

# Playing Poker With Tennessee Williams



[www.blacklawrence.com](http://www.blacklawrence.com)

Executive Editor: Diane Goettel

Book and Cover Design: Zoe Norvell

Cover Art: “Big Red Doors in the French Quarter” by Diane Millsap

Copyright © Kevin Pilkington 2021

ISBN: 978-1-62557-834-1

All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in critical articles or reviews, no part of this book may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission from the publisher: [editors@blacklawrencepress.com](mailto:editors@blacklawrencepress.com)

Published 2021 by Black Lawrence Press.

Printed in the United States.

**Playing Poker  
With  
Tennessee  
Williams**

**Kevin Pilkington**

Black Lawrence Press

"He stands before a tree. Within the tree is  
a word that becomes a name."

— Patti Smith

"I took my power in my hand  
And went against the world;"

— Emily Dickinson

## Table of Contents

### I.

Pomegranate	2
Other Modes of Transportation	3
A Church on the Edge of the Bed	4
Bridges	5
August 3:00 AM	7
Trumpets and Candles	9
Open Heart	11
Andy Warhol's Wig	12
Dieting	14
Old Men	16
Not Asking for Much	17

### II.

Cake	20
Stan Getz in the Refrigerator	21
Lights	23
The Promise of Water	25
Completely Dry	26
At the Other End of the Hall	28
Imagination	29
Upside Down	30
The Next King of Scotland	32
Mingus	34
Bread	36
Gary Indiana	37
Bob's Tavern: The Worst Food and Coldest Beer in Colorado	39

Elegy for Art	40
Day Dreaming in South Dakota	43
Dumb	44
Learning Subtraction at St. Mark's Grammar School	45
III.	
Sidewalks	48
Taking Risks	51
Building on Fire	52
Missing	53
Black Coffee and Sermons	54
The Distance Between Friends	56
Elephants	58
How a Black Stone Disappears	60
Photo of My Grandfather Smoking a Cigar	62
Cool	63
Peace Offering	65
Weekly Horoscope	66
Paris	68
Playing Poker with Tennessee Williams	71
About the Author	74

I.

Teach me mortality,  
frighten me into the present.

— Jack Gilbert

## Pomegranate

A woman walks by the bench I'm sitting on  
with her dog that looks part Lab, part Buick,  
stops and asks if I would like to dance.  
I smile, tell her of course I do. We decide  
on a waltz that she begins to hum.

We spin and sway across the street in between  
parked cars and I can tell she realizes  
she chose a man who understands the rhythm  
of sand, the boundaries of thought. We glide  
and Fred and Ginger might come to mind or  
a breeze filled with the scent of flowers of your choice.  
Coffee stops flowing as a waitress stares out the window  
of a diner while I lead my partner back across the street.

When we come to the end of our dance,  
we compliment each other and to repay the favor  
I tell her to be careful since the world comes to an end  
three blocks to the east of where we stand. Then  
I remind her as long as there is a '59 Cadillac parked  
somewhere in a backyard between here and Boise  
she will dance again.

As she leaves content with her dog, its tail wagging  
like gossip, I am convinced now more than ever  
that I once held hundreds of roses in my hands  
the first time I cut open a pomegranate.

## Other Modes of Transportation

Last week an old tenement three over  
from ours caught fire. The flames  
may have been on a crash diet  
the way they burned through each  
floor as if they were calories.

Yesterday a construction crew began  
drilling a hole in the street right  
outside our building. Although it  
is deep they still have miles to go  
if they plan on reaching China.

Things are getting better though.  
The birds on the ledge outside our  
bedroom window every morning  
sound more like Paul Desmond's sax  
and I upgraded my smartphone  
to a genius.

I've also found I make a lot less  
mistakes whenever I'm late for the train.  
The only trips worth taking are like  
this one, sitting here with you, talking  
and every once in a while simply gaze  
at your shoulders and travel the length  
of your hair.

## A Church on the Edge of the Bed

There was a fire in the church  
uptown near the tracks that destroyed  
everything except for a shell of walls  
and a few prayers that floated  
away now that the roof is sky.

Passing by it on the train  
reminded me how it looked  
a lot like Billie Holiday's voice  
on her last album.

I had to turn away  
when it began to resemble  
my father sitting on the edge  
of his bed, after the stroke, alone  
for the first time, hanging on  
after years of stone and wood,  
out of prayers and waiting for no one.

## Bridges

I'm on the roof deck of a building  
45 stories high that aren't all worth  
reading. This is the only place I can  
stay above it all and by the time the noise  
on the street reaches this height it turns  
into Mozart. The sky is clear except  
for a cloud a helicopter rips into shreds  
with its blades. Queens looks like braille  
I can rub my fingers over in case I want  
to see even more. The East River lets another  
ship slide by and I wonder if we are related  
since I have been sliding by for years.  
All the bridges can fit on the table  
of the model train set my brother and I  
had as kids. No wonder the freight train  
going over Hell Gate looks Lionel and Wards  
Island Bridge is small enough to pin on my lapel.

I walk over to look downtown, past the new  
apartment building three blocks away that is all  
glass, chrome and resembles Cary Grant.  
Just below 2<sup>nd</sup> Ave. there is a park the size  
of a green mat. I'd like to pick it up and place in front  
of my door so anyone who stops by can wipe  
their shoes on treetops. The Empire State always  
reminds me of a syringe a doctor is holding up  
waiting for me to pull down my pants. And further  
back where the sky is torn and ripped

the World Trade Towers stood. There are new buildings under construction all over and a flock of giant birds who flew out of those Japanese monster movies from the sixties nest on top of them like cranes.

This is a city that keeps changing, where block parties are a new religion, dogs walk their owners, guys still leave bars and piss between parked cars until their bladders turn to sand, winters bring snow and ice and the police bring heat. No one gets along, but everyone else does. There's no denying in back of me Billie Holiday died in Metropolitan Hospital tied to her bed. This, however, is what I'm certain of—somewhere down there a woman is waiting just for me who smells like flowers.

## August 3:00 AM

The noise on the street got me out of bed and over to the window. I opened the blinds and for a few seconds the empty tenement three over looked like my cousin back from the bars on 3<sup>rd</sup> with flames shooting out of his head. Then I blinked my eyes clear and saw it was even worse—the entire building was on fire, flames sticking out of the roof and front windows, licking the breeze trying to set it on fire too.

Both ends of the block were closed off and fire trucks and an ambulance were parked in the middle of the heatwave, lights blinking as if something was caught in their beams. Police roped off a crowd who gathered to watch as if celebrities, Brad Pitt or Beyoncé, would come out of the building with their careers on fire and stop to pose for selfies. Sparks shot up from the roof like stars you have to travel two hours north of the city to find or the glitter in Alia and Connie, names pinned to waitress uniforms in the diner around the block.

By dawn, the firemen put the flames  
out but the building was still smoking  
like it had a three-pack-a-day habit.  
I was sweating, relieved the fire hadn't spread,  
then turned the A/C all the way up and fell back  
on the bed with the cold air blowing on me.  
I turned into a chunk of ice large enough  
to keep every bottle of beer cold at an end  
of summer block party. Relieved and exhausted,  
I fell back to sleep, my eyes frozen shut.