



## THE RIVER BENEATH THE RIVER

Donna Iona Drozda © 2000

## ***The River Beneath the River***

By Donna Iona Drozda © 2000

***“The old woman La Loba...who lives beneath and yet on the top side of the earth.  
She lives in us and through us and we are surrounded by her.”***

A great theft takes place when I am nineteen. It is a theft of my soul in three parts. The first loss comes in early June when my newborn baby is relinquished through adoption ‘for his and my own good’. He is swiftly delivered to his new home where a family waits to enfold him as their own. I held him in my arms long enough to create a tiny hand drawn portrait, the only tangible memento of my uncelebrated, solitary rite of passage into womanhood. The second theft from my vital core takes place two days after giving birth. There is one person, my age, who I feel compelled to see and speak with. I need to communicate with this individual. In my mind it will be a major step in my attempt to begin again, however, it’s not to be. I receive the news that his death occurred three days before I gave birth. Every part of my life is toppling. Finally I am shattered like a glass when within weeks of the birth I am set up, held hostage and raped by three angels from hell.

Tossed overboard without a life preserver, thrown from a plane without a parachute, climbing the mountain unaware of the avalanche. In the summer of 1968 I am thrown bodily into the mythic story line and growing up does not appear to hold the promise that my dreams once held.

Rising up from beneath all that comes the instinct to keep moving. I take action and change the very texture of the rest of my days. I take my first trip and in August of 1968 I travel, with an acquaintance, to

The Farm

***“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 scorch marks of fear.  
But it does not die, for it is protected by La Loba in the underworld.  
She is the finder and the incubator of the bones.”***

The Farm reminds me of my most idyllic days. Those were days spent visiting, as a little girl, grandfather’s five acre home and enchanted orchard in the countryside of Peninsula Ohio. Grandpa and Grandma Toth died when I was eleven. Their passing took away a deep and nurturing connection with them and the natural world. This connection returns to me, through The Farm, as the beginning of my healing in the late summer of my nineteenth year.

I love The Farm. I wake up in the morning, walk outdoors and breathe in the harmony of land and sky ringed by the beauty of the forest. I feel a sense of home and know the way in which, I too, want to live the rest of my life. This 300-acre Twitchell Farm is my opportunity to see that something serene exists in the world beyond the chaos.

The first few days are for wandering. I hike the land until tired and then find a tree to lean against. I sit for hours watching whatever happens to pass by...a snail, spider, butterfly, rabbit, hawk or doe. My meanderings are linked morning and evening by the collection of eggs laid by a flock of 1500 Rhode Island Reds. Days flow with a nourishing rhythm.

On my way to the long low poultry houses I pass the large fenced vegetable garden. It feels like a sacred space; far more private an area than the rest of the surroundings; and so with great respect I have skirted it...that is, until several days into my visit. Now, I need to see what it feels like to be among the large leafy rows of greens and amidst the wonderful design of the tripods holding vining plants and heavy gourds. I unhook the rusted latch on the slatted wooden gate and enter. Life is burgeoning. My inner senses dance among the variety of shapes and colors, textures and earthy aromas. I breathe in the perfection of the leaves and fruits. Bees and butterflies are at work in profusion. I realize immediately that in order to be whole again I need a garden in my life. Something catches my eye and as I squint through the oversized foliage of a summer squash I see, perhaps two hundred feet up the slope, lying snug against the earth, the main residence, a low single story contemporary designed home. There is a natural pond outside the back door.

I stare.

The sun is reflecting off of the surface of the water. Through the brilliant light I think I see an apparition. I watch as a graceful nude figure emerges. Rising up and out of the pond with ease. There's fluidity to her movement and dignity in her posture as she wraps herself in a white flowing garment. She stands in the sun and idly creates a long single braid in her pure white hair before the shadows absorb her in to the house.

***“Within each woman there is a wild and natural creature,  
a powerful force, filled with good instincts, passionate creativity,  
and ageless knowing.”***

The following day, as I wander in the garden, I am surprised. I find, squatting low among the rows of beans gathering the long green snaps into a clay pot at her feet, my vision. She smiles quietly and asks about me. She wants to know my name, my length of stay. She introduces herself as Alice Twitchell.

After that initial meeting, Alice silently invites me to spend time with her. She doesn't say anything specific, we simply become companions. She allows me to accompany her for hours on end and so the days take on another level of mysterious depth and substance. I am entranced. I observe the manner in which this angelic woman glides through her days. There is some type of frailty that visits her...with frequency she excuses herself, telling me that she will be resting. I watch as she floats around a corner like mist and disappears into her room.

Larry Twitchell built the house and all the outbuildings by hand. He included an indoor tropical garden for Alice with entries in the foundation of the house that allow small animals to run back and forth hiding their treasures among the rocks and roots. She eyes them while tranquilly creating a meal or a painting.

When Alice reappears from her quiet time she wraps the embroidered white caftan around her body and speaks to me of things foreign and exotic like India and Ba' Hai, meditation and miso; of the rigors of art school, and polio and chiropractic adjustments. I don't understand her or her ways yet I know that I want to be nowhere else but with her and I want to be more like her than like myself.

After two transcendent weeks on The Farm my companion mildly twists her ankle and the Twitchells, concerned about our safety and our parents reaction to injury, ask us to leave. I don't recall any part of the departure. I disassociate.

It is unfathomable to imagine not being in the company of Alice any longer. She has so much to teach me and I have so much to learn. Yet I sense that I will walk in her footsteps (to the best of my ability), for the rest of my days.

I write to thank Alice for all that I have gained as her guest. A week later the mailman delivers a large manila envelope. There I find five pages of her poems, four sheets of her small abstract watercolor paintings, and the most enraptured letter of my life. It is the first of twenty-six years of delightful correspondence. Her first hand written letter reads:

*Donna Donna Donna*

*Dear Lovely beautiful*

*Donna.*

*Tis my turn to thank you and also to thank that Unknowable Beyond Our Knowledge God which gave us both, Life...on whose path we walk towards Life...Your gracious and penetrating letter plumbed the heights of my depths! How about that for a paradoxical impossibly feminine construction?!*

*We learned anew, deep truths anew! You and I!*

*Man changes...man becomes Man, girl becomes woman and woman becomes WOMAN!*

*Our humanity is potentially, no more than that! It must become high, Donna, higher than the angels, for so it is decreed!*

*Our Lord Jesus Christ so said...and others as well...*

*I am thanking Him for the gift of you...and ...since I first saw you, your lovely self has firmly imprinted its image upon my heart, my inmost heart! Yes you will never leave the farm...always I'll look up to see your piquant face and slender strong figure, your eyes with the depths of the High Ones shining through their lustrous grays...and wherever you walk, I'll be with you...my strength is vast, and from Beyond, for without Him I am empty, a nothing...but O my path is that razor sharp Path...He helps me to be strong. So take from me what you will...I know that you will use it wisely. We rejoice at your gift of yourself...it gives us joy, deep as well as sweet,*

*Lovingly yours,*

*Alice August 21, 1968*

Thank you for writing...thank you...Please let me know where you are as you follow where your special star leads you!

Alice and Larry settled, years later on the bank of the Rio Chama, in Abiqui, New Mexico. In 1991 while I camped beside her stretch of river Alice shared with me her story. Twenty-three years earlier, in 1968, she had lost her eighteen-year-old daughter in a car crash. It occurred six months before I arrived on The Farm, young and frail from my own trauma. We had bonded as surrogates each unaware of the other's recent injury.

*“What is La Loba? ...she is the female soul. Yet she is more;  
she is the source of the feminine. She is all that is of instinct.  
Of the worlds both seen and hidden-she is the basis.  
We each receive from her a glowing cell which contains all the instincts  
And knowings needed in our lives.”*

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On January 30, 1994 a large manila envelope arrives in the mail. It echoes the first from the summer of 1968. Within I find a letter and four drawings. I sit and read the handwritten letter aloud. Alice closes with:

Feels like much is happening planet wise. No doubt it is.  
Would like to block it, sometimes I can, sometimes NO.  
We have no TV, no radio, no newspapers, no magazines.  
Quiet here. Serene. It's good. We send much love.  
Alice and Larry

Thursday Jan 27, '94

The phone rings as I finish reading her words. It is a friend calling from New Mexico. She wants me to know that on the evening of January 28<sup>th</sup> on an unlit back road Alice and Larry's truck hit a large rock and turned over killing Alice instantly.

Thank you, Alice for your natural beauty of spirit and your love of the artist's life. You gently and joyfully passed these gifts to my heart when I was a very young woman. I nurtured, nourished and shared the legacy you passed on to me. I pledge to continue all the rest of my days.

*“She who we love and lose is no longer where she was before. She is now  
wherever we are.”*

English gravestone inscription



Dedicated to Alice Emma Buscher Twitchell  
November 4, 1917 – January 28, 1994

Quoted excerpts from *Women Who Run With the Wolves* by Clarissa Pinkola Estes