

New Mexico Quarterly

Volume 13 | Issue 1

Article 5

1943

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Recommended Citation

West, Jessamyn. "Reverdy." *New Mexico Quarterly* 13, 1 (1943). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol13/iss1/5>

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REVERDY

Jessamyn West

I NEVER SEE asters without remembering her—never the haze of their pink and lavender blossoming as summer dies, but her name is in my heart: Reverdy, Reverdy.

I never say her name—not to anyone. When people ask about her, as they do occasionally even now, I say “she” and “her.” “She is still gone.” “We do not hear from her.” “Yes, she was very beautiful,” I say. But not her name.

Not Reverdy. That is buried deep, deep in my heart. Where the blood is warmest and thickest. . . . Where it has a sound to me like bells, or water running, or the doves whose voices in the evening wind are like smoke among the madrones and eucalyptus.

I have longed all these years to tell her how it was the night she left. You may scarcely believe it, but it is worse to have a good thing that is not true believed about you, than a bad. To be thanked for an act you meant as harmful—every year those words sharpen until at last they cut like knives.

You mustn't think she was like me. She wasn't in the least. Not inside nor out. She had dark hair like a cloud. Yes, really. It wasn't curly but it didn't hang straight. It billowed out. And her face—oh, you mustn't think it was anything like mine. She had hazel eyes and a pointed chin. And you've seen lots of people, haven't you, with very live, animated faces and dead eyes? It was just the other way with Reverdy. Her face was always quiet, but her eyes were so alive they glowed. Oh, she was the most beautiful, most alive, and most loving girl in the world, and she was my sister.

I cannot bear for people to say we were alike—she was really good, and I was just a show-off.

Mother—she was better later, and gentler, but then she was bad, cruel and suspicious with Reverdy. Everybody loved Reverdy. Not

just the boys. But Mother wouldn't see that. She always acted as if Reverdy were boy crazy, as if Reverdy tried to entice the boys to her. But it wasn't true. Reverdy never lifted a finger to a boy—though they were about her all the time from the day she was ten. Bringing her May baskets, or Valentines, or their ponies to ride.

And the big, tough boys liked her, too. When she was twelve and thirteen big eighteen-year-olds would come over and sit on the steps and smoke and talk to Reverdy. They never said anything out of the way. I know because most of the time I was with them. Reverdy didn't care. She never wanted to be alone with them. Reverdy would listen to them until she got tired, then she'd say, "Goodbye for now." She'd always say, "Goodbye for now,"—and then she'd go out and play, maybe, run, sheep, run, with the little kids my age. And the little kids would all shout when Reverdy came out to play with them—and if the game had been about to die, it would come to life again. If some of the kids had gone home they'd yell "Hey, Johnnie," or "Hey, Mary," or whoever it was, "Reverdy's going to play," and then everyone would come back, and in a minute or two the game would be better than ever.

I used to be awfully proud of being her sister. I don't know what I would have done without her. I was a terribly plain little frump—I wore glasses and had freckles and if I hadn't been Reverdy's sister I'd have had to sit and play jacks by myself until Joe came along. But boys would try to get Reverdy's attention by doing things for me. They'd say to her, "Does your sister want to ride on my handle bars?" And Reverdy would say all glowing, happier than if she'd been asked, "Do you, Sister?" Of course I did, and then when the boy came back *she'd* ride with him just to thank him.

I don't know why people—why the boys liked her so. Of course, she was beautiful, but I think it was more that she was so much—well, whatever she was at the moment; she never pretended. She talked with people when she wanted to, and when she got tired of them, she didn't stay on pretending, but said, "Goodbye for now," and left.

But Mother would never believe she wasn't boy crazy and I would hear her talking to Reverdy about girls who got in trouble, and how she'd rather see a daughter of hers in her grave. I didn't know what she was talking about, but it would make my face burn and scalp tingle just to hear her. She wouldn't talk sorrowfully or lovingly to Reverdy, but with hate. It wasn't Reverdy she hated, but you couldn't tell that.

looking at her. She would bend over Reverdy and shake her finger and there would be long ugly lines from her nose to her mouth, and her eyebrows would be drawn down until you could see the bony ridges they were supposed to cover, all bare and hard. It used to make me tremble to see her. Then Reverdy would get mad. I don't think she knew half the time what Mother was talking about either—only that Mother was full of hate and suspicion. She'd wait until Mother had finished, then she'd go to the foothills for a walk—even if it was dark—and stay for a long time. And then Mother would think she was out with some boy again.

I remember one time my mother came to me and said, "Clare, I want you to tiptoe out to the arbor and see what's going on there. Reverdy's out there with Sam Foss and I haven't heard a sound out of them for an hour or more."

The arbor was a kind of little bower covered with honeysuckle. There was only a tiny little door, and the honeysuckle strands hung so thick over it the arbor was a kind of dark, sweet-smelling cave. Reverdy and I used to play house there. I knew I ought to say I wouldn't go spying on Reverdy, but I wanted to please Mother, so I went creeping out toward the arbor, holding my breath, walking on my toes. I didn't know then—but I've found out since—you can't do a thing without becoming that thing. When I started out to look for Reverdy I was her little sister, loving her. But creeping that way, holding my breath, spying, I became a spy. My hands got heavy and hot and my mouth dry, and I wanted to see her doing . . . whatever it was . . . Mother was fearful of.

And then when I got to the arbor and peeped in, I saw that Chummie, our ten-year-old brother, was there with them, and they were all practicing sign language. Deaf and dumb language was the rage with kids that summer, and there was that big Sam Foss sitting cross-legged, practicing sign language so hard he was sweating. They had oranges rolled until they were soft, and straws stuck in them to suck the juice out.

That's all they were doing. Practicing deaf and dumb language, and sucking oranges that way, playing they were bottles of pop. I guess they'd taken a vow not to talk, because nobody said a word. Even when Reverdy saw me peeping in she didn't say anything but just spelled out, "Hello, Sister." But my hands felt so hot and swollen I couldn't spell a thing, and I just stood there and stared until I heard

Mother call me to her, where she was standing strained and waiting on the back steps.

"They're playing sign-language with Chummie," I told her.

"Is Chummie with them?" she asked and her face relaxed and had a sort of shamed look on it, I thought.

I went in the house and put on the old dress I went swimming in, and floated around in the irrigation canal until supper was over and so I wouldn't have to sit and look across the table at Reverdy.

Things like that were always happening. I loved Reverdy more than anybody, and I hated Mother sometimes for spying and suspecting and lecturing. But I wanted people to love me. And especially you want your mother to love you—isn't that true? And no one loved me—the way Reverdy was loved. I wasn't beautiful and spontaneous—I had to work hard and do good deeds to be loved. I couldn't be free the way Reverdy was. I was always thinking of the effect I was making. I couldn't say, "Goodbye for now," and let people go to hell if they didn't like me. I was afraid they'd never come back . . . and I'd be left . . . alone. But Reverdy didn't care. She liked being alone—and that's the reason people loved her, I guess.

One evening in October, when it was almost dark, I was coming home from the library, coasting across lots in the hot dry Santa Ana that had been blowing all day. Cool weather had already come, and then three days of this hot wind. Dust everywhere. Under your eyelids, between your fingers, in your mouth. When we went to school in the morning the first thing we'd do would be to write our names in the dust on our desks. I had on a skirt full of pleats that evening, and I pulled the pleats out wide so the skirt made a sort of sail and the wind almost pushed me along. I watched the tumble weeds blowing, and listened to the wind in the clump of eucalyptus by the barn, and felt miserable and gritty. Then I saw Reverdy walking up and down the driveway by the house and I felt suddenly glad. Reverdy loved the wind, even Santa Ana's, and she was always out walking or running when the wind blew, if she didn't have any work to do. She liked to carry a scarf in her hand and hold it up in the wind so she could feel it tug and snap. When I saw Reverdy I forgot how dusty and hot the wind was and remembered only how alive it was and how Reverdy loved it. I ran toward her but she didn't wave or say a word, and when she reached the end of the driveway she turned her back on me and started walking toward the barn.

Before I had a chance to say a word to her, Mother came to the door and called to me to come in and not talk to Reverdy. As soon as I heard her voice before I could see her face, I knew there was some trouble—some trouble with Reverdy—and I knew what kind of trouble, too. I went in the house and shut the door. The sound of Reverdy's footsteps on the pepper leaves in the driveway outside stopped and Mother put her head out of the window and said, "You're to keep walking, Reverdy, and not stop. Understand? I want to hear footsteps and I want them to be brisk." Then she closed the window, though it was hard to do against the wind.

I stood with my face to the window and looked out into the dusty, windy dark where I could just see Reverdy in her white dress walking up and down, never stopping, her head bent, not paying any attention to the wind she loved. It made me feel sick to see her walking up and down there in the dusty dark like a homeless dog, while we were snug inside.

But Mother came over to the window and took the curtain out of my hand and put it back over the glass. Then she put her arm around my shoulders and pressed me close to her and said, "Mother's own dear girl who has never given her a moment's trouble."

That wasn't true. Mother had plenty of fault to find with me usually . . . but it was sweet to have her speak lovingly to me, to be cherished and appreciated. Maybe you can't understand that, maybe your family was always loving, maybe you were always dear little daughter, or maybe, a big golden wonder-boy. But not me and not my mother. So try to understand how it was with me, then, and how happy it made me to have Mother put her arms about me. Yes, I thought, I'm Mother's comfort. And I forgot I couldn't make a boy look at me if I wanted to and blamed Reverdy for not being able to steer clear of them the way I did. She just hasn't any consideration for any of us, I decided. Oh, I batted on Reverdy's downfall all right.

Then Father and Chummie came in and Mother took Father away to the kitchen and talked to him there in a fast, breathless voice. I couldn't hear what she was saying, but I knew what she was talking about, of course. Chummie and I sat there in the dark. He whirled first one way and then another on the piano stool.

"What's Reverdy doing walking up and down outside there?" he asked.

"She's done something bad again," I told him.

Mother's voice got higher and higher and Chummie said he'd have to go feed his rabbits, and I was left alone in the dark listening to her, and to Reverdy's footsteps on the pepper leaves. I decided to light the lights, but when I did—we had acetylene lights—the blue-white glare was so terrible I couldn't stand it. Not to sit alone in all that light and look at the dusty room and listen to the dry sound of the wind in the palms outside, and see Reverdy's books on the library table where she'd put them when she got home from school, with a big bunch of wilted asters laid across them. Reverdy always kept her room filled with flowers, and if she couldn't get flowers she'd have leaves or grasses.

No, I couldn't stand that, so I turned out the lights and sat in the dark and listened to Reverdy's steps, not fast or light now, but heavy and slow . . . and I sat there and thought I was Mother's comforter . . . not causing her trouble like Reverdy.

Pretty soon I heard Mother and Father go outside, and then their voices beneath the window. Father was good, and he was for reason, but with Mother he lost his reason. He was just like me, I guess. He wanted Mother to love him, and because he did he would go out and say to Reverdy the things Mother wanted him to say.

Chummie came back from feeding his rabbits and sat with me in the dark room. Then I got the idea of a way to show Mother how much I was her comfort and mainstay, her darling younger daughter, dutiful and harmonious as hell. Mother wanted me and Chummie to be musical—she'd given up with Reverdy—but Chummie and I had taken lessons for years. Usually we kicked and howled at having to play, so, I thought, if we play now it will show Mother how thoughtful and reliable we are. It will cheer her up while she's out there in the wind talking to that bad Reverdy. Yes, she will think, I have one fine, dependable daughter, anyway.

So I said to Chummie, "Let's play something for Mother." So he got out his violin and we played that piece I've ever afterwards hated. Over and over again, just as sweet as we could make it. Oh, I felt smug as hell as I played. I sat there on the piano stool with feet just so, and my hands just so, and played carefully, every note saying, "Mother's comfort. Mother's comfort. Played by her good fine, reliable daughter."

We could hear Mother's high voice outside the window and Reverdy's low murmur now and then. Chummie finally got tired of playing—the music wasn't saying anything to him—and went out to the

kitchen to get something to eat. I went too, but the minute I took a bite I knew I wasn't hungry, and Chummie and I went to bed. I lay in bed a long time waiting to hear Mother and Reverdy come in but there wasn't any sound but the wind.

I was asleep when Reverdy did come in. She sat down on the side of my bed, and it was just her sitting there that finally awakened me. Then, when I was awake she picked up my hand and began to press my finger-tips one by one, and spoke in the sweetest, kindest voice. You'd never have thought to hear her that she had just spent four or five hours the way she did.

She said, "I'll never forget your playing for me, Sister. Never. Never. It was kind and beautiful of you. Just when I thought I was all alone I heard you telling me not to be sad." Then she leaned over and kissed me and said, "Good night, now. I've put some asters in water for you. They're a little wilted but I think they'll be all right by morning. Go to sleep, now. I'll never forget, Clare."

If I could only have told her,—if I could only have told her then. If I could have said to her, "I was playing for Mother, Reverdy. I guess I was jealous of your always having the limelight. I wanted to be first for once." If I could only have said, "I love you more than anything, Reverdy, but I have a mean soul," she would have put her cheek to mine and said, "Oh, Clare, what a thing to say."

But I couldn't do it and next morning she was gone. And there on the table by my bed were the asters she had left for me, grown fresh over night.