

New Mexico Quarterly

Volume 17 | Issue 2

Article 4

1947

Reconciliation

Sandra Babb

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

Recommended Citation

Babb, Sandra. "Reconciliation." *New Mexico Quarterly* 17, 2 (1947). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol17/iss2/4>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *New Mexico Quarterly* by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

RECONCILIATION

Sanora Babb

THE TWO OF THEM sat on the back step in the afternoon shade of the tall Moorish house. The woman was delicately friendly, almost arrogant. She glanced at her husband's face, seeing an instant of grief pass slowly into resentment and slowly back. An urgent feeling of warm concern erased her arrogance.

The February sun lay on the steep side of the sumac-rough hill and hot on the white wall of the big house on its crest. The Southern California winter was moving imperceptibly into spring. The man held a garden hose sending a long, thin spray of water far up the wild and unkept yard. As if it were an unusual pleasure, he danced the spray over the geraniums, the tall cacti, the low succulent floor, the narcissus, the banana tree. The water plopped gently on the great papyrus leaves and the fiery poinsettias. He pointed the hose upward into the pepper trees and down carefully over the tender sorrel and the shaggy grass. The slope was a designless mass of color. Purple lantana and cerise bougainvillæa dropped over the low rock wall which separated the level strip from the hill. In odd places a strange plant had risen from a hidden bulb, bloomed, and disappeared.

"A wild man must have planned this yard," she said. "Or perhaps the wind dropped these seeds in the neglected years when the house was alone."

"The yard went crazy while *you* were gone," he said significantly. "It's all right with care." She ignored him. He wants me to feel guilty in every way, she thought.

The heat came delicately into the shade. The woman pulled the long silk dressing gown above her knees and slid her bare feet along the cool tile walk. The man looked at her feet.

"Small, but strong and even," he said quietly, reminiscently, as if they were lost to him.

She was still, listening and feeling the spring coming up subtly through the warmth of this ever-flowering land.

A radio symphony, low and soft, suddenly mounted loud into their silence.

"Tschaikowsky," he said.

"Yes. Turn the radio off," she said gently. "I like it but I want to listen to the little things here."

"The Fifth," he said as if to change her mind, but he got up.

When he came back a fat rusty-rump thrush was drinking from a big leaf near the wall. The bird sat boldly on until he was full.

"I wish I could smell a creek," she said. "Run the water along the wall again. Sometimes in the evening when the hill is cooling, there's the odor of a strong plant out there, and something about it, just a trace, of that wild place."

"What wild place?"

"You know, the one when I was a little girl, that strange, wild place. It's my grandfather, and a lot of things I don't even understand."

She broke a twig and started a design on the damp ground. He looked at her and she was far away, farther away than when she spoke of any other place.

"You lived so many places. I don't know about this one."

"Really?"

"Where was it, now?"

"Colorado. The plains. Except that this place was below the plains like a ragged edge below the rim of the earth. My mother used to say it was the jumping-off place of the world. It was a lonely spot and she hated it. But Konkie, my grandfather, and I, we loved it, and it was like a secret between us of which we never spoke. I understand it now. My mother was a young woman, my grandfather was old, and I was a child. We were on the edges of her kind of loneliness."

"You understand that now?"

"Do you?" she asked cruelly.

She drew a long straight line on the bare earth, and parallel to it a curving one.

"The rock precipice was like this. It must have been a hundred feet tall. Over its face were the little pocket nests of swallows. Here was the creek winding between the wall and the cottonwoods on its

other bank. The wide bed was white sand, and the stream was only a few inches deep."

"I'll bet you used to play there," he said uncomfortably.

"Yes," she said dreamily. "I would slide down the steep bank holding onto the willow roots, or leap off into the sand. No one ever came. We were many miles from anyone, so I often wore no clothes, only a sunbonnet. I made dams and caught minnows, or hunted anything, or lay on my belly and pretended to swim. In the evening the kildees ran along the creek bed like arrows. They made a plaintive call." She was silent for a moment. "That cry—wild and lonely—in that desolate place . . . it's"

"It's the way you feel now," he said, and his eyes, as she looked up, said, "with me." But there was no accusation. She could not even touch his hand now, feeling withdrawn and unrelated.

Her thoughts held him, the other one, in an intense moment of solitude for her lost desire. Only tenderness remained and she would not defile what had happened by denial of its meaning. These two did not conflict; one took nothing of her from the other. But pride, humiliation, possession, and a thousand other tendrils of instinct and custom made resolution necessary. Still that resolution now was little more than her self-contained presence, so because she must not humiliate him with guilty kindness. How could there be guilt without shame or ugliness? Only the participant was free to understand this. There was only sorrowing regret in her to hurt someone loved.

"What else was it like?" he asked impersonally.

She drew her thoughts back to the place and time which were rising from her memory in unbidden, urgent force. She made new lines on the map, and after a bit she spoke again.

"Up on the narrow ledge which was our yard there were many places to play. There were three levels, you see, the creek, the yard, the prairie. A steep road curved down from the plain, which was really all the rest of the world, and into our yard. The far end of the yard curved into the high wall so that we lived on a shelf. Around the house like a narrow collar ran the edge, and we could get into the yard ten feet below only by a path at the front and back. The path was almost straight up and down. Everywhere was shale, the yard had no grass, only rocks and snakes. But along the creek we had planted a patch of alfalfa. It is a lovely plant, tender and green, and its purple blooms perfumed the air for miles."

"Why are you so full of memories? Are you telling the old ones, thinking the new ones?"

She saw his eyes cruel for a moment with jealousy. He directed the water hard against the wall and a fine spray came back upon them.

"Between the house and the barn near the wall"—she drew more lines across the narrow yard—"were a small dark canyon, and a perfect rock room with a red berry tree at its door where the mocking birds sang, and a narrow path leading up to the plain. This path climbed in the only place which was not a precipice, and it was hard to get a footing even here. On the prairie above was our garden. It seems absurd to have had a garden there. Why didn't we have it in a corner of the alfalfa plot? My father was not a farmer, but he was intelligent."

She drew a fence around the garden.

"Anyway, we had a garden there and could never raise anything but potatoes and squashes and watermelons. I shall never forget the wonder of going each morning to see the growth of a melon in the night. Konkie and I would climb the path every morning and push the leaves aside and look at the melons. I could feel his excitement and I know he felt mine. In the evening we would carry buckets of water up to the plain."

"Had you no crops?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, we had broomcorn and kaffir and maize and cane in a field upon the plain. The field was two miles from the house and all of us worked there. We would take water and food, and work all day, resting at the ends of the rows. In the summer we worked with large knives chopping the stalks and laying them in bundles to dry, then shocking them later. The shocks were like tepees and in the autumn I played Indian in them."

He looked at her delicate-boned wrists and slender legs.

"Walking in a field, swinging a heavy knife."

She smiled at him now.

"Why didn't you make money?"

"Because those were the dry lands. There were magnificent storms winter and summer but almost never any rain. Only the irrigated portions owned by the big farmers could raise crops successfully. Usually, our crops burned up in the fields. Much of that country is irrigated now, but when we lived there we were pioneering the margin lands."

"Well," he said, "it sounds like a very dramatic place, and I imagine life was more interesting then than now."

"Oh, no, but it was interesting, if you can call it that while it's happening. We were terribly poor. Life was hard."

"But it didn't seem hard then, did it? I mean to you?"

"Yes. When people are that poor it seems hard even to children no matter how full of imagination and pretense they are. Hunger is a hard thing, and we were almost always hungry. Memory doesn't enhance that."

"Really hungry," he stated to himself. He could never believe it and somehow he resented it.

"I remember a kind of final day when my mother sold her wedding ring for flour and lard."

"Did she ever get another?"

"No," but there was a white band on her finger for a long time. She used to laugh sometimes and call it the shadow of her marriage."

"Did she mind very much?"

"Well, I suppose she did, but we never carried on about any of the things that happened to us."

"Why was that?"

"Because, I suppose, getting voluntarily upset was a luxury we couldn't afford. No telling what would have happened if my mother had ever let go. My father was a spendthrift of energy and emotions. He had a violent temper and he let it loose often. It used to pounce upon us at unsuspecting moments like a savage animal. He couldn't stand the pressure of our lives."

"You wouldn't say that of your grandfather, would you?"

"He couldn't stand the pressure of responsible living."

"Oh."

"My father kept at it."

"Your grandfather was a very handsome man?"

"Yes. He was tall and brown with long hands and fierce black eyes that seemed strangely to conceal their fire."

"Perhaps his appearance explains some things."

"Perhaps, though only a little," she said. "I believe there's some pressure attached to being so alive and handsome. More distractions from the hard duty."

"Yes, for a beautiful woman as well. It would have been easier to have a homely wife."

It seemed to her he was sincere, perhaps forgiving her. "There are many beautiful women," she said. "You should not take it so seriously."

"Well, you are other things too, good things. That's the trouble." She was silent.

"Well, go on," he said. She hurried into the first memory brought up by the sight of the water running in the lines she had drawn on the ground.

"When the snow melted in the Rockies which we couldn't even see, suddenly one day we would hear a terrific roar and see a high wall of water rushing through the creek bed, tearing at the banks. Each spring a little more of our yard was torn away. When the well went we had to leave. But that was a long time after."

She returned to filling in the map she had made on the earth.

"My father was like that water. Without warning he would terrify my grandfather and me. I used to think he hated us both, but perhaps not. One night he stormed and threatened so much that Konkie and I went up on the plain. That night I felt he would kill him, and Konkie felt it too."

"Surely not!"

"It is hard to know. We were afraid. We walked for a long time on the plain. The air was like a pearl with moonlight and every star was showing in the tall sky. After a while the beauty of the night came into our minds and there was no space for the trouble we had carried out of the house. My grandfather was a sensitive man, and very quiet. We spoke in odd ways, seldom with words, but there was a warm understanding between us."

"I'm sure of it," he said rather sharply.

"That night I remember how his long shadow leaned on the plain, and how he would glance far down from his tallness to me and nod quick and sidewise. In that nod was all the sorrow he felt for the words and the hate from which we had fled. He would lay his long bony hand on my shoulder and leave it there for awhile as we walked. 'Don't tremble,' he would say gently. Just for a moment I would see his black eyes in a tender caress, and then he would lift his head and his eyes would be looking far away, secret with the thoughts of his own world. It seemed to me then that I understood the essence, if not the words, of every thought he had."

"He must have been an unusual man."

"He was, in himself, but he had his weaknesses. In his youth when his wife died he almost drank himself to death. And all his life he suffered the defeats of not trying rather than come up hard against the world."

"You are sentimental about his weaknesses. Perhaps they seemed picturesque?"

"No!" Her heart beat hard with a flare of anger and in a moment of silence quieted again. "No. But I could never hold them against him, not knowing the cause. He may have been miserable with them, and I could not help him then."

He adjusted the nozzle and set a fine round spray against the crooked fuchsia branches. The little bell flowers with their long stamen ding-donging in the shower clung briefly and fell to the ground. She retrieved several and put them in her hair. He handed her two more for earrings.

"Once," she said, "when my feelings were hurt, Konkie suggested we walk to the nearest town. It was a store and post office in a shack seven miles away. My father was in the field on the prairie, walking in the deep furrow behind the plow. It was like a betrayal to go to town as he worked, but I washed my feet, put on a clean dress, and we walked."

He looked at her feet again.

"Oh," she smiled, "my feet were hard then from going barefoot. It took a long time and there was no shade all the way. We got a cold drink at the artesian well. My grandfather asked for the mail and bought a little flour. It had to be charged till harvest. He wanted tobacco for his pipe and I longed for candy, but we had a rule that those luxuries were bought only with cash. While he visited with the old store-keeper, I hung over a bean-barrel and gazed into the candy case. When my grandfather could think of nothing more to say, he did not call me to him but walked to me. The grocer walked along behind the counter. I was ashamed that my desire had been so urgent as to make me forgetful of my manners."

"Are you often ashamed?" he asked with a crisp and intimate smile.

"He knew I was hungry, and yet he reached in the case and brought out a small hard piece of candy, the smallest there. I felt my grandfather's sharp finger against my shoulder blade. 'Thank you,' I

whispered in a terror of shyness. The grocer waited for me to eat it, he waited to see my gratitude again, and as if that weren't enough, he said, 'Eat it!' I'm sure he meant no harm; it was a small event to help along the lonely day. I whispered, 'No,' and put the candy, already sticky from the heat of my palm, into my pocket.

"By the sun it was after four o'clock when we started back. We drank from the artesian well again. Konkie had a letter in his pocket for my mother. It would be like a gift. The bag of flour he attached to a thin rope and flung over his shoulder. Outside of town he decided to save his shoes and tied the strings together to saddle them over his other shoulder."

She rested her chin in her palms and spoke as if she were thinking aloud. He sat listening now as if he must hear what she had to say.

"We felt happy because we were moving. Konkie sang a little song about tramping over this wide, weary world. I've been nearly all over the land, he said, *afoot*. America is a beautiful country. It's a shame everybody can't see it.

"Is it like this? I asked. Well, he said, this is it too, and a lot more besides—all kinds of people and all kinds of scenery. I tried to imagine it but all I knew was the flat plain like a round plate with a sky for the lid. I looked as far as I could see and tried to think about America. It was the first time I had thought about America; it was like hearing your own name in a new way. He looked down at me and said, Now, don't let it confound you. There's a whole world. Whenever your dad can get near a school or move to town, you'll learn. Meanwhile I aim to teach you what I can. Last winter you learned to read the papers on the walls. This winter you can read my book, and I'll tell you things. This book isn't much but it's all I have; so I read it over and over. It's called *The Adventures of Kit Carson*. But it's summer now! he said.

"We walked in silence for a while and then he said, Half my life I've wanted to go to a place called Costa Rica. There's a river there named Reventazón. I read it once somewhere—'the wild Reventazón'—and I've never been able to get it out of my head. Will you go? I asked him, taking it for granted because my grandfather disappeared and reappeared several times a year. No, he said, I can't tread water. If I worked and saved for the trip, I'd die before I'd saved enough; if I don't work, I can't go. That's life, but, mind you, it's not the way it should be. So, I work a little and walk.

"It's a shame," she said, "that he never saw the 'wild Reventazón.' It is wild, and strong, and it rushes along the feet of great mountains softly green with moist grass, and coffee and banana trees."

Her husband turned his head and looked at her for a long time but he said nothing.

"Konkie was silent all the rest of the way. When we came in sight of our field, the sun was going down, sending a fan of colored beams all over the west. My father and the horses were little black figures against the sun. We watched him come to the end of the row and unhitch the horses. He picked up his water jug, and stopped to look at a snake he had hung over the fence. Holding the lines, he walked off behind the horses toward home. We were still a long way off but in the clear desert air we could see all these things well.

"In my time, my grandfather said, I have had many dreams. It always seemed to me I was patterned for something, but I could never make it come out. When he spoke in this way I knew he was speaking to himself, so I watched my father walking over the plain. Often I did not like him because we were strangers, but for all this and his wild anger, there he was, tired and perhaps lonely, after a hard and sober day working to get our food and the rent for the farm. Perhaps he had his dreams too but there was no room in our world for this other part of him, and he was angry. I thought if I could plant these two men I loved like seeds in another soil they might come up one beautiful plant, one person. Then, I should not be divided and neither should they.

"The summer dusk was rising up around our feet when we reached the edge of the plain where we went down the precipice to our yard. The unharnessed horses were going into the alfalfa with their mouths dripping water. We splashed water on our faces at the well and washed our feet.

"In the house, Konkie gave my mother the letter, and I tried to break the sticky candy in two. I wanted to give my father a gift for the sight of us going to town."

"How silly."

"Perhaps."

"The point is," her husband said abruptly, "you really like a man who will go out of his way to give you some rather foolish emotional satisfaction better than one who works hard to give you the more important things."

"Sometimes," she said, "I think such a man would work the same to give *himself* the *important things*. Don't you?"

"That's hardly the point. And it leaves out love—his love."

"I was speaking only of my life."

"I realize that," he said meaningfully.

"Well, it is past and my grandfather is dead."

"Your grandfather is *never* dead! He is the universal fascinator!"

She wanted to strike him.

He waved the hose over the grass without interest. She looked at his blonde head and the reddish Sunday whiskers, the cool face turned away, the emotion hidden, controlled.

The long, Moorish shadow of the house had crept up to the top of the hill. Suddenly a mocking bird sang from a eucalyptus tree near the street and flew into the tree above them. Others sang wildly.

"That's their dawn chorus," she said. "They've got mixed up."

He turned off the water and went indoors. She had wanted to put her hand on his arm, against his loneliness, but she could not. It would be like a further betrayal. Sometime, perhaps, not now.

She could hear him faintly, her ears long familiar with the sounds from the house. He was searching through the record albums. These were his refuge. Suddenly she felt irritated with her easy, thoughtless conclusions of him. Had her love been his music? Perhaps the music was his expression for that part of him submerged to silence, as the story she had been telling was her discontent, her loneliness, her plea. They had found no way to be friends and could not speak directly.

The beautiful and disturbing music of Scriabin's "Poem of Ecstasy" disquieted the dusk.

She had needed him; she had shown him only in a cruel way, thinking of herself, and he had gone into the house consumed with his own need. She drew the stick across her drawings on the earth, and listened for a long time, as if she were hearing the words in his heart.

The music moved into the "Poem of Fire." She stood up and walked through the deep grass to the end of the yard which dropped steeply into a narrow canyon. Some radiant energy, long bound by the weight of confusion and opposing desires, demanded release. Not in flood, but in a long full stream, beginning now, flowing through their relationship and beyond it into many things. It would not be easy. She hardly knew how to begin. Perhaps only a little thing at first and then on and on until this enmity of strangers had dissolved

between them, freeing them, as much as one is ever freed, to tend their lives. This waste of self-absorption in a world of many needs was shameful, and yet shame was unknown or forgotten in that aching void between them. A carelessly abandoned hope came softly into her thought of him. Some day he would listen to his music in fullness, not in desolation. And she would not be speaking of her loneliness, or hiding it.

Like an inverted sky the city far below in the valley was bejewelled with street-lamp stars. A low wind smelling of the sea came in gently to the great hills. She turned back toward the house. Under the desperate music and the quick winter dark, she could hear the foolish frogs singing as if nothing great or small would ever be changed in the world. She hesitated a moment thinking of flight. The frogs were singing of eternal, innocently, blindly. She opened the door and went in quietly, wanting to be known, and to know him whom she had not fully known before.