Tennessee Williams Lying In State

I'm not sure why I came here in the fragile
frozen rain - a notice in the news
drew me along. The subway was a blur
of streetcars passing deep below
the footpaths of the living.

Up the steps and past the morbid usher
in my funeral suit I found you resting
warmed by café lights - a bordeaux rug
held back the dark mahogany. No audience
just bouquets of cloying

lilies and chrysanthemums that pushed
remorse into the chamber's dimlit corners.
Half expecting unicorns and regrets
etched in glass, through gobs of makeup you whispered:
first the dress rehearsal.

On your crisscrossed hands a Russian icon
beamed peasant scenes out of that heavy box
like Achilles' polished shield. The setting's
interrupted rural rhythms faded
into foothills - helium

angels strummed their balalaikas - Jesus
at the center, costumed in a shepherd's
turquoise frock, read lines from the Cyrillic
scriptures to the vacant balconies.
Were the critics here today?

I had thought to make an offering in ink
but the perfumed air that furled upon your lips
in search of windows swept me offstage, speechless
down the stairs into the shattered rain
towards the underground and back downtown.

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Tennessee Williams died suddenly on Friday, February 25, 1983, as a production of his play The Glass Menagerie was underway at the Eugene O'Neill Theater. On Monday the Times reported that the funeral parlor had opened his casket for public viewing. A friend of the playwright's had placed a Russian Orthodox icon on his hands.