

Afterword

by Annie Proulx

The Power of the Dog was published in 1967 by Little, Brown in Boston after Thomas Savage's editor at Random House asked for changes that the writer refused to make. It earned extremely good reviews, stayed on the *New York Times* "New and Recommended" list for nearly two months, was five times optioned for a film (which was never made). It is the fifth and, for some readers, including this one, the best of Savage's thirteen novels, a psychological study freighted with drama and tension, unusual in dealing with a topic rarely discussed in that period—repressed homosexuality displayed as homophobia in the masculine ranch world. It is a brilliant and tough book and belongs on the shelf of hard-eyed western fiction along with Walter Van Tilburg Clark's *Track of the Cat*, Wallace Stegner's *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, and Katherine Anne Porter's *Noon Wine*. Although Savage wrote strong and intelligent novels, some set in the east, some in the west, it is his Montana-Idaho-Utah books that ring truest and stick permanently in the mind. Something aching and lonely and terrible of the west is caught forever on his pages, and the most compelling and painful of these books is *The Power of the Dog*, a work of literary art.

Savage, though rarely included in the western literary lists, was one of the first of the Montana writers, an informal but famous regional concentration of writers. His novels are

Afterword

rich in character development, written in clear and well-balanced sentences with striking and important landscape description, imbued with a natural sense of drama and literary tension. As his writing matured it became clear he was a powerful observer of the human condition. Book critic Jonathan Yardley commented in his review of *For Mary, With Love* that “over his long and notably productive career [Savage] has shown himself to be a writer of real consequence; it is a shame, bordering on an outrage, that so few readers have discovered him.”

Most of the reviewers in the late 1960s, even if they recognized the interior tragedy of *The Power of the Dog*, dodged the homosexuality issue by reporting a simplistic contest of good versus evil, cruelty versus decent kindness, or “the wary war between compulsion and intelligence,” whatever that means.¹ Only one, an anonymous reviewer for *Publisher’s Weekly*, though squeamish about a calf castration scene on the first page, understood what *The Power of the Dog* was about and said so clearly:

A taut and powerful novel with such an unnecessarily graphic brutality in its opening paragraph, however, that many readers will be put off by it. The scene is Utah in 1924 and against a rugged ranch country background Mr. Savage spins a tale of two brothers, George, slow, clumsy, essentially decent, and Phil, a repressed homosexual. When George marries a widow and brings her back to the ranch, Phil makes life such hell for her that she takes to secret drinking. Then her young son, Peter, who is bright and strange, comes for the summer and sees what is

¹Eliot Fremont-Smith, *New York Times Book Review*

Afterword

happening. While Phil is plotting a homosexual involvement with the boy, young Peter is plotting a diabolically clever revenge on him that is pretty chilling. Krafft-Ebbing [*sic*] against a regional Western setting, this has strong literary but rather less commercial appeal.²

The book earned much critical praise — “a powerful tragedy,” “taut and powerful,” “the year’s best novel,” and, wrote Roger Sale in *The Hudson Review*, “the finest single book I know about the modern west,” but sold few copies. Emily Salkin of Little, Brown, the current force behind the republication of this neglected novel, remarks that the publisher’s sales records do not go back to 1967 but “I can’t imagine it sold more than 1,000 copies in hardcover.”³ Though the novel is still occasionally found on ranch bookshelves, it is virtually unknown today to the general reading public, even to specialists in western literature. It is cause for rejoicing that *The Power of the Dog* has a second chance with today’s readers.

Thomas Savage was born in 1915 in Salt Lake City, Utah, to a remarkably handsome couple, Elizabeth (Yearian) and Benjamin Savage. Elizabeth Yearian was the oldest daughter of a famous Idaho sheep-ranching family, and her mother, imperious and powerful and well connected, was known as “the Sheep Queen.” The ranch itself had been founded a generation earlier when the clan patriarch discovered gold.

When Savage was two years old, his parents divorced. Three years later his mother married a wealthy Montana rancher named Brenner, and from that time he was

²*Publisher’s Weekly*, January 2, 1967.

³Emily Salkin, private correspondence, October 10, 2000.

Afterword

ranch-raised as Tom Brenner in Beaverhead County in southwest Montana. He was fortunate to be part of two eccentric and sprawling clans—the Yearians and the Brenners—which furnished him a wealth of character studies; fortunate to be part of two rich and notable ranches, the Brenners in cattle, the Yearians in sheep. Family mattered intensely, especially to the Yearians. In his autobiographical novel, the best known of his works, *I Heard My Sister Speak My Name* (to be republished by Little, Brown in 2001, under the title *The Sheep Queen*), he wrote:

We all love each other. My aunt Maude, the middle aunt, once told me, “You know, Tom, we’ve always liked each other better than anybody else.” It is not that we think we are better than anybody else but that we are better company, at least for each other. We like to have fun.⁴

... We picnicked annually, sometimes as many as fifty of us, on the very spot where George Sweringen had discovered gold and we ate what he had eaten: beans and bacon and trout fried over the fire, and dried apple pies. We felt we could reach out and touch him and his wife Lizzie who had often sung hymns. We were proud of them and felt they would be proud of us. They would have liked us better than anybody else.⁵

Beaverhead County was a bronc-stomping Montana now long gone, rough and masculine in ethos, only one or two

⁴Thomas Savage, *I Heard My Sister Speak My Name*, p. 138, Little, Brown, Boston, 1977.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 140. Sweringen is the fictional name Savage used for the Yearians.

Afterword

generations removed from pioneer days. It was a man's world of cattle, sheep, horses, dogs, guns, fences, and property. The open range still existed in living memory, as did confrontations with Indians. In the 1920s the Brenner ranch house enjoyed electricity (from a Delco generating plant, later replaced by a Wind Charger) and a certain amount of elegance. There were some automobiles in Montana in the '20s, and young Savage was passionate about the more prestigious equipages (his interest in classic automobiles is embedded in *Trust in Chariots*, his fourth novel, about the escapades of a man who fled marriage and toured the continent in a Rolls-Royce, linked to Savage's own purchase in 1952 of the Rolls-Royce that had been on exhibit at the 1939 World's Fair), but in ranch country the railroad continued to be all-important and the horse was still major transportation; men were valued for their abilities with horses. Most ranch diets were home-raised, rustled, or hunted meat, potatoes, beans. Coffee was swallowed black. Both the Yearian and Brenner tables featured delicacies and abundance uncommon in that day.

A powerful work ethic dominated western culture, and it took (and still takes) a tough cuss to make a go of ranching. This kind of rural life is more or less extinct in the American 21st century; most people cannot even imagine a society without paved roads, television or radio, cars, hot showers, telephones, airplanes. Nor can many know the combination of hard physical work and quiet wealth that characterized some of the old ranches. This was Thomas Savage's world for the first twenty-one years of his life. After graduation from Beaverhead County High School (where he claims to have learned little beyond speed typing) and two years at the University of Montana studying writing, he broke horses and

Afterword

herded sheep in Montana and Idaho for a few years, doing the ritual Saturday night go-to-town-and-get-drunk, “where you sat on the running boards of cars and got sick.”⁶ The horse-breaking part of that past was visible in his first published article, “The Bronc Stomper,” for *Coronet* magazine in 1937 under the name of Tom Brenner, unremarkable except for its unusual subject matter. Years later Savage wrote:

In 1936 I began to wonder what I was doing, wandering around, and perhaps to find a direction, I wrote an article about how to break a horse, sent it off to *Coronet* magazine and was astonished to receive a check for seventy-five dollars. Fifty of it I invested and lost in gold mining stock. The other twenty-five I spent on a red dress for a young cousin of mine who had been invited to a Junior prom. I didn’t sell another thing for seven years.⁷

A certain restlessness was in him now, and the possibility of another kind of life than ranching began to glimmer in the distance. He enrolled as an English major at Colby College in Waterville, Maine.

On my 21st birthday I woke up herding sheep in the Bitterroot Valley. I asked myself what in hell am I doing here, and my stepfather, the best of stepfathers, much in love with my mother, sent me off to Colby where I’d heard there was a charming girl who had been in high school in Missoula,

⁶Thomas Savage, *I, Thomas Savage, am the author of The Power of the Dog*, 1967, p. 5, autobiographical essay used by Little, Brown for promotional purposes.

⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

Afterword

Montana. We wrote all that summer, and I went back and we were married the summer of '39.⁸

After Savage graduated from Colby he took an uncongenial job as a claims adjuster for a Chicago insurance company. Over the years he also worked as a wrangler, ranch hand, plumber's assistant, welder, and railroad brakeman. He taught English as well, at Suffolk University in Boston, at Brandeis, and more briefly at Franconia College in New Hampshire and Vassar College. Through all of these jobs he was writing steadily.

This marriage with Elizabeth Fitzgerald, later a novelist herself, endured until her death in 1988. They had three children, sons Brassil and Russell, and daughter Elizabeth. In 1952 the Savages bought property on the Maine coast and lived there until the February blizzard of 1978 washed the house off its foundations. "It cost us \$25,000 to fix that house," Savage says ruefully. The next year Savage received a Guggenheim Foundation grant, which helped him write *Her Side of It*, the story of an alcoholic writer wrestling with demons.

In 1982 the Savages sold the Maine house and moved to Whidby Island in Puget Sound, where they built on property given to Savage by his long-lost sister, immortalized in *I Heard My Sister Speak My Name*. Today Thomas Savage, who left the island after his wife's death, makes his home in Virginia Beach near his daughter.

As a young man at Colby, Savage began his writing career with a short story about the importance of the railroad to an

⁸Thomas Savage, personal correspondence, September 15, 2000.

Afterword

isolated ranching community cut off from the outside by a high pass and the intense Montana winters.

I sent it off to Ed Weeks, then editor of *The Atlantic*. He returned it, remarking that there were no human beings in it, and suggested I make a novel of it...I wrote the first draft of *The Pass* at Colby. Dean Mariner allowed me to skip classes so long as I wrote.⁹

The Pass was published by Doubleday in 1944 under the name Thomas Savage, for, with the birth of his first child, Tom Brenner sent to Salt Lake City for his birth certificate and began the laborious process of having all his past job and education records changed to show his birth name, Thomas Savage, “all difficulty, but eventually accomplished except for having my wife’s Phi Beta Kappa name changed from Brenner to Savage, which they wouldn’t do.”¹⁰ This family complexity of names and identities, of east coast culture and western mountains, of manual labor and writing, of a lost past and private secrets, characterizes Savage’s life, his novels, and the people in them. The tangle of abandonment, loss, broken families, and difficult emotional situations is in Savage’s work and, to a considerable degree, is related to his own life. With intense human drama swirling about him throughout his childhood, and from the vantage point of outsider in the Brenner house, Savage developed an exquisitely keen eye for nuances of body language, intonation, silence. He has said a number of times that he does little research but relies on his own experience of life, memories, imagination. The 1977 autobiographical novel

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

Afterword

I Heard My Sister Speak My Name fictionalizes the extraordinary and true appearance in Savage's life, when they were both in their fifties, of an older sister neither he nor anyone else knew existed. His beautiful mother had been dead then for a decade, but the digging out of legal proofs and papers uncovered a long-ago temporary false identity, her secret—that in 1912 she had borne a baby girl and, as in some antique melodrama, left the infant on a doorstep. This novel is particularly useful for a study of Savage's sources.

Savage's first novel, *The Pass*, is shot through with the deepest kind of landscape description which utterly controls the destinies and fortunes of the ranchers and Scandinavian farmers who settle on the prairie adjacent to a formidable pass. The people of the place love it beyond reason, the blue autumnal haze, the grassland stretched out, and they relish testing themselves against spring storms and baking drought. The novel is studded with brilliant portraits that already display Savage's masterly ability to show the inner lives of characters, especially women, who are treated with a rare depth of understanding. The language and thinking of the ranch people in *The Pass* is strikingly vivid, even today, and invites comparison with James Galvin's biography of place, *The Meadow*, and the brilliant and funny stories of the Chilcotin country by Canadian writer Paul St. Pierre, *Breaking Smith's Quarter Horse and Smith and Other Events*.

A sense of great longing and sympathy for the western landscape colors this novel, and it is hard to dismiss the idea that Savage, in the tighter confines of the east, re-created the country he came from for personal as well as literary reasons. But living in such country demands and takes everything. When a character freezes to death on his trapline in *The Pass*, a young wife says to her husband, "The prairie killed him. He

Afterword

loved the prairie and it killed him.” There are more ways than one that hard country kills, as Savage shows in his western fiction. Some years after *The Pass*, Savage said in an interview:

I have always believed that the landscape shapes the people. A person will say, for instance, that there is something different about Westerners. And I think the moment you leave Chicago and go West, you find that people are quite different. For one thing, there is an openness about them. I think the difference in Westerners has to do with the fact that they feel it's impossible to look at the Rocky Mountains—or to look at the horizon, which is equally vast—and consider that there is such a thing as Europe or neighbors or anything else.¹¹

The Pass and *Lona Hanson* and, to some extent, *The Power of the Dog* may be seen as late novels from the golden age of American landscape fiction, a period that falls roughly in the first half of the last century. In these novels landscape is used not just as decorative background, but to drive the story and control the characters' lives, as in the work of Willa Cather, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Walter D. Edmonds, William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, John Steinbeck, and nearly all that Hemingway wrote, all resonant with the sense of place, a technique well suited to describing the then strikingly different regions of America, the pioneer ethos, the drive of capitalist democracy on the hunt for resources. By 1948, when Norman Mailer's *The Naked and the Dead* appeared, with its characters braced in adversarial and manipulative position to the raw land, that older landscape novel was disappearing.

¹¹interview, Jean W. Ross, *Contemporary Authors Online*, The Gale Group, 1999.

Afterword

The title of Savage's major book, *The Power of the Dog*, is a multiple-layered reference to a striking landscape feature that Phil Burbank can see but his brother, George, cannot. In fact, Phil uses this distant formation of rock and slope that resembles a running dog as a kind of test—those who cannot see it are lacking in intelligence and perception. For himself it is a proof of his sharp and special sensitivity.

In the outcropping of rocks on the hill that rose up before the ranchhouse, in the tangled growth of sagebrush that scarred the hill's face like acne he saw the astonishing figure of a running dog. The lean hind legs thrust the powerful shoulders forward; the hot snout was lowered in pursuit of some frightened thing—some idea—that fled across the draws and ridges and shadows of the northern hills. But there was no doubt in Phil's mind of the end of that pursuit. The dog would have its prey. Phil had only to raise his eyes to the hill to smell the dog's breath. But vivid as that huge dog was, no one but one other had seen it, George least of all.¹²

In another sense the dog is Phil himself; alternatively he is the dog's prey. The dog is also a connection with the old, finer days. But most powerfully the title comes from the Book of Common Prayer:

Deliver my soul from the sword;
My [only one] from the power of the dog.¹³

¹²Thomas Savage, *The Power of the Dog*, p. 67, Little, Brown, Boston, 1967.

¹³*Ibid.*, p. 273. Psalms, 22:20, The New Scofield Reference Bible, Oxford U. Press, N.Y.

Afterword

The Burbank ranch is located in southwestern Montana near the cattle-shipping town of Beech, and it has been operated for many years by the parents of Phil and George, “the Old Gentleman” and “the Old Lady.” The elder Burbanks are moneyed easterners who maintained relatively luxurious lives in their years on the ranch but who, when the story opens in 1924, have retired to a suite of rooms in a Salt Lake City hotel, following an undescribed contretemps with Phil. The Burbanks are the most important ranchers in the valley. When the story opens the two sons run the ranch, Phil forty years old, George thirty-eight. The two men share a bedroom as they have since childhood, out of tradition and habit.

On the ranch Phil is responsible for haying, roundups, ranch labor, trailing herds to the railroad, the daily work of a big spread, while George oversees the business affairs and finances, meets with bankers and the governor, and winds the clock on Sunday afternoon. In the rural division of labor, ranch work is man’s work.¹⁴ Phil spends much time in the bunkhouse with the hands, talking about the good old days when ranch hands were real men and the chief of them was Bronco Henry. Phil prides himself on his ability to get along with the cowboys and thinks there is something about George that makes them uncomfortable.

The brothers are a study in opposites. Phil is slender and good-looking; he is brilliant and enormously capable, a great reader, a taxidermist, skilled at braiding rawhide and horsehair, a solver of chess problems, a smith and metalworker, a collector of arrowheads (even fashioning arrowheads himself

¹⁴Will Fellows, *Farm Boys: Lives of Gay Men from the Rural Midwest*, U. Wisconsin Press, 1996, 1998, well illustrates the rigid division of the sexes in conservative, rural America.

Afterword

with greater skill than any Indian), a banjo player, a fine rider, a builder of hay-stacking beaver-slide derricks, a vivid conversationalist. He is also a high-tempered bully, a harping critic of all around him; he knows unerringly the cruel thing to say, relishes getting people's goats. He is, in fact, a vicious bitch. He bathes only once a month in summer, not in the bathtub but in a hidden pool, makes it a point never to wear gloves so his hands are nicked and callused and dirty. He gets his hair cut rarely. He believes that people need obstacles in their lives that they may strive and rise above them.

George, on the other hand, is phlegmatic, slow to learn but with a good memory, feels sorry for people and never blames anybody, has little to say. George is stocky (Phil calls him "Fatso" to irritate), steady against Phil's mercury, kind against Phil's cruelty. It is easy to see the brothers as personifications of Good and Evil, as Abel and Cain, as Weak and Strong, as Normal and Peculiar. To some extent all of these balance points fit, but both characters are far more complex.

In a barroom Phil, who himself drinks very sparingly out of fear of what he might reveal in a loose-tongued moment, humiliates and abuses the drunken town doctor, Johnny Gordon, who cannot resist liquor, with tragic results, for the doctor, corroded by humiliation, kills himself a year later. Phil is revolted by weakness and pride, and never misses a chance to lacerate another with his mean-spirited opinions. He humiliates not only the drunken doctor, but a Jewish department store owner who started out as a hide buyer, a boastful fat kid with a bag of marbles, and an elderly Indian; he spews hatred and scorn. So much does he dislike social-climbing Jews that rather than sell his old hides to the peddler, he wastefully burns them. He is particularly vocal and phobic about "sissies," still a word of choice in the west to describe effeminate boys

Afterword

and men. He is particularly scornful of Peter Gordon, the drunken doctor's sissy son, who has developed an unfortunate skill in making paper flowers. It is this son who discovers his father's body and who inherits the doctor's medical library. Less well known than his ability to fashion crepe-paper roses is the boy's omnivorous curiosity about medicine and wild plants, whose intricate leaf and root systems he draws in minute detail.

A character mentioned only a very few times and never described is of central importance to the novel—Bronco Henry, the ideal cowboy of Phil's youth. Again and again there is a fleeting reference to this hero, and gradually it dawns on the reader that Bronco Henry has a tremendous emotional grip on Phil's bitter and loveless heart. No one and nothing can ever match Bronco Henry. At some time in the past, we come to understand, Phil desired—touched—perhaps loved—Bronco Henry. And something very bad happened. We do not learn of the accident that killed Bronco Henry in front of the twenty-year-old Phil's eyes until nearly the end of the book. Nor do we learn until then that it was Bronco Henry who first saw the running dog in the landscape.

But it is not bitterness and loss that make Phil the mean-mouthed bully that he is. Bronco Henry's death does not explain Phil's almost pathological cultivation of nonsissy appearance—smelly, dirty, rough hands, deliberately ungrammatical talk, superabilities in such manly things as riding and braiding rawhide ropes. The major key to Phil's complex personality is, perhaps, that in wanting to touch and have Bronco Henry, he was forced to recognize and confront the enormous fact of his own homosexuality. His private obstacle became this thing that he knew about himself, something that in the cowboy world he inhabited was terrible and unspeakably vile. Following the code of the west, he remade himself as a manly,

Afterword

homophobic rancher. No one could mistake rough, stinking Phil for a sissy. In that light, his wounding tongue can be seen as preemptive sarcasm that throws possible critics off balance and into confusion. “[H]e had loathed the world, should it loathe him first.”¹⁵ He grew fangs.

Savage ratchets up the tension tremendously when he has George take an interest in Rose, the doctor’s widow, and finally, secretly marry her. Hell breaks loose when he gives the news to Phil, who resentfully sees the widow as a schemer after the Burbank money. The couple moves into the large master bedroom once used by the Old Gentleman and the Old Lady, but Phil dedicates himself to making the bride’s life a living hell in a thousand little mocking, secret ways, eventually driving her to secret tippling.

Then it is announced that Rose’s sissy son, sixteen-year-old Peter, will spend the summer on the ranch. Phil is appalled and thinks:

Was...George cogitating about the summer when the kid would come slinking in and out of the house, a constant reminder that Georgie boy wasn’t the first one to put the blocks to her? He had a hunch George hated sissies as much as he did, and now there would be one such right there in the house, messing around, listening. Phil hated how they walked and how they talked.¹⁶

Phil prepares the bunkhouse hands for the sissy’s arrival by describing Peter’s mincing ways, the paper flowers. Peter arrives, and in the ranch house tensions thicken like glue and

¹⁵*The Power of the Dog*, p. 263.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 126.

Afterword

mealtimes become a horror. The boy can do nothing right. When he surprises Phil naked at his secret water hole, Phil flies into a shouting rage. But the boy is as sharp of eye as Phil, and he sees what Phil is doing to his mother and much more. He has chill and watchful ways, a coldness that has always confounded Rose. In a gauntletlike roundup incident, even Phil recognizes something adamantine and courageous about Peter when the boy walks past the ranch hands in stiff new blue jeans after someone has mocked him with a wolf whistle.

Now, Phil always gave credit where credit was due. The kid had an uncommon kind of guts. Wouldn't it be just interesting as hell if Phil could wean the boy away from his mama? Wouldn't it now? Why, the kid would jump at the chance for friendship, a friendship with a man. And the woman—the woman, feeling deserted would depend more and more on the sauce, the old booze.

And then what?¹⁷

He anticipates that Rose's drinking will escalate and that George will finally cast her off. And so Phil makes the first overtures, offering to give Peter the rawhide rope he is braiding, offering to teach him to rope and ride, offering friendship, which Peter seems to accept. In all of this turn-around friendship (not unlike Long John Silver's grinning overtures to Jim Hawkins), he tells Peter about that extraordinary person from the old good days, Bronco Henry:

“Oh, he taught me things. He taught me that if you've got guts, you can do any damned thing, guts and patience.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 226.

Afterword

Impatience is a costly commodity, Pete. Taught me to use my eyes, too. Look yonder, there. What do you see?" Phil shrugged. "You see the side of a hill. But Bronc, when he looked there, what do you suppose he saw?"

"A dog," Peter said. "A running dog."

Phil stared, and ran his tongue over his lips. "The *hell*," he said, "you see it just now?"

"When I first came here," Peter said.¹⁸

Accompanying the change in attitude there is a sense of rising sensuality, intensified when Phil, who never touches anyone, puts his arm over the boy's shoulders, an intimacy set off, as if in emotional parentheses, by Phil's fury at Rose for selling some old hides to the Jewish peddler. Peter listens stone-faced to Phil's vengeful rant, but he has his own secret plan, deeply chilling, more awful than any of Phil's sadistic cruelties, for Peter is already in the big leagues.

In reading Savage's autobiographical novel, *I Heard My Sister Speak My Name*, we see much of the raw material for the characters in *The Power of the Dog*. George Burbank is modeled on Savage's stepfather—stolid, steady, quiet. The Old Gentleman and the Old Lady are fictional illustrations of the elder Brenners. One of the Brenner brothers served as the model for Phil Burbank. The fictional Tom Burton in *The Sheep Queen* writes about their mother to the woman now proven his sister. He describes his mother's second marriage to the well-to-do rancher and the sly insults she suffered from the second brother, Ed.

Ed was a bachelor by profession, a woman-hater. He was brilliant, quick at chess, puzzles and word games. I recall

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 259–60.

Afterword

that he knew the meaning of the word “baobab.” He read widely in such top-drawer periodicals as no longer exist—*Asia*, *Century Magazine*, *World’s Week*, *Mentor*... *Country Life* he tossed aside as directed at climbers and others who required the crutch of possessions.

He was lean, had a craggy profile under thick black hair he had cut no more than four times a year. He despised towns where hair was cut, where men gathered to engage in silly banter and chewed food in public. His long, sharp nose was an antenna quick to pick up the faintest rumor and send it on to his brain to be amplified.... His laughter was an insulting bray; it crowded and pushed the air ahead of it.

He said many true words about other men. I never heard him say a kind one.¹⁹

Burton goes on to describe the step-uncle’s devotion to his half sister:

The little girl became for Ed his chief instrument of torture; he began to woo her away from my mother. He did a fine job.... Ed talked to the little girl around my mother. That her daughter found Ed so lovable and so responsive to her will must have made my mother doubt her sanity.²⁰

When Burton/Savage’s mother played Schumann or Schubert on the piano, Ed would go to his room and counter with boisterous tunes on his banjo. “His purpose was to destroy my mother, and that is what he did.”²¹ This malicious

¹⁹*I Heard My Sister Speak My Name*, pp. 223–26.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 228.

²¹*Ibid.*

Afterword

act grew, in Savage's hands, as a black weed in *The Power of the Dog* to great effect. Although young Savage often wished his step-uncle dead, he was too young to "find the clue to his own weakness and destroy him." In the end the man destroyed himself. While he was fencing a haystack using poles "slick with cow manure wet from the fall rains," a splinter jammed into "the palm of his naked, horny hand."²² He was dead within days of anthrax, a deadly disease caused by *Bacillus anthracis* that can be transmitted from animals to humans through insect transmission, milk, and the handling of infected hides and tissue.

Savage's innate sense of literary drama let him construct a gripping and tense novel from these pieces of his Montana family history. It is one thing to have extraordinary raw material in your literary scrap bag, but quite another to stitch the pieces into a driving and classic story that forever fixes a place and an event in the reader's imagination. From the childhood memory of an odious man, with virtuoso skill Savage created one of the most compelling and vicious characters in American literature. In a curious way he has realized his childhood wish to see the man dead, for every time a new reader catches his breath at Phil Burbank's satisfyingly ghastly end, the child that was Thomas Savage re-kills him as surely as the fictional Peter Gordon removed his mother's nemesis.

²²Ibid.

2020 Postscript to Afterword

This afterword was written almost twenty years ago. Tom Savage died in 2003 at the age of eighty-eight. He would have been delighted to know that Jane Campion, one of the world's great directors, is filming *The Power of the Dog*. In 2018 Jane and her producer, Tanya Seghachian, visited me in Port Townsend, Washington, to talk about the novel. They were unsure whether or not Phil Burbank and Bronco Henry had ever consummated their love because there is no such scene in the book. In the 1960s serious novelists knew such material was taboo. That night I did a careful re-reading and saw how this highly skilled writer had craftily transmuted what might have been an explicit physical scene in the hideout willows into a nature description that could offend no one but was quite obvious to those in the know. I look forward to seeing how many close-ups of willow leaves make it onto Campion's screens.

—Annie Proulx