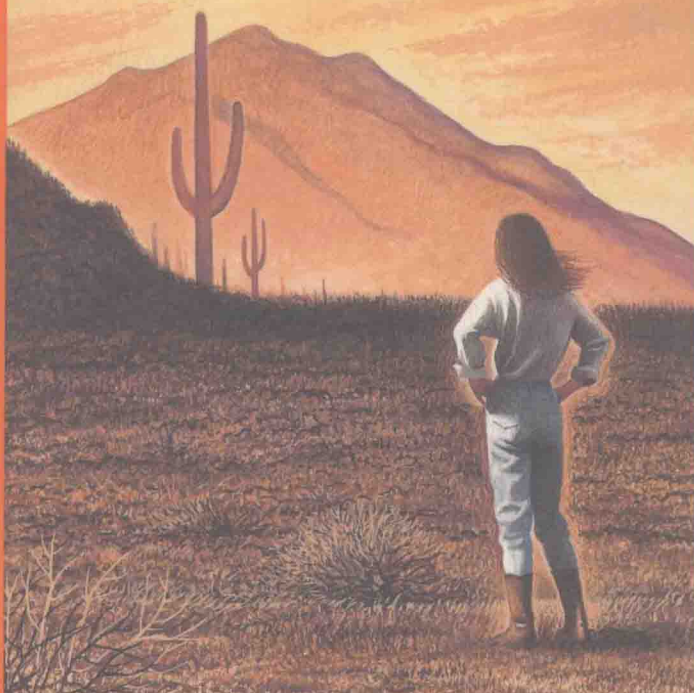


LANA WITT

THE
HEART OF
A THIRSTY
WOMAN

AUTHOR OF SLOW DANCING ON DINOSAUR BONES





Also by Lana Witt

Slow Dancing on Dinosaur Bones

*The Heart
of a
Thirsty Woman*

LANA WITT

SCRIBNER



SCRIBNER

1230 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10020

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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*For my children, Darren and Andrea
And for Kenneth, who got away*

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Lastly, it is with the highest regard that I salute the happy inmates of 5201.

I to the world am like a drop of water,
That in the ocean seeks another drop. . . .
—William Shakespeare, *The Comedy of Errors*

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PART ONE

Inner State West

Clarence and Josie lie bowed together in the dark bed after a slow session of lovemaking. Outside silence has descended on the mountain, and all is quiet except the soft rustle of leaves. Clarence's arm is draped around his wife's shoulder, his hand resting on her collarbone as she talks. Josie has been talking nonstop for weeks, telling every story she can dredge up from her childhood, talking about weird topics too, at least Clarence thinks they're weird. Although she turned twenty-seven last month, Clarence figures she acts more like a twelve year old than anything else. He's beginning to worry she'll never grow up.

Lately she's been going on and on about separate realities—saying a tree isn't necessarily a tree just because it looks like one, that there's a good chance it's an ancient spirit of some kind—and she claims to have seen things, dark shadowy things, out of the corners of her eyes. The other night she told him she'd had an out-of-body experience, that she'd come out of herself somehow. Josie is a bookworm. Lying on top of her bookshelf is an annotated Shakespeare that she's read over and over again. Half the time she'll pretend to be some crazy person from one of the plays. Just last night she was prancing around, shouting, "O heat, dry up my brains! tears seven times salt/Burn out the sense and virtue of mine eye!"

"Why the hell do you do that? What good is it, Josie?" Clarence asked.

"I'm not Josie," she responded. "I'm Laertes."

For months she's been studying the *I Ching*, a little green book that has Clarence mystified. She's also been reading books by Carlos Cas-

taneda, who writes about an old Yaqui Indian named don Juan. Don Juan has some pretty strange notions that she has sunk her teeth into hard and fast. Among them is the one about the separate realities. Clarence believes something is going more and more wrong with Josie, but still he tries to listen as she talks.

"It was when we was in Arizona back in '58, '59," she's saying, "when Daddy had got that job in a copper mine." Josie sounds as though she's giving a report to a class at school, as if she has to include all the facts and get them straight. "We just stayed out there a year. At first we lived in the town of Rustle, but when school got out that summer we moved up to the mountains to this little place called Sage. Cheyenne was still alive then. She was fourteen years old, and I was ten. I don't remember nothing being in Sage but two or three houses, a post office, church, and store. And, of course, that big old Mexican mansion made out of adobe. I guess you'd call it a hacienda, I don't know. They'd turned it into a apartment building for the miners, and we lived on the bottom floor. It had walls a foot thick and French doors. God, I love French doors."

"A hacienda?" Clarence asks, wondering where this story is leading. He sighs, hoping Josie doesn't branch off on more weird tales from don Juan and his Yaqui way of knowledge. Wasn't that where don Juan was from? Arizona?

"Anyway when Daddy got laid off at the copper mine, we had to move back here to Kentucky," Josie says. "The day we packed up to leave, me and Cheyenne was so excited we kept running from one room to the other. Just the sight of that U-Haul trailer hitched to the back of our '56 Ford was too much to take, I reckon. Besides we'd been holed up for months in the apartment—Cheyenne laying in bed with her bad heart most of the summer—and it was too hot to go outside anyway."

"I remember that Ford," Clarence mutters, trying to latch onto something good and solid and American.

"Daddy was out front checking under the hood, and he was yelling at the same time, 'Come on. Let's get out of here before it gets dark!' Mommy didn't make a move, though, just stood there at the front