

# Women Who Run With the Wolves

Clarissa Pinkola Estés

Published by Rider

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RIDER

WOMEN WHO  
RUN WITH  
THE WOLVES

Contacting the Power  
of the Wild Woman

Clarissa Pinkola Estés



RIDER

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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Published in 2008 by Rider, an imprint of Ebury Publishing  
A Random House Group Company

First published in the UK in 1992 by Rider

Published in paperback in 1993 by Rider

Reprinted 1993 (four times), 1994 (five times), 1995 (twice), 1996

Reissued in 1998

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by Cox and Wyman Ltd, Reading, Berkshire



ISBN 978-1-84-604109-9

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## CHAPTER I

# The Howl: Resurrection of the Wild Woman

### *La Loba, The Wolf Woman*

I must reveal to you that I am not one of the Divine who march into the desert and return gravid with wisdom. I've traveled many cookfires and spread angel bait round every sleeping place. But more often than the getting of wisdom, I've gotten indelicate episodes of *Giardiasis*, *E. coli*,<sup>1</sup> and amebic dysentery. Ai! Such is the fate of a middle-class mystic with delicate intestines.

Whatever wisdom or notion I espied on my travels to odd places and unusual people, I learned to shelter, for sometimes old father Academe, like Kronos, still has an inclination to eat the children before they can become either curative or astonishing. Over-intellectualization can obscure the patterns of the instinctual nature of women.

So, to further our kinship relationship with the instinctual nature, it assists greatly if we understand stories as though we are inside them, rather than as though they are outside of us. We enter into a story through the door of inner hearing. The spoken story touches the auditory nerve, which runs across the floor of the skull into the

brainstem just below the pons. There, auditory impulses are relayed upward to consciousness or else, it is said, to the soul . . . depending on the attitude with which one listens.

Ancient dissectionists spoke of the auditory nerve being divided into three or more pathways deep in the brain. They surmised that the ear was meant, therefore, to hear at three different levels. One pathway was said to hear the mundane conversations of the world. A second pathway apprehended learning and art. And the third pathway existed so the soul itself might hear guidance and gain knowledge while here on earth.

Listen then with soul-hearing now, for that is the mission of story.

Bone by bone, hair by hair, Wild Woman comes back. Through night dreams, through events half understood and half remembered, Wild Woman comes back. She comes back through story.

I began my own migration across the United States in the 1960s, looking for a settling place that was dense with trees, fragrant with water, and populated by the creatures I loved: bear, fox, snake, eagle, wolf. The wolves were being systematically exterminated from the upper Great Lakes region; no matter where I went, the wolves were being hounded in one way or another. Although many spoke of them as menaces, I always felt safer when there were wolves in the woods. Out West and in the North in those times, you could camp and hear the mountains and forest sing, sing, sing at night.

But, even there, the age of scope rifles, Jeep-mounted klieg lights, and arsenic "treats" caused an age of silence to creep over the land. Soon, the Rockies were almost empty of wolves too. That is how I came to the great desert which lies half in Mexico, half in the United States. And the further south I traveled, the more stories I heard about wolves.

You see, it is told that there is a place in the desert where the spirit of women and the spirit of wolves meet across time. I felt I was onto something when in the Texas borderlands I heard a story called "*Loba Girl*" about a woman who was a wolf who was a woman. Next I found the ancient Aztec story of orphaned twins being breast-fed by a she-wolf till the children were old enough to stand on their own.<sup>2</sup>

And finally, from the old Spanish land-grant farmers and Pueblo people of the Southwest, I heard one-line reports about the bone people, the old ones who bring the dead back to life; they were said to re-

store both humans and animals. Then, on one of my own ethnographic expeditions, I met a bone woman and have never been quite the same since. Allow me to present a firsthand account and introduction.

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### *La Loba*

THERE IS AN OLD WOMAN who lives in a hidden place that everyone knows in their souls but few have ever seen. As in the fairy tales of Eastern Europe, she seems to wait for lost or wandering people and seekers to come to her place.

She is circumspect, often hairy, always fat, and especially wishes to evade most company. She is both a crower and a cackler, generally having more animal sounds than human ones.

I might say she lives among the rotten granite slopes in Tarahumara Indian territory. Or that she is buried outside Phoenix near a well. Perhaps she will be seen traveling south to Monte Albán<sup>3</sup> in a burnt-out car with the back window shot out. Or maybe she will be spotted standing by the highway near El Paso, or riding shotgun with truckers to Morelia, Mexico, or walking to market above Oaxaca with strangely formed boughs of firewood on her back. She calls herself by many names: *La Huesera*, Bone Woman; *La Trapera*, The Gatherer; and *La Loba*, Wolf Woman.

The sole work of *La Loba* is the collecting of bones. She collects and preserves especially that which is in danger of being lost to the world. Her cave is filled with the bones of all manner of desert creatures: the deer, the rattlesnake, the crow. But her specialty is wolves.

She creeps and crawls and sifts through the *montañas*, mountains, and *arroyos*, dry riverbeds, looking for wolf bones, and when she has assembled an entire skeleton, when the last bone is in place and the beautiful white sculpture of the creature is laid out before her, she sits by the fire and thinks about what song she will sing.

And when she is sure, she stands over the *criatura*, raises her arms over it, and sings out. That is when the rib bones and leg bones of the wolf begin to flesh out and the creature becomes furred. *La Loba* sings some more, and more of the creature comes into being; its tail curls upward, shaggy and strong.

And *La Loba* sings more and the wolf creature begins to breathe.

And still *La Loba* sings so deeply that the floor of the desert shakes, and as she sings, the wolf opens its eyes, leaps up, and runs away down the canyon.

Somewhere in its running, whether by the speed of its running, or by splashing its way into a river, or by way of a ray of sunlight or moonlight hitting it right in the side, the wolf is suddenly transformed into a laughing woman who runs free toward the horizon.

So remember, if you wander the desert, and it is near sundown, and you are perhaps a little bit lost, and certainly tired, that you are lucky, for *La Loba* may take a liking to you and show you something—something of the soul.



We all begin as a bundle of bones lost somewhere in a desert, a dismantled skeleton that lies under the sand. It is our work to recover the parts. It is a painstaking process best done when the shadows are just right, for it takes much looking. *La Loba* indicates what we are to look for—the indestructible life force, the bones.

The work of *La Loba* can be thought of as representing *un-cuento milagro*, a miracle story. It shows us what can go right for the soul. It is a resurrection story about the underworld connection to Wild Woman. It promises that if we will sing the song, we can call up the psychic remains of the wild soul and sing her into a vital shape again.

*La Loba* sings over the bones she has gathered. To sing means to use the soul-voice. It means to say on the breath the truth of one's power and one's need, to breathe soul over the thing that is ailing or in need of restoration. This is done by descending into the deepest mood of great love and feeling, till one's desire for relationship with the wildish Self overflows, then to speak one's soul from that frame of mind. That is singing over the bones. We cannot make the mistake of attempting to elicit this great feeling of love from a lover, for this women's labor of finding and singing the creation hymn is a solitary work, a work carried out in the desert of the psyche.

Let us consider *La Loba* herself. In the symbolic lexicon of the psyche, the symbol of the Old Woman is one of the most widespread archetypal personifications in the world. Others are the Great Mother and Father, the Divine Child, the Trickster, the Sorceress(er), the

Maiden and Youth, the Heroine-Warrior, and the Fool(ess). Yet, a figure like *La Loba* can be considered vastly different in essence and effect, for she is symbolic of the feeder root to an entire instinctual system.

In the Southwest the archetype of the old woman can also be apprehended as old *La Que Sabe*, The One Who Knows. I first came to understand *La Que Sabe* when I lived in the Sangre de Cristo mountains in New Mexico, under the heart of Lobo Peak. An old witch from Ranchos told me that *La Que Sabe* knew everything about women, that *La Que Sabe* had created women from a wrinkle on the sole of her divine foot: This is why women are knowing creatures; they are made, in essence, of the skin of the sole, which feels everything. This idea that the skin of the foot is sentient had the ring of a truth, for an acculturated Kiché tribeswoman once told me that she'd worn her first pair of shoes when she was twenty years old and was still not used to walking *con los ojos vendados*, with blindfolds on her feet.

The wild essence that inhabits nature has been called by many names and crisscrosses all nations down through the centuries. These are some of the old names for her: *The Mother of Days* is the Mother-Creator-God of all beings and doings, including the sky and earth; *Mother Nyx* has dominion over all things from the mud and dark; *Durga* controls the skies and winds and the thoughts of humans from which all reality spreads; *Coatlicue* gives birth to the infant universe which is rascally and hard to control, but like a wolf mother, she bites her child's ear to contain it; *Hekate*, the old seer who "knows her people" and has about her the smell of humus and the breath of God. And there are many, many more. These are the images of what and who lives under the hill, far off in the desert, out in the deep.

By whatever name, the force personified by *La Loba* records the personal past and the ancient past for she has survived generation after generation, and is old beyond time. She is an archivist of feminine intention. She preserves female tradition. Her whiskers sense the future; she has the far-seeing milky eye of the old crone; she lives backward and forward in time simultaneously, correcting for one side by dancing with the other.

The old one, The One Who Knows, is within us. She thrives in the deepest soul-psyche of women, the ancient and vital wild Self. Her home is that place in time where the spirit of women and the spirit



of wolf meet—the place where mind and instincts mingle, where a woman's deep life funds her mundane life. It is the point where the I and the Thou kiss, the place where, in all spirit, women run with the wolves.

This old woman stands between the worlds of rationality and mythos. She is the knucklebone on which these two worlds turn. This land between the worlds is that inexplicable place we all recognize once we experience it, but its nuances slip away and shape-change if one tries to pin them down, except when we use poetry, music, dance, or story.

There is speculation that the immune system of the body is rooted in this mysterious psychic land, and also the mystical, as well as all archetypal images and urges including our God-hunger, our yearning for the mysteries, and all the sacred instincts as well as those which are mundane. Some would say the records of humankind, the root of light, the coil of dark are also here. It is not a void, but rather the place of the Mist Beings where things are and also are not yet, where shadows have substance and substance is sheer.

One thing about this land is certain, it is old . . . older than the oceans. It has no age; it is ageless. The Wild Woman archetype funds this layer, emanating from the instinctual psyche. Although she can take on many guises in our dreams and creative experiences, she is not from the layer of the mother, the maiden, the medial woman, and she is not the inner child. She is not the queen, the amazon, the lover, the seer. She is just what she is. Call her *La Que Sabe*, The One Who Knows, call her Wild Woman, call her *La Loba*, call her by her high names or by her low names, call her by her newer names or her ancient ones, she remains just what she is.

Wild Woman as an archetype is an inimitable and ineffable force which carries a bounty of ideas, images, and particularities for humankind. Archetype exists everywhere and yet is not seeable in the usual sense. What can be seen of it in the dark cannot necessarily be seen in daylight.

We find lingering evidence of archetype in the images and symbols found in stories, literature, poetry, painting, and religion. It would appear that its glow, its voice, and its fragrance are meant to cause us to be raised up from contemplating the shit on our tails to occasionally traveling in the company of the stars.

At *La Loba's* place, the physical body is, as poet Tony Moffeit writes, “a luminous animal,”<sup>4</sup> and the body's immune system seems,

via anecdotal reports, to be strengthened or weakened by conscious thought. At *La Loba's* place, the spirits manifest as personages and *La voz mitológica*, The Mythological Voice of the deep psyche, speaks as poet and oracle. Things of psychic value, once dead, can be revived. Also, the basic material of all stories existent in the world ever, began with someone's experience here in this inexplicable psychic land, and someone's attempt to relate what occurred to them here.

There are various names for this locus betwixt the worlds. Jung called it variously the collective unconscious, the objective psyche, and the psychoid unconscious—referring to a more ineffable layer of the former. He thought of the latter as a place where the biological and psychological worlds share headwaters, where biology and psychology might mingle with and influence one another. Throughout human memory this place—call it Nod, call it the home of the Mist Beings, the crack between the worlds—is the place where visitations, miracles, imaginations, inspirations, and healings of all natures occur.

Though this site transmits great psychic wealth, it must be approached with preparation, for one may be tempted to joyously drown in the rapture of one's time there. Consensual reality may seem less exciting by comparison. In this sense, these deeper layers of psyche can become a rapture-trap from which people return unsteady, with wobbly ideas and airy presentments. That is not how it is meant to be. How one is meant to return is wholly washed or dipped in a revivifying and informing water, something which impresses upon our flesh the odor of the sacred.

Each woman has potential access to *Río Abajo Río*, this river beneath the river. She arrives there through deep meditation, dance, writing, painting, prayermaking, singing, drumming, active imagination, or any activity which requires an intense altered consciousness. A woman arrives in this world-between-worlds through yearning and by seeking something she can see just out of the corner of her eye. She arrives there by deeply creative acts, through intentional solitude, and by practice of any of the arts. And even with these well-crafted practices, much of what occurs in this ineffable world remains forever mysterious to us, for it breaks physical laws and rational laws as we know them.

The care with which this psychic state must be entered is recorded in a small but powerful story of four rabbis who yearned to see the most sacred Wheel of Ezekiel.

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## The Four Rabbinim

ONE NIGHT four rabbinim were visited by an angel who awakened them and carried them to the Seventh Vault of the Seventh Heaven. There they beheld the sacred Wheel of Ezekiel.

Somewhere in the descent from *Pardes*, Paradise, to Earth, one Rabbi, having seen such splendor, lost his mind and wandered frothing and foaming until the end of his days. The second Rabbi was extremely cynical: "Oh I just dreamed Ezekiel's Wheel, that was all. Nothing *really* happened." The third Rabbi carried on and on about what he had seen, for he was totally obsessed. He lectured and would not stop with how it was all constructed and what it all meant . . . and in this way he went astray and betrayed his faith. The fourth Rabbi, who was a poet, took a paper in hand and a reed and sat near the window writing song after song praising the evening dove, his daughter in her cradle, and all the stars in the sky. And he lived his life better than before.<sup>5</sup>

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Who saw what in the Seventh Vault of the Seventh Heaven, we do not know. But we do know that contact with the world wherein the Essences reside causes us to know something beyond the usual hearing of humans, and fills us with a feeling of expansion and grandeur as well. When we touch the authentic fundament of The One Who Knows, it causes us to react and act from our deepest integral nature.

The story recommends that the optimal attitude for experiencing the deep unconscious is one of neither too much fascination nor too little, one of not too much awe but neither too much cynicism, bravery yes, but not recklessness.

Jung cautions in his magnificent essay "The Transcendent Function"<sup>6</sup> that some persons, in their pursuit of the Self, will overaestheticize the God or Self experience, some will undervalue it, some will overvalue it, and some who are not ready for it will be injured by it.

But still others will find their way to what Jung called “the moral obligation” to live out and to express what one has learned in the descent or ascent to the wild Self.

This moral obligation he speaks of means to live what we perceive, be it found in the psychic Elysian fields, the isles of the dead, the bone deserts of the psyche, the face of the mountain, the rock of the sea, the lush underworld—anyplace where *La Que Sabe* breathes upon us, changing us. Our work is to show we have been breathed upon—to show it, give it out, sing it out, to live out in the topside world what we have received through our sudden knowings, from body, from dreams and journeys of all sorts.

*La Loba* parallels world myths in which the dead are brought back to life. In Egyptian mythos, Isis accomplishes this service for her dead brother Osiris, who is dismembered by his evil brother, Set, every night. Isis works from dusk to dawn each night to piece her brother back together again before morning, else the sun will not rise. The Christ raised Lazarus, who had been dead so long he “stinketh.” Demeter calls forth her pale daughter Persephone from the Land of the Dead once a year. And *La Loba* sings over the bones.

This is our meditation practice as women, calling back the dead and dismembered aspects of ourselves, calling back the dead and dismembered aspects of life itself. The one who re-creates from that which has died is always a double-sided archetype. The Creation Mother is always also the Death Mother and vice versa. Because of this dual nature, or double-tasking, the great work before us is to learn to understand what around and about us and what within us must live, and what must die. Our work is to apprehend the timing of both; to allow what must die to die, and what must live to live.

For women, “*El río abajo río*, the river-beneath-the-river world,” the Bone Woman home place, contains direct knowing about seedlings, root stock, the seed corn of the world. In Mexico, women are said to carry *la luz de la vida*, the light of life. This light is located, not in a woman’s heart, not behind her eyes, but *en los ovarios*, in her ovaries, where all the seed stock is laid down before she is even born. (For men, exploring the deeper ideas of fertility and the nature of seed, the cross-gender image is the furry bag, *los cojones*, the scrotum.)

This is the knowing to be gained in being close to Wild Woman. When *La Loba* sings, she sings from the knowing of *los ovarios*, a knowing from deep within the body, deep within the mind, deep

within the soul. The symbols of seed and bone are very similar. If one has the root stock, the basis, the original part, if one has the seed corn, any havoc can be repaired, devastations can be resown, fields can be rested, hard seed can be soaked to soften it, to help it break open and thrive.

To have the seed means to have the key to life. To be with the cycles of the seed means to dance with life, dance with death, dance into life again. This embodies the Life and Death Mother in her most ancient and principled form. Because she turns in these constant cycles, I call her the Life/Death/Life Mother.

If something is lost, it is she to whom one must appeal, speak with, and listen to. Her psychic advice is sometimes harsh or difficult to put into practice, but always transformative and restorative. So when something is lost, we must go to the old woman who always lives in the out-of-the-way-pelvis. She lives out there, half in and half out of the creative fire. This is a perfect place for women to live, right next to the fertile *huevos*, their eggs, their female seeds. There the tiniest ideas and the largest ones are waiting for our minds and actions to make them manifest.

Imagine the old woman as the quintessential two-million-year-old woman.<sup>7</sup> She is the original Wild Woman who lives beneath and yet on the topside of the earth. She lives in and through us and we are surrounded by her. The deserts, the woodlands, and the earth under our houses are two million years old, and then some.

I'm always taken by how deeply women like to dig in the earth. They plant bulbs for the spring. They poke blackened fingers into mucky soil, transplanting sharp-smelling tomato plants. I think they are digging down to the two-million-year-old woman. They are looking for her toes and her paws. They want her for a present to themselves, for with her they feel of a piece and at peace.

Without her, they feel restless. Many women I've worked with over the years began their first session with some variation of: "Well, I don't feel bad, but I don't feel good either." I think that condition is not a great mystery. We know it comes from not enough muck. The cure? *La Loba*. Find the two-million-year-old woman. She is caretaker of the dead and dying of woman-things. She is the road between the living and the dead. She sings the creation hymns over the bones.

The old woman, Wild Woman, is *La voz mitológica*. She is the mythical voice who knows the past and our ancient history and keeps

it recorded for us in stories. Sometimes we dream her as a disembodied but beautiful voice.

As the hag-maiden, she shows us what it means to be, not withered, but wizened. Babies are born wizened with instinct. They know in their bones what is right and what to do about it. It is innate. If a woman holds on to this gift of being old while she is young and young while she is old, she will always know what comes next. If she has lost it, she can yet reclaim it with some purposeful psychic work.

*La Loba*, the old one in the desert, is a collector of bones. In archetypal symbology, bones represent the indestructible force. They do not lend themselves to easy reduction. They are by their structure hard to burn, nearly impossible to pulverize. In myth and story, they represent the indestructible soul-spirit. We know the soul-spirit can be injured, even maimed, but it is very nearly impossible to kill.

You can dent the soul and bend it. You can hurt it and scar it. You can leave the marks of illness upon it, and the scorch marks of fear. But it does not die, for it is protected by *La Loba* in the underworld. She is both the finder and the incubator of the bones.

Bones are heavy enough to hurt with, sharp enough to cut through flesh, and when old and if strung, tinkle like glass. The bones of the living are alive and creatural in themselves; they constantly renew themselves. A living bone has a curiously soft “skin” to it. It appears to have certain powers to regenerate itself. Even as a dry bone, it becomes home for small living creatures.

The wolf bones in this story represent the indestructible aspect of the wild Self, the instinctual nature, the *criatura* dedicated to freedom and the unspoiled, that which will never accept the rigors and requirements of a dead or overly civilizing culture.

The metaphors in this story typify the entire process for bringing a woman to her full instinctual wildish senses. Within us is the old one who collects bones. Within us there are the soul-bones of this wild Self. Within us is the potential to be fleshed out again as the creature we once were. Within us are the bones to change ourselves and our world. Within us is the breath and our truths and our longings—together they are the song, the creation hymn we have been yearning to sing.

This does not mean we should walk about with our hair hanging in our eyes or with black-ringed claws for fingernails. Yes, we remain human, but also within the human woman is the animal instinctual Self. This is not some romantic cartoon character. It has real teeth, a

true snarl, huge generosity, unequaled hearing, sharp claws, generous and furry breasts.

This Self must have freedom to move, to speak, to be angry, and to create. This Self is durable, resilient, and possesses high intuition. It is a Self which is knowledgeable in the spiritual dealings of death and birth.

Today the old one inside you is collecting bones. What is she re-making? She is the soul Self, the builder of the soul-home. *Ella lo hace a mano*, she makes and re-makes the soul by hand. What is she making for you?

Even in the best of worlds the soul needs refurbishing from time to time. Just like the adobes here in the Southwest, a little peels, a little falls down, a little washes away. There is always an old round woman with bedroom-slipper feet who is patting mud slurry on the adobe walls. She mixes straw and water and earth, and pats it back on the walls, making them fine again. Without her, the house will lose its shape. Without her, it will wash down into a lump after a hard rain.

She is the keeper of the soul. Without her, we lose our shape. Without an open supply line to her, humans are said to be soulless or damned souls. She gives shape to the soul-house and makes more house by hand. She is the one in the old apron. She is the one whose dress is longer in the front than in the back. She is the one who patta-pat-pats. She is the soul-maker, the wolf-raiser, the keeper of things wild.

So, I say to you with affection, imagistically—be you a Black wolf, a Northern Gray, a Southern Red, or an Arctic White—you are the quintessential instinctual *criatura*. Although some might really prefer you behave yourself and not climb all over the furniture in joy or all over people in welcome, do it anyway. Some will draw back from you in fear or disgust. Your lover, however, will cherish this new aspect of you—if he or she be the right lover for you.

Some people will not like it if you take a sniff at everything to see what it is. And for heaven's sakes, no lying on your back with your feet up in the air. Bad girl. Bad wolf. Bad dog. Right? Wrong. Go ahead. Enjoy yourself.

People do meditation to find psychic alignment. That's why people do psychotherapy and analysis. That's why people analyze their dreams and make art. That is why some contemplate tarot cards, cast I Ching, dance, drum, make theater, pry out the poem, and fire up their prayers. That's why we do all the things we do. It is the work

of gathering all the bones together. Then we must sit at the fire and think about which song we will use to sing over the bones, which creation hymn, which re-creation hymn. And the truths we tell will make the song.

These are some good questions to ask till one decides on the song, one's true song: What has happened to my soul-voice? What are the buried bones of my life? In what condition is my relationship to the instinctual Self? When was the last time I ran free? How do I make life come alive again? Where has *La Loba* gone to?

The old woman sings over the bones, and as she sings, the bones flesh out. We too "become" as we pour soul over the bones we have found. As we pour our yearning and our heartbreaks over the bones of what we used to be when we were young, of what we used to know in the centuries past, and over the quickening we sense in the future, we stand on all fours, four-square. As we pour soul, we are re-vivified. We are no longer a thin solution, a dissolving frail thing. No, we are in the "becoming" stage of transformation.

Like the dry bones, we so often start out in a desert. We feel disenfranchised, alienated, not connected to even a cactus clump. The ancients called the desert the place of divine revelation. But for women, there is much more to it than that.

A desert is a place where life is very condensed. The roots of living things hold on to that last tear of water and the flower hoards its moisture by only appearing in early morning and late afternoon. Life in the desert is small but brilliant and most of what occurs goes on underground. This is like the lives of many women.

The desert is not lush like a forest or a jungle. It is very intense and mysterious in its life forms. Many of us have lived desert lives: very small on the surface, and enormous under the ground. *La Loba* shows us the precious things that can come from that sort of psychic distribution.

A woman's psyche may have found its way to the desert out of resonance, or because of past cruelties or because she was not allowed a larger life above ground. So often a woman feels then that she lives in an empty place where there is maybe just one cactus with one brilliant red flower on it, and then in every direction, 500 miles of nothing. But for the woman who will go 501 miles, there is something more. A small brave house. An old one. She has been waiting for you.

Some women don't want to be in the psychic desert. They hate the frailty, the spareness of it. They keep trying to crank a rusty jalopy



and bump their way down the road to a fantasized shining city of the psyche. But they are disappointed, for the lush and the wild is not there. It is in the spirit world, that world between worlds, *Río Abajo Río*, that river beneath the river.

Don't be a fool. Go back and stand under that one red flower and walk straight ahead for that last hard mile. Go up and knock on the old weathered door. Climb up to the cave. Crawl through the window of a dream. Sift the desert and see what you find. It is the only work we *have* to do.

You wish psychoanalytic advice?

Go gather bones.