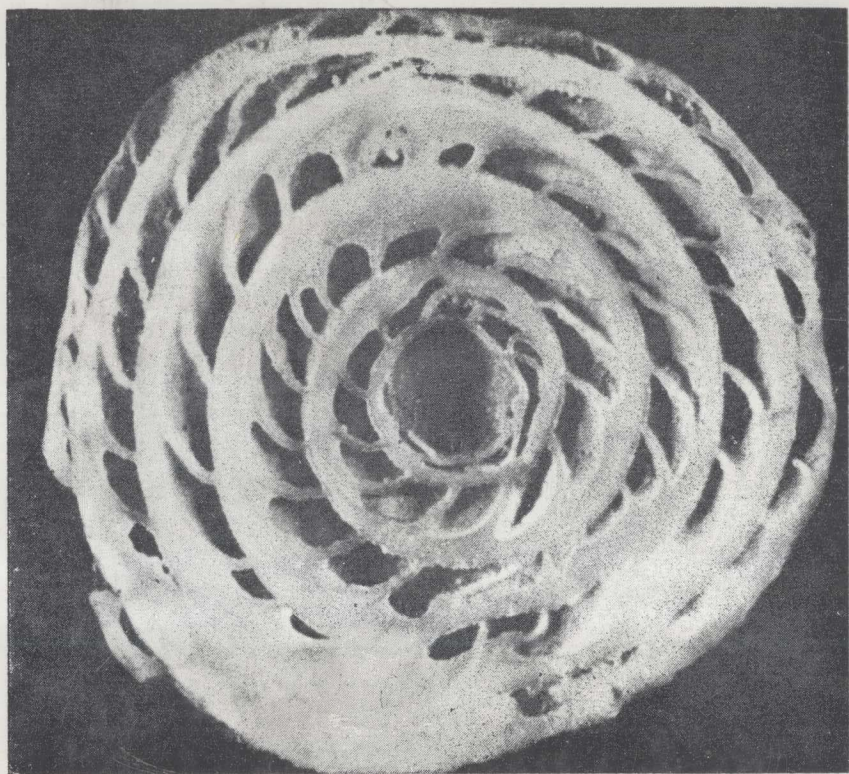


TEO SAVORY



WEST TO EAST

Tales of the Twenties & Thirties

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Teo Savory

WEST TO EAST

Tales of the Twenties and Thirties

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West to East

Tales of the Twenties & Thirties

BOOKS BY TEO SAVORY

FICTION

- Landscape of Dreams, *New York*, 1960
The Single Secret, *New York*, 1961; *London*, 1962
A Penny for the Guy, *London*, 1963; *New York*, 1964
To a High Place, *Santa Barbara*, 1972
A Clutch of Fables, *Greensboro*, 1977
Stonecrop: The Country I Remember, *Greensboro*, 1977
A Childhood, *Greensboro*, 1978
To Raise a Rainbow, *Greensboro*, 1980

POETRY

- Traveler's Palm, 1967
Snow Vole, 1968
Transitions, 1973
Dragons of Mist and Torrent, 1974

TRANSLATIONS

- Eleven Visitations, katrina von hutten, *Munich*, 1971
(with Ursula Mahlendorf) The Cell, Horst Bienek, *Santa Barbara* and
Toronto, 1972; *London*, 1974
Selected Poems, Guillevic, *London* and *Baltimore*, 1973
Euclidians, Guillevic, *Greensboro*, 1975
(with Vo-Dinh) Zen Poems, Nhat Hanh, *Greensboro*, 1976
Selected Poems, Jacques Prévert, *Greensboro*, 1979
Selected Poems, Günter Eich, *Santa Barbara*, 1971
Selected Poems, Raymond Queneau, *Greensboro*, 1986

*for Janet Gunn, Janelle Lavelle, Alan Brilliant,
Sarah Lindsay and Robert Peters, who helped me
during my blindness to assemble this collection,
and for Edwin Seaver, my first editor*

Introduction

Teo Savory's characters in *West to East* work their destinies within concentrated territories, some of their own choosing, some not. In the West, the setting is "Fort Union," originally a pioneer town only about 30 miles from the sea in a river valley. This is the scene of the years that Bridget Grant in *Landscape of Dreams* (1960) spent with her grandmother. (This may be Portland, Oregon.) In the East, the setting is the Berkshire Hills of Western Massachusetts, scene of her four "Stonecrop" novels: *The Single Secret* (1962), *Stonecrop: The Country I Remember* (1977), *A Childhood* (1978) and *To Raise a Rainbow* (1980).

In the stories that make up *West to East* we see tragic and wasted lives, and lives where radical changes result in something like happiness, transpiring in spaces as unified as those designed by ancient dramatists. These characters, no matter how disastrous their struggles, Savory treats with compassion and humor, and a clear vision extolling self-reliance, a spiny resilience, and a deliciously rebellious faith that the least travelled paths through life's wood are the best.

Many of these characters (most of the principals are women) are victims of family, small-town, or rural pettinesses, of rumor-mongering and family hate. Others, often pathetically, create their own failures. But Savory's survivors are impressively independent, iconoclastic, and indifferent to community expectations and persecutions. These magnificently independent folk possess all the human starch that matters. Despite theircripplings by pressures beyond their control, glimmers of sensitivity to landscape, art, and human interrelationships persist. They struggle valiantly to furnish their territories.

Throughout, Savory's subtle insights and her honed, lucid style for some readers will recall Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*; and some of the same pleasure we find in reading Anderson we will find here—with important differences. Savory's men, though often horrendous in their impact on women, keep pretty much to the shadows, and come forward only when they are needed to highlight some facet of their women. Some of the men, generally younger, seem passive, and bring joy to older women, despite the negative societal pressures. One man, Norman Birdsall, cheated by fate of a son, given instead a retarded daughter, and faced with an increasingly taciturn wife, grubs with blind force at his stony acres, working even harder as he ages, as though the resistant earth were the epitome of his hard and thorny fate.

Savory's women are various: girls recalling aunts and grandfathers who raised them; girls hopelessly in love with brothers-in-law; women abandoned by their men; women exploited by their families; love-lorn women with retarded children; pretentious women who move to rural New England to simplify their lives; mothers betrayed by daughters.

Savory's settings are almost Hardy-esque. Fort Union and Cobbs Crossing are as stark and forboding as Egdon Heath and Budmouth. And like Hardy's settings, Savory's allow her characters to assume a lonely, larger than life grandeur, juxtaposed as they are against stark natural elements. "A Woman Who Saved Everything" is the most Hardy-like of these tales: all her life a woman slaves for a father until he dies, and until she's fifty saves every cent she can. Once she's freed of family obligations, her desire is to leave the dark encircling mountains for the sea and to sail all over the world.

There are many hints of greater worlds outside Savory's Cobbs Crossing and Fort Union: Mme. Giovanesca has sung minor roles in grand opera throughout Europe. A snooty Mrs. Hilary, overly proud of her delicate notepaper and tidiness, settles in Cobbs Crossing after a life spent in large cities and abroad. An American countess appears minus her husband and much of her fortune. A fascinating, crippled youth, Larry, anxious to know the truth of his paternity and

subject to much vicious teasing because of his dark appearance and bad leg, is befriended by an older man who seeks by educating him to prepare him for a life in the supposedly more congenial world outside. The girl on whom the story focuses, who befriends the lad, hungers for him after her bourgeois, castrating mother has disapproved of their friendship and the boy moves away.

One of the subtlest of the stories, "The Fox Kill," resolves itself in violence. A mother gives up when her only child, a daughter, turns out to be retarded. Failing to produce the son her hard-working farmer husband craves, she insists on keeping the daughter near her, refusing to send her to a hospital or an institution for care, almost as a badge of her cruel fate. When hounds pursue a pregnant vixen to her porch, Clara, the mother, sees in the plight of the fox something of her own plight.

These stories, most never before published, complement Teo Savory's long writing career, spreading as it does over forty years. The first of her nine novels and collections of stories, *Landscape of Dreams*, was published in 1960 and was widely reviewed and well received. Before that, stories and poems appeared in various books and periodicals. The latest novels, in their evocation of village types, have been compared to Mrs. Gaskell's *Cranford*. I must stress that Savory has never been an antiquarian story-teller, lost in the artifacts of small-town and rural Americana; her characters, of all ages, move, succeed, and are defeated against current world events and obsessions. Her life-view, though celebratory, has a sardonic edge, and her acute regard for truth never allows a hint of the facile and sentimental. Blind Chance seems as much her conditioner as it was for Thomas Hardy.

Robert Peters
Huntington Beach, California
Christmas, 1987

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I
Fort Union

The Death of an Old Woman

I can remember her from a time when she was very young. She lived in a medium-sized town in the Pacific Northwest, a quiet town with a river flowing through it, where it never got very hot in the summer and seldom snowed in the winter, where it rained a good deal in the spring and there was some rather beautiful scenery close by. Nothing in particular ever happened in that town, and anyone who was gifted in any particular way left it for a larger, more easterly city. She had a father and mother who lived in an old, comfortable wooden house in a pleasant residential district, shaded by elm trees, which grew shabby and crowded with cheap apartment houses later on. She lived in that house, too, and when she was a child her older brother and sister lived there. The brother, the oldest of the three, had been something of a black sheep and had gone away. Her sister married at the age of twenty-six and five years later went to live abroad.

I can remember her from a time when she must have been no more than twenty or twenty-one years old. She was my mother's sister.

What can be remembered from a time when one was only two or three years old? There are the memories of one's mother and grandmother; there are old photographs, and old impressions overlaid with later ones. But I can clearly remember a tall, shy, very thin girl (indeed, she was no more than a girl), losing her timidity and ungainliness when she was alone with me, that very tall body bringing itself down to my level as she sat on the floor and played with me, showed me how to enjoy my toys and helped me to learn to speak. And

I remember other times when we were alone at dusk. The birds were getting ready for the night and I was in my crib. She was bending over me with a look of great love in her face and feeding me my supper or tucking me in. She could not sing to me, at nightfall, as my mother did, nor tell me stories, like my grandmother. She just sat, seeming more like a girl to me than a grown-up, and giving off an effect of warmth and affection. I am not certain, but I believe I preferred this.

She had black hair with a natural wave to it, hazel eyes and black eyebrows, straight and rather heavy. Her nose was narrow and straight and scattered over with freckles. She wore clothes which look laughable, in the old photographs, now, but which I believe were rather graceful and suitable for her. She was not pretty at all, but had touches of beauty about her. There was something French—seventeenth or eighteenth century French—in her face, as sometimes occurs in the features of those old Scots families. I did not realize then, of course, what a handicap it was for a young woman to be six feet tall. (Her father was six feet four, everyone else, including her brother, much shorter.)

When I saw her again, she was much changed, as I was myself. I was an adolescent girl, and she had committed, for me and at that age, the unforgivable *gaucherie* of becoming fat. Not only too tall and still ungainly, but monstrously fat, dowdy and sometimes even dirty. In the intervening ten or twelve years, she had become, also, a cross and embittered old maid. And this is how I had remembered her, until the other day.

And as I had forgotten the girl, the young aunt, who liked to play with her sister's baby, so she too had forgotten the child she had loved and found the adolescent school-girl a burden, an enigma of unlovable characteristics, a disrupting factor in the dim existence she had made for herself. She vented her spleen on me, as they used to say.

It was an infinite relief to us both when I went away again.

In the old wooden house she lived out her days with her mother and father. Her brother, the black sheep, committed

his scandals from a distance and finally died. Her sister lived abroad. Her niece was a "handful" and no longer affectionate. She was sent away to school. Her father and mother "didn't get along," as the neighbors phrased it. At some time in her earlier years she had gone to a business school and learned how to type. For a few years she worked in a doctor's office, part time, as receptionist, and spent her afternoons helping her mother about the house, doing the marketing or sitting in a chair crocheting. Because of her shyness she had never had many friends; now these few were married or had moved away, or both; in any case had moved out of her *milieu*. She was more often alone with her mother. Her father was seldom at home; when he was, he often teased his daughter; but she did not know how to respond—hurt feelings and tears would put an end to a Sunday breakfast or dinner. Or he and his wife would have a disagreement and she, the daughter, would side with her mother. After a time, she gave up her job—or lost it, I do not know—and then she was with her mother nearly all the time. She did not get another job. She took to lying in bed late in the mornings and coming to breakfast in her bathrobe. Sometimes she would not get dressed until noon. She never discarded any of her clothes. One of the closets in an empty bedroom was filled with the suits she had worn as a girl. The closets in her own room were full of later purchases; but she never wore any of these. She gave up crocheting and took up knitting. She knitted herself a suit—very unbecoming on her fat body—and she wore that until the elbows were gone and there were holes in the skirt.

She read the gossip column in the newspaper, scandal sheets and Hollywood magazines. She became very spiteful. She spied on the neighbors and on her father, and she spied on people she did not know by way of newsprint. She bought a car and she and her mother went on long, aimless drives in it. Her hair grew streaked with grey, and was sometimes not clean. She had long, thin hands with beautiful fingernails, almond-shaped, which she tended less and less.

She and her mother had a strange, ambivalent relationship. They quarreled frequently. The habits of each got on the

nerves of the other. Sometimes they despised each other. But they were like an ill-matched married couple who cannot get along with each other but cannot bear, either, to be separated.

Then her mother died. She was alone in the house with the father who was seldom there. At those times she was as though cut in half; she remembered how much she had loved her mother, she discovered how dependent she had been on her. She could not eat, nor sleep. She became very ill.

Her sister made a long sea-voyage and spent several months with her, there in the old house where they had both been born. She had a strong attachment for her sister; years ago, they had been very close. Her going abroad had left loneliness behind. Her infrequent visits left a taste of envy behind. And the sister no longer fitted in with the town, the shabby house, or the confined life there. However, when the sister left this time, she was somewhat better. The mother's clothes had been disposed of, the house redecorated, a servant hired to cook the meals. The father was old, now, and would stay more often at home.

The sister had left. Now she was alone in the house with her father. She took to reading mystery stories. The servant brought her breakfast to her room. She read one mystery story in the morning, another at night. When she went out in the afternoon to do the marketing she would spend a half-hour or so in the corner drugstore playing the pinball machine. She would go for long, aimless drives in her car, alone. At four o'clock she would stop somewhere and eat two or three hamburgers, perhaps play some more pinball games.

She bought a large radio and in the late afternoons, as dusk was falling, while she was waiting for dinner and the time when her father might or might not come home, she sat with her knitting and listened to the police reports on the short-wave. She had learned what all the code numbers meant. If she heard of a fire she would get in her car and go to it. In the evenings she listened to the news at eight and

again at ten; in between, to the police reports. She continued to knit suits. She made one for her sister, who was still living abroad, and one for me, her niece, who was then living in New York. She made one for a friend, also, and one for herself, though that one was never finished.

A woman whom she had known as a girl, in high school, was divorced from the husband she had married in Chicago and came back to live in her native town with her mother. Another former friend, a school-teacher, became widowed. These three childless and manless women drifted together; they went for rides in my aunt's car, ate ice cream together, drank beer and played pinball in a discreet bar. Mainly, they sat together, in the parlor of one of the three houses, and gossiped.

When, a fifteen-year-old problem-child, I had lived in my grandparents' house, my aunt had had a cat. Cats had always come to my grandmother's back door, so my mother had told me, and found a home. There had been one, when they were all youngsters, who used to sleep in the oven and once had nearly been roasted for dinner. The cat I remember was very old and had no teeth and liked no one but my aunt. He used to sit on her lap after breakfast while she had a cigarette and inhale the smoke as she exhaled it. He was a rough-coated fierce animal; the family, for some reason, had named him Beatrice. When she was a young girl, there had been a dog. She had found him wandering the streets and brought him home. But that was long ago; it was with difficulty, now, that anyone remembered his name.

After her mother's death, after her sister had come and gone, there were no cats or dogs in the house, only herself and her father and the maid who, unsupervised, was slovenly and sometimes drunk.

One day while out riding she passed a pet-shop and saw a puppy in the window. She brought it home. She took it walking, fed it, bathed it. It took up a good deal of her time. It was playful and liked to tug at her father's trouser-cuffs, which was a great annoyance to him. She never got it