The exception of Inge, whose accommodation with American middle-class respectability included Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, teaching in a high school, and visits to a well-meaning analyst. But for all that, Inge continued to break out of bounds, followed by bouts of hot shame. Williams, much less scrupulous, went to the same shrink, fell off the wagon in two weeks, and boasted about it in interviews. Drinking fueled their shared aesthetic. Ecstasy is a higher value in their work than sobriety, even if ecstasy lasts a shorter time. An inevitable crash was the price, one they all knew about intimately and paid for in their lives. Suicide was always a possibility. Williams and McCullers tried it, McCullers’ father and her husband succeeded. Mishima’s suicide, a ritual disemboweling, planned for months, was so in character with his writing that it can be considered the last of his dramas. Inge’s short play The Love Death, written between 1968 and 1970 and published posthumously, begins with a failed writer tricking his psychiatrist into revealing the number of sleeping pills it takes to kill oneself, which number the writer then swallows. In 1973, Inge asphyxiated himself inside his garage while seated behind the wheel of his new Mercedes.

The flipside of their pain is that they were successful, on their own terms and in the greater world. They were fashionable—and ambitious. They wanted their plays on Broadway; they wanted Hollywood films made from their works, with Hollywood stars and important directors. In the 1950s they got what they wanted. They won awards. Mishima won many prizes in Japan, and his Kabuki plays were performed by the National Theater of Japan. Inge won a Pulitzer and an Oscar, Williams two Pulitzers. Carson McCullers’ The Member of the Wedding won the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award for best play in 1950. Williams won the same award five times, and Inge won it too. They were photographed by celebrity photographers, and there was interest enough about them for potential scandal.

And they had secret sex lives. In the 1950s, Williams and Inge were closeted and promiscuous. According to reliable sources, they had sex with each other. Bowles, McCullers, and Mishima were heterosexually married, but before and during their marriages they had sex with members of their own sex. They were careful to keep their secrets to themselves—enough to avoid the law and maintain what was then considered good taste and a decent reputation. After they died, some of their heirs maintained historic façades, but these have collapsed with the weight of time. We know now some of the specifics of Bowles, McCullers, and Mishima in bed because their lovers have squealed. Williams characteristically spilled his own details in his Memoirs.

Their sexual activity gave them ready metaphors for their writing: enslavement, abandonment, weakness in wanting the thing that would destroy them, and, especially and always, having a secret, knowing a secret, keeping a secret, sharing a secret. At an early age their unconventional sexuality estranged them from conventional parents and peers. They identified with freaks because they knew what it was to be one. Bowles, who was born Jewish, called herself “Crippie the Kike Dyke.” Mishima’s father mocked him as effeminate, and Williams’ father called him Miss Nancy. Inge was called a sissy by the other boys in Independence, Kansas. Bowles and McCullers were both “boyish.” In each other’s company they were open enough about who they slept with. The society they chose to enter held freewheeling soirées in out-of-the-way places: Tangiers, Key West, and the Brooklyn boardinghouse where Carson McCullers and Jane Bowles sometimes roomed (separately) with Gypsy Rose Lee and W. H. Auden. Carson had a crush on Gypsy, though Williams denied it was consummated. He was wrong.

Yet, for all that, they were lonely—profoundly lonely. They fell in love with inaccessible people, which seems fair because they were themselves inaccessible. In reading each other, in knowing each other, I do not think they were any less lonely, just lonely together. In Camino Real, Williams has Don Quixote say: “When so many are lonely as seem to be lonely, it would be inexcusably selfish to be lonely alone.” Being alone together is often, if not always, the basis of friendship in Williams’ plays.

Alone together or together yet alone, in life off-stage Williams offered his friends adventures to share, often through road trips. In early 1939 he hitched cross-country from New Or-
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