professionally. The story, however, proved to be the first piece of his to outrage his puritanical mother, Edwina, who would complain that she found the sexual content of his writing "ugly and indecent" (*Selected Letters* 1:90, 340). The story specifies only that the action takes place outside a "little Arkansas town" (*Collected Stories* 43). When Williams transformed the story into a one-act play, however, he transferred the action to Blue Ridge Mountain, Miss., and in 1979, when he transformed the film script *Baby Doll* into a full-length stage play titled *Tiger Tail*, he specified that the action takes place in Tiger Tail County, Miss.

References to Williams's stories will hereafter be cited parenthetically as *CS* (for *Collected Stories*), followed by the page number(s) in question. Likewise, references to Williams's correspondence will hereafter be cited *SL* (for *Selected Letters*), followed by the volume and page number(s).

[3] Williams apparently began mulling over the idea for "One Arm" as early as summer 1940, when he refers in a letter written during his sexually and professionally important developmental stay in Provincetown, Mass., to having "started what may be a novel about a male prostitute" (*SL* 1:326). A letter to his literary agent, Audrey Wood, reveals that he had returned to the subject in fall 1942 while working as an MGM scriptwriter and living in Santa Monica, Calif. (*SL* 1:493). The story, however, would not be completed until 1945, and first appeared as the title story of Williams's *One Arm and Other Stories* (1946). It is the basis of an unproduced screenplay of the same title found among Williams's papers after his death which editor Richard Gilman dates to "most likely in the sixties" (vii). In an October 1970 interview, Williams refers to the screen play as completed (*Conversations* 158). By 1977, however, he could only note that the typescript "has been floating around" and that he no longer even knew where it was (*Conversations* 303). Michael Paller reports that in 1960 a play made from Williams's short story, but not adapted by Williams himself, was presented at Café Le Mama, Elaine Stewart's forum for avant-garde theatre in New York City (Paller 159–60).

[4] "The Killer Chicken and the Closet Queen" first appeared in 1978 in *Christopher Street*, a gay literary monthly published from New York City. It proved to be Williams's first and only contribution to an emerging gay press.

[5] Such ambivalence is at the heart of Williams's world view and personal experience. According to a collaborator who knew him well, Williams himself was deeply ambivalent about the sexual appeal of "rough trade." Director Elia Kazan acknowledged shaping Jessica Tandy's and Vivien Leigh's performances as Blanche DuBois in the original stage and film productions, respectively, of *A Streetcar Named Desire* according to his perception of Williams as "an ambivalent figure who is attracted to the harshness and vulgarity around him at the same time he fears it, because it threatens his life" (qtd. in Tischler 53). According to Kazan,

> Blanche Dubois [sic] comes into a house where someone is going to murder her. The interesting part of it is that Blanche Dubois-Williams is *attracted* to the person who's going to murder her. That's what makes the play deep. . . . So you can understand a woman *playing* affectionately with an animal that's going to kill her. So she at once wants him to rape her, and knows he will kill her. She protests how vulgar and corrupted he is, but she also finds that vulgarity and corruption attractive. [qtd. in Tischler 53]

Mrs. Meighan may lack the emotional fragility and poetic consciousness of Blanche—nor does she express the desire for "magic" that characterizes Williams's most famous creation—but she shares with Blanche (and with the young Lutheran minister in "One Arm" and

the closeted Wall Street lawyer in "The Killer Chicken and the Closet Queen") an attraction to a sexually exciting, physically dangerous male.

[6] "One Arm" is built on a series of parodic inversions. For example, men with whom Oliver has had a sexual encounter write him in prison that they had found the hustler unforgettable, yet Oliver is unable to remember any of them clearly. Likewise, whereas the young Lutheran minister is unable to offer Oliver any spiritual comfort, Oliver possesses for his correspondents "the curtained and abstract quality of the priest who listens without being visible to confessions of guilt" (*CS* 179), just as previously he had offered his body sexually for their emotional salvation in an unintentional parody of the Christian sacrament of the Eucharist. Only in prison, when he is denied the physical contact that he once took for granted, does Oliver come to understand that sex is a kind of absolution that only those who are themselves lonely can offer others. And only then does he experience "a sense of communion" (*CS* 182) with the men whose faces he can no longer recall. One of the most haunting paradoxes of "One Arm" is that Oliver, the baby-faced priest of the rites of Dionysus, is in jail awaiting execution for the murder of a man who reduced sexual communion to a crass pornographic act.

[7] The biblical narrative records that Moses asked of God, "I beseech thee, show me thy glory," which Yahweh explained was not possible, for any human looking upon the face of God must die. As a mark of His favor, however, Yahweh offers to position Moses in a protective cleft in a rock where Moses may stand as the "glory passeth by," and where Yahweh promises to cover Moses's eyes so that he will not be blinded. "And," at the crucial moment, Yahweh promises, "I will take away mine hand, and thou shalt see my back parts: but my face shall not be seen" (Exod. 33:18–23, KJV).

[8] The minister shares the condition of heart palpitations with a number of sexually repressed characters in Williams. In a 1961 interview, for example, Williams acknowledged that the palpitations experienced by Alma Winemiller in *Summer and Smoke* (1948) were caused by her attempt to suppress the "wildness within her": "that's what gave her the palpitations. She was caging something that was really quite different from her spinsterish, puritanical exterior" (qtd. in Devlin 83). In speaking of Alma's attempt to contain "wildness" within a cage, Williams resorts to the governing metaphor of "One Arm," that of Oliver as the golden panther.

[9] Williams repeatedly excoriated Nixon in interviews at the time, going so far as to charge that:

> The destruction in America of the ideal of beauty is one of the most apparent and depressing things of all and devolves on the man who's ruling this country. I think that when you prosecute an immoral war [in Vietnam] for so many years—a war that is disgraceful in all that it pits such a powerful nation against such a pitifully underprivileged people—then morality is destroyed for the whole country. (qtd. in Devlin 248)

[10] For an analysis of the extent to which the gay sexual revolution depended upon an opening of the previously closed male body, and the extent to which Allen Ginsberg, another gay writer of Williams's generation, developed an "anal erotic" for satiric purposes, see Frontain.

[11] Stephen's narcissistic regard for his own buttocks is expressed a second time as he is dressing for his Sunday brunch: "He inspected himself two ways, head on and in profile, and was far from displeased, particularly by the way that the paisley silk so gracefully delineated, in profile, the masculine but prominent buttocks that Dame Nature had gifted him with" (*CS* 562).

[12] Stephen's experience parallels Williams's own in some ways. In a 1973 interview, Williams recounted that

> I've never raped anybody in my life. I've *been* raped, yes, by a goddamn Mexican, and I screamed like a banshee and couldn't sit for a week. And once a handsome beachboy, very powerful, swam up on a raft, and he raped me in his beach shack. I had a very attractive ass and people kept wanting to *fuck* me that way [. . . .] (qtd. in Devlin 229)

Like Williams, Stephen, although no longer an ephebe, possesses beautifully shaped buttocks that certain other men find sexually irresistible.

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