

1947

## Another Word Entirely

Jessamyn West

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

---

### Recommended Citation

West, Jessamyn. "Another Word Entirely." *New Mexico Quarterly* 17, 1 (1947). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol17/iss1/11>

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](mailto:disc@unm.edu).

## ANOTHER WORD ENTIRELY

*Jessamyn West*

**W**HEN THE DOORMAN at the St. Mark saw that particular car he wondered which girl it was, but both were pale and both looked to have been crying. Both were young, but he had seen them younger; and both looked like college girls, but then they often did and often were. This was the first time; otherwise they would have known better than to come with that chauffeur and in that car. He didn't suppose they had had sufficient foresight to arrange for a room reservation, and he said automatically to the chauffeur, whom he knew by sight, "There aren't any vacancies."

One of the girls, the larger, the one with the big diamond and the broad wedding ring said, "Kurt Leitner reserved a room for us here."

That was different, of course; so he nodded to the chauffeur in a way he could see the girls didn't like, opened the door of the big black car, beckoned to a boy, and himself helped the girls out. The small fair one, the one with the worn kolinsky and the crushed hat on the back of her head, came out of the car without putting any of her weight on his arm, but the large dark one accepted his help naturally.

After the girls had gone inside he said to the chauffeur, "How's business these days?" but the chauffeur didn't feel jovial. "It's not a business, it's a racket," he said.

"How's the racket?" the doorman persisted, but the chauffeur still didn't want to talk about it. "Roll down that wide window, will you?" he asked.

The doorman rolled it down. "Fine spring weather we're having," he said, but the chauffeur didn't want to talk about that either. He meshed gears with the oily smoothness of a man who hasn't been driving a good car long and is proud both of his car and his skill, and moved out into the east-bound traffic without further talk.

After the chauffeur left, the doorman, with a kind of morbid curiosity, stepped inside to see how the girls were getting on. The small, fair one was sitting, her head against the chair's tapestry back, her eyes closed. Her companion was at the desk filling in a registration card. When they had finished and a bell boy had taken them to the elevators he went up to the desk and asked the room clerk if he knew how the girls had arrived. He didn't, of course; so the doorman had the pleasure of telling him. Then he said what he was saying to everyone that morning, "Wonderful weather we're having," and went back to his post where the warm sun, which made the weather what it was, was shining even more pleasantly than it had before he went inside.

The wonderful weather had had its part in their undertaking; though influencing, of course, only the way they felt about it. They were far beyond weather as an agent which could alter or postpone their arrangements for that day. But free as their acts were of weather, their feelings were not so emancipated, and it was impossible for them swinging wide their casement windows into the serene March morning, not to feel in spite of everything that this was a time of beginning again . . . not ending.

Margaret, who easily blamed herself, stood gazing across the bay at San Francisco, as if its sharpness of outline were a rebuke, not to the fogs which so often obscured the city, but to her own eyes for failing to see well and clearly what was always there and always clear. The morning was still and bright with so little moisture in the air that the sea as water seemed to have vanished, to have been replaced by the sea as metal: a vast, somewhat dented sheet of shining steel from whose surface great shafts of reflected light were thrown upward onto the already shining city.

Margaret, still in her night gown, thrust a bare arm out into the light and warmth, and said, "The bay looks like metal. It would be a good time to try walking on water;" then she could have bitten out her tongue because Cathy had mourned as much about not being able (she said) to set foot in church again, as anything else, and this might remind her of it. But if it did, she gave no sign. When Margaret turned away from the window, Cathy was packing as methodically as if no word had been spoken. Her dressing gown, pajamas, and toilet articles were already in her bag and she was sorting through her books.

"Let's not duplicate stuff," Cathy said. "I've got Legouis and

Cazamian, Restoration Drama, Swift, Milton, the 18th Century. You take what else we need."

"O. K.," said Margaret, getting out of her night gown and going toward the shower. "I'll take Saintsbury, the romantic poets. . . ."

"Oh, God," Cathy said, "no romantic poets!"

Margaret stopped, surprised, then went on into the shower. She turned on the water quickly as if its sounds might keep Cathy from overhearing her thoughts. She was determined to exist for the next day or two only for Cathy; still Cathy had, as much as she, to prepare for this exam; they had both postponed and postponed, and now no matter how great the excuse they could postpone no longer. The romantic poets would have to go with them . . . Lake Lemman . . . the Wedding-Guest . . . the magic casements . . . even the dome of many-colored glass. . . .

When she came out of the shower Cathy held out to Margaret her fine, broad, new-fashioned wedding ring, her big emerald cut diamond.

"Take these," she said.

Margaret took the rings in her damp hand. "Take them and do what with them?"

"Take them and wear them!" Cathy snapped.

Then as Margaret still held the rings in her hand, making no move to put them on, Cathy said humbly, "I think it would look better if one of us were married."

"Well, one of us is," Margaret answered, bewildered.

"Oh, no," said Cathy, beginning commandingly, then breaking down. "Oh, no, I can't bear that. I can't bear to have them think that. You wear them, Margaret, please."

"I've already told them you were married," Margaret said doubtfully.

"You know that doesn't matter," Cathy told her scornfully. "Wear them," she urged. "I want them with me, but not on me. You can understand that, can't you?"

Margaret wasn't sure.

"And it will look so much more. . . ." Cathy floundered, hunting for a word . . . "responsible," she said, and repeated, "responsible . . . for one of us to be married."

Responsible, Margaret thought pityingly, as she shoved Cathy's rings down on her finger. For a minute, as they settled in place, it seemed that Cathy might snatch them away, cry distractedly, "What

are you doing with my rings?" But she watched silently, then turned away to finish her dressing. When Margaret came out of the bathroom, Cathy, except for putting on her coat and hat, was ready to leave.

"Cathy," Margaret asked, "why are you wearing that?"

Cathy had on a suit, once good, but now half out at the elbows, in need of pressing and stained with the red clay which she had picked up on her rambles about Grizzly Peak.

"That's so awful," Margaret said; "dirty, falling to pieces."

"I don't want them to think I'm rich," Cathy said stubbornly.

"The price is all arranged," Margaret said, misunderstanding. "It's a set fee. It doesn't matter what they think."

Cathy was really angry then. "Price, price," she said. "What do I care about price?"

Nothing at all. Margaret knew on second thought, not a thing. Then she wondered what *does* she mean, and Cathy repeated, as if answering her, "I just don't want them to think I've got money."

Margaret considered this as she finished her dressing: she doesn't want to look rich, she doesn't want to look married, she doesn't want to look pretty; she doesn't want, really, to look like herself for a day or two, she decided. Afterwards she would like it to be as if this had happened to someone else.

Once inside their taxi which had come exactly on time, at ten, Cathy had begun to worry about their hotel reservation.

"Did you check on it?" she asked. "Did you call them?"

"You know I did," Margaret said patiently.

"What did they say?"

Cathy knew very well what they had said, but Margaret told her again. "They said, yes, a double room had been reserved for Mrs. Bernard Stratton Warring, by her father, Kurt Leitner."

"Why did he have to choose the St. Mark?" Cathy complained. "Always bragging about having once had stage coaches in their dining room. I really hate the St. Mark."

Margaret said nothing. Cathy knew as well as she did that they were lucky with the room shortage what it was to have a place anywhere, and that Kurt Leitner was only able to get a room for them at all because he had through Paramount some sort of pull at the St. Mark. Listening to Cathy talk with her father in Beverly Hills, Margaret had expected at any minute to see Cathy replace the receiver, accept one of her father's no's as final; but Cathy had persisted, arguing that it

was impossible to get any studying done where they lived; that if she were to pass the examination at all, and her father knew how much that meant to her, she must get away from interruptions, and the best place for that was a hotel. It wasn't only best; it was necessary, she had said. "Absolutely necessary, Father," she insisted; "otherwise I wouldn't be bothering you about it at all." And Cathy's father had been convinced finally that this was so.

And in a sense, it was so. They did have, absolutely, to get away from the House for two or three days, and this being true, where, except to a hotel, could they go?

When the bell boy, his demonstrations that keys turn, doors open, windows move, had finished, Margaret helped Cathy out of her clothes and into bed; she herself sat in the mulberry wing chair in the corner opposite the bed and across from the window. She put her books on her lap and determined to study, not just at once, but presently.

For a time she watched Cathy, who seemed to be sleeping, but perhaps wasn't; for across her eyes Margaret saw those tremors pass which result when will, not sleep, has closed the lids. Then she looked away from Cathy to the brick wall of the building opposite their window, where a painter, very precariously balanced, it seemed to her, upon a narrow plank held in place by ropes, was methodically working. Her own muscles tautened with fear as the man bent to dip his brush in paint, or reached high to make a sweeping stroke. An inch or two of miscalculation would send him plunging downward fifteen stories to the street below.

Then she relaxed. He is absolutely safe, she thought, so long as I keep an eye on him. I have seen so much today, that not another . . . untoward . . . thing can happen in my sight. For a second she felt as if she could by her look alone, stop any kind of disaster; that should the painter make a misstep she would only have to regard him steadily to cause his falling body to move upward and back onto the safety of the plank.

Then she was ashamed of herself . . . so self-regarding, she thought, you, who only waited while Cathy—but Cathy herself interrupted this thinking. Suddenly, she sat bolt upright, said, "Hand me the pillow off your bed, will you, please, Margaret?"

Margaret got the pillow, quickly. "Don't you feel all right, Cathy?" she asked.

"I feel fine," Cathy said, but Margaret saw that her eyes were sunken and the skin about her mouth and nose was white.

"Thanks," said Cathy, "now give me my note book. I'm going to get to work."

"Do you think you ought?" Margaret asked. "Do you think . . . ." but Cathy interrupted her. "Yes," she said, "I do. I think I ought." So Margaret handed her her notebook, the two sulpha tablets she was to take every three hours, and a glass of water.

"Now," said Cathy, miscalculating the distance and setting the glass on the telephone stand so that it rocked uncertainly for a minute, "let's begin."

They began with the questions they had been collecting all year: first, the traditional questions, the ones that were said to be always asked; they went on to the trick questions, the trivial ones; they passed from these to the great fundamental interrogations of whose answers they were certain, but whose bulk they liked to touch now and then for the assurance the solidity of these possessions gave them; finally they reached the questions they had themselves devised to patch up the chinks, and make fool-proof the edifice of their knowledge.

And though they were now turned toward the safe past, the remote past of the literature of textbooks, sounds of the world they still inhabited continued to come to them through their locked door and in spite of the hall's thick carpeting: the rise and fall of elevators, the decisive click of a key, voices protesting, hesitating, declaring, the shiver of cutlery on a table moving with a mid-afternoon breakfast toward some sluggard, late a-bed.

Outside, the sunlight flowed across the brick buildings, across the painter who was safe so long as Margaret watched him, washed down into the canyon of the street, and there in a stream full, but ebbing, immersed the afternoon shoppers.

Cathy drank glass after glass of water; she was a little feverish now; besides, the sulpha tablets lay like particles of fire in the pit of her stomach; but she would not put down her notebook nor stop the questions and answers.

And all the questions moved in one direction and all the answers said the same thing. It's as if the whole of literature, Margaret thought, had been written simply to punctuate this day, this afternoon, this hour. As if no poet had ever spoken of anything but birth—or death; of

fidelity or infidelity, of love given or love betrayed, of absence or reunion. Where are the safe ones, the bucolic, the sweet, the simple, the melodious? The empty singers of an empty day?

She could not find them. Cathy could not find them. Surely there were other and better examples of the refrain than, "She said, 'I am weary, weary, I would that I were dead' " . . . . "Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds" is not Shakespeare's only sonnet nor his best, nor do all ballads begin, "I can not call her true that's false to me, nor make of women more than women be."

It was as if some kind of spell had been put upon them; as if they were condemned to say whatever word would speak most painfully to Cathy. Perhaps, Margaret thought, there is now no word in the world which is not in some way spoiled for Cathy; perhaps the very best words, morning, sunlight, child, are now forever ruined for her.

And it was not, finally, until they seemed to Margaret to have worked their way, by some lucky chance, out of those thickets of tormenting words and wounding images, that Cathy suddenly pushed all the papers, all the books that during the long afternoon had been collecting upon her bed, to the floor.

"I can't stand it," she said and slid down so that her head rested below the pillows and was partially hidden by them.

Margaret, remembering what she had heard of . . . was it embolism . . . dropped her own books to the floor and ran to Cathy's side.

"Cathy," she asked, "are you . . . is there something wrong. Are you sick . . . do you feel worse?"

"I feel just the same," said Cathy, and she put her hand where, earlier in the afternoon she had felt some pain, "but here," and she sat up and pressed her hands against her chest, "here, it is killing me."

What was there to say? Margaret heard, from the street below, the brisk and cheerful sounds of traffic quickening as the work day closed; she saw that at some moment, when she had not been watching him, the painter had left his platform; in the hall outside, a man's voice said, "If I'm not back by seven don't wait for me." She took Cathy's dry, hot hand in her own.

"I'm going to write Bernard," Cathy said. "I'm going to tell him. . . ."

"No," said Margaret, unbelieving, "no . . . ." This whole thing, danger . . . pain . . . wrongness . . . it had all been so that Bernard need



never know, so that he need never know at all . . . so that when, finally . . . he was free to come home, he would be without knowledge . . . forever ignorant, even of that other name, unless someone, maliciously . . . or so Margaret had believed . . . and now, suddenly, this change.

Cathy pulled her dry and burning hand from Margaret's, sat up, covered her face with both her hands. "Why did he ever have to come here?" she asked.

Then she took her hands from her face. "That's all over," she said. "Past. I'm going to write Bernard. Everything from now on, Margaret," she said, "is going to be absolutely perfect. I'm going to see to that . . . there's not going to be a single flaw anywhere. I'll give Bernard nothing but perfection from now on . . . I'll see to that . . . I'll watch everything."

She spoke so rapidly and breathlessly, so almost incoherently, that Margaret wondered if her fever were high enough to make her uncertain about what she was saying. She began to cry, but paid no attention to her tears except to wipe them away when they collected at the corners of her mouth. "I'm going to write him," she declared and asked Margaret to hand her the notebook and pen which she had pushed onto the floor.

"Everything perfect," she said, crying. . . . "My dear darling . . . I am going to tell you everything . . . what happened and how it was and then it will be as if it had never happened at all and for the rest of our lives I'll see that everything is perfect . . . nothing will ever go wrong again . . . you can count on me . . . you can trust me . . . I'll see to that. . . ."

She had begun to write, quite quickly, talking to Margaret as she did so. "I'm going to copy this," she said. . . . "It has to be perfect. I'll need some other paper. Hand me some, please."

Margaret went to the desk and took from the drawer some of the good St. Mark's stationery, but Cathy wouldn't have it. She tossed it to the floor without apology. "Oh, no," she said. "Certainly not. Not hotel paper. Public paper. Something anybody can use. I want good paper. Haven't you any good paper with you? Not lined; nothing printed on it?"

Margaret hadn't, she hadn't expected to be writing letters that week end, but by the time she said no, Cathy had forgotten paper in her hurried writing and speaking: speech directed sometimes toward

the absent Bernard, saying, my darling, my darling; sometimes toward Margaret saying, how do you spell this or that.

Once Margaret answered, "I'm not sure. This way I think."

"Think," Cathy flashed, looking up from her writing. "Don't you know? You don't, do you? Admit it. Oh, we're a couple of educated fools," she cried bitterly and snatched the phone from the table.

"Room service," she said. "Room service. I want a box of the best white writing paper, and a dictionary. No. No. Not a small one. A large one. Send out for it. Buy it. It's not six yet. Warring," she said. "Room 865."

She was crying again when she put the phone back on the table. "Can't they understand," she said, "that from now on, everything has to be perfect?"

The bell boy holding the slip, "Warring, Room 865, White writing paper. Large Dictionary," stood beside the doorman.

"Where's the nearest book store?" he asked. There was one near, he knew, but he wasn't sure in just what direction.

The doorman told him and remembering that name and number, added, laughing a little, "Those girls aren't going to find the word they're looking for in any dictionary." But he was quite wrong. The word was there and it was another word entirely.