

Federico García Lorca

Yerma

1934

A tragic poem in three acts and six scenes

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Cast List

Yerma

Maria

Juan

Victor

Old Pagan Woman

Dolores

First Washer-Woman

Second Washer-Woman

Third Washer-Woman

Fourth Washer-Woman

Fifth Washer-Woman

Sixth Washer-Woman

First Young Girl

Second Young Girl

Female Mask

Male Mask

First Sister-in-Law

Second Sister-in-Law

First Woman

Second Woman

Child

First Man

Second Man

Third Man

Act I Scene 1

(When the curtain rises Yerma is asleep with an embroidery frame at her feet. A strange dreamy light fills the stage. A shepherd enters on tiptoe, gazing fixedly at Yerma. He leads a child dressed in white by the hand. The clock sounds. The shepherd leaves and the bluish light becomes the bright light of a spring morning. Yerma wakes.)

VOICE SINGING: *(within)*

For a cradle, cradle, cradle
for a cradle we will make
a little cabin in the meadow
and then shelter there'll we take.

YERMA: Juan. Do you hear me? Juan.

JUAN: I'm on my way.

YERMA: It's time.

JUAN: Have the oxen gone by?

YERMA: They've already gone.

JUAN: See you later. *(He prepares to leave)*

YERMA: You won't take a glass of milk?

JUAN: What for?

YERMA: You work hard and you're not made for work.

JUAN: When men are thin they're strong, like steel.

YERMA: Not you, though. When we married you were different. Now you're white-faced as if the sun never shines on you. I'd like to see *you* swim in the river, or climb on the roof when the rain is beating on our house. We've

been married twenty months, and your face gets sadder, thinner, as if you were shrinking.

JUAN: Have you done?

YERMA: (*Rising*) Don't take it amiss. If *I* were ill I'd want *you* to take care of *me*. 'My wife's ill: I'll slaughter this lamb and make her a good meat stew. My wife's sick: I'll keep this chicken-fat to ease her chest; I'll take this sheepskin to protect her feet from the cold.' That's how I am. That's why *I* take care of *you*.

JUAN: And I'm grateful for it.

YERMA: But you don't let me.

JUAN: Because there's nothing the matter with me. It's just your imagination. I work hard. Every year I grow a little older.

YERMA: Every year... You and I will stay on here year after year...

JUAN: (*Smiling*) Naturally. And peacefully, too. The work is going well, we've no children to worry about.

YERMA: No children....Juan!

JUAN: What is it?

YERMA: Is it because I don't love you enough?

JUAN: You love me.

YERMA: I know girls who've trembled and wept before they climbed into bed with their husbands. Did I cry the first time I slept with you? Didn't I sing as I turned back the fine linen? Didn't I say: 'What a scent of apples these sheets hold?'

JUAN: That's what you said!

YERMA: My mother wept because I wasn't sorry to leave her. And it was true! No one was ever happier at being married. And yet...

JUAN: Hush.

YERMA: I will hush. And yet...

JUAN: It's too much, having to listen to it all the time...

YERMA: No. Don't tell me what they say. I see with my own eyes it's not true...the force of the rain falling on stone makes it crumble to soil, and weeds grow that people say are fit for nothing. Weeds may be fit for nothing, yet I still see their yellow flowers blowing in the breeze.

JUAN: We must hope!

YERMA: Yes, and love each other! (*Yerma, taking the initiative, kisses and embraces her husband*)

JUAN: If you need anything tell me and I'll get it for you. You know I don't like you going out.

YERMA: I never go out.

JUAN: You're better off here.

YERMA: Yes.

JUAN: The streets are for idlers.

YERMA: (*Darkly*) Of course.

(*The husband leaves and Yerma goes back to her sewing. She passes her hand over her belly, lifts her arms in a beautiful sigh, and sits down to sew.*)

YERMA:

Where do you come from, my child?
'From heights that are icy cold.'

(*She threads the needle*)

What do you need, my love?
'The warm feel of your robe.'
Let branches stir in the light
and fountains leap in the air!

(As if she is speaking to her child)

A dog barks in the yard,
a breeze sings in the trees.
The ox lows for the herdsman
and the moon ruffles my hair.
What do you wish, child, far away?

(She pauses)

'The white hills of your breast'
Let branches stir in the light
and fountains leap in the air!

(Sewing)

I can only say yes, my child.
I'll be broken and torn for you.
What a grief it is to me now,
your first cradle, this womb!
When, my child, will you come?

(Pause)

'When it smells of jasmine, your flesh.'
Let branches stir in the light
and fountains leap in the air!

(Yerma continues singing. Maria enters through the doorway carrying a bundle of clothes.)

Where have you come from?

MARIA: From the store.

YERMA: From the store, so early?

MARIA: I'd have waited at the door till they opened to get what I wanted. Can you guess what I bought?

YERMA: I'd imagine coffee for breakfast, sugar, bread.

MARIA: No. I bought lace, three lengths of cloth, ribbons and coloured wool to make tassels. My husband had money and he gave it to me.

YERMA: You're going to make a blouse.

MARIA: No, it's for....you know?

YERMA: What?

MARIA: Because it's arrived! (*She lowers her head*)

(*Yerma rises and looks at her admiringly.*)

YERMA: In only five months!

MARIA: Yes!

YERMA: You can tell it's there?

MARIA: Of course.

YERMA: (*With curiosity*) And how do you feel?

MARIA: I don't know. (*Pause*) Worried.

YERMA: Worried. (*She takes hold of her*) But...when did it come? Tell me...You weren't expecting it?

MARIA: No, I wasn't...

YERMA: You could have been singing, couldn't you? I'm singing. You must...tell me about it...

MARIA: Don't ask. Have you ever held a live bird cupped in your hands?

YERMA: Yes.

MARIA: It's the same...but deep inside you.

YERMA: How beautiful! (*She gazes at her, at a loss*)

MARIA: I'm anxious. I don't know a thing.

YERMA: About what?

MARIA: About what I should do. I'll ask my mother.

YERMA: Why her? She's old and she's forgotten about all that. Don't walk too much, and when you breathe, breathe as softly as if you had a rose between your teeth.

MARIA: Listen, they say that later he kicks you gently with his little legs.

YERMA: And that makes you love him more, when you can say 'My son!'

MARIA: In the midst of it all I feel embarrassed.

YERMA: What did your husband say?

MARIA: Nothing.

YERMA: He loves you deeply?

MARIA: He doesn't say, but he clasps me and his eyelids quiver like green leaves.

YERMA: Did he know that....?

MARIA: Yes.

YERMA: And how did he know?

MARIA: I don't know. But on our wedding night he kept saying it to me with his mouth pressed against my cheek, so my child seems like a dove of light he set free in my ear.

YERMA: What joy!

MARIA: But you know more about this than I do.

YERMA: What use is it to me?

MARIA: It's true! Why that should be? Of all the brides of your year you are the only one...

YERMA: That's how it is. Of course there's still time. Helena took three years, and others in my mother's day even longer, but five years and twenty days, like me, is too long to wait. I don't think it is right for me to wear away my life here. Many a night I go out in the yard barefoot to walk about, I don't know why. If I go on like this, I'll end badly.

MARIA: See here, you foolish creature! You're talking like an old woman. What are you saying! No one should worry about these things. One of my mother's sisters had one after fourteen years, and you should have seen how beautiful a child it was!

YERMA: (*Eagerly*) What was he like?

MARIA: He bellowed like a little bull, with the energy of a thousand cicadas all buzzing at once, and he peed on us, and tugged our plaits, and when he was four months old he covered our faces with scratches.

YERMA: (*Laughing*) But it doesn't hurt.

MARIA: I tell you...

YERMA: Bah! I've seen my sister feed her child, and her breasts covered with scratches, and it hurt a lot, but it was a new pain, a good one, essential to health.

MARIA: They say you suffer a lot with children.

YERMA: It's a lie. That's what weak, complaining mothers say. Why do they have them? Having a child is no bouquet of roses. We must suffer if they're to grow. I sometimes think we must give half our blood to them. But that's

good; healthy, beautiful. Every woman has enough blood for four or five children, and when she doesn't have them it sours her, as it shall me.

MARIA: I don't know what's wrong with me.

YERMA: I've heard the first time always makes you fearful.

MARIA: (*Timidly*) We'll see....How well you sew...

YERMA: (*Taking her bundle*) Give that to me. I'll cut you out two little dresses. And this?

MARIA: For diapers.

YERMA: Good. (*She sits down*)

MARIA: Well then...till later.

(*As she comes near Yerma presses her belly lovingly*)

YERMA: Don't go running over the cobblestones.

MARIA: Bye. (*She kisses her and exits*)

YERMA: Come again soon.

(*Yerma is in the same position as at the start of the scene. She takes her scissors and begins cutting out. Victor enters.*)

Hello Victor.

VICTOR: (*He has depth and a solid gravitas about him*) Where's Juan?

YERMA: Out in the fields.

VICTOR: What's that you're sewing?

YERMA: I'm sewing diapers.

VICTOR: (*Smiling*) Bravo!

YERMA: (*Laughing*) I'm going to trim them with lace.

VICTOR: If it's a girl, name her after yourself.

YERMA: (*Trembling*) What?

VICTOR: I'm happy for you.

YERMA: (*Almost choking*) No...they're not mine! They're for Maria's baby.

VICTOR: Fine, let's see if her example encourages you. This house needs a child.

YERMA: (*With anguish*) Needs one!

VICTOR: You can do it. Tell your husband to think about work less. He wants to make money and he will, but who will he leave it to when he dies? I'm going out to my sheep. Tell Juan to take the two he brought from me. And about the other thing...try harder! (*He exits, smiling*)

YERMA: (*Passionately*) That's it: try harder!

(Yerma who has risen, in thought, goes to the place where Victor stood and breathes deeply as if she were breathing mountain air. Then she goes to the other side of the room as if seeking something, and then sits down and takes up the sewing again. She begins to sew and remains there with fixed gaze)

Curtain

Act I Scene 2

(A field. Yerma enters, carrying a basket. The first Old Woman enters.)

YERMA: Good Morning!

FIRST OLD WOMAN: Good luck to the lovely lady. Where are you going?

YERMA: I've just taken my husband his lunch. He's working in the olive grove.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: Have you been married long?

YERMA: Three years.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: Have you any children?

YERMA: No.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: Oh, you'll have them!

YERMA: *(Eagerly)* Do you think so?

FIRST OLD WOMAN: Why not? *(She sits down)* I've just taken my husband his lunch too. He's old. He's still working. I've nine children, but since not one of them is a girl, I have to cross from one side of the river to the other.

YERMA: You live over the river.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: Yes. By the mills. Who are your family?

YERMA: I'm the daughter of Enrique the shepherd.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: Oh! Enrique the shepherd. I knew him. Good people. Rise, sweat, eat bread and die. No playing about, nothing. Fairs are for others. Silent people. I might have married an uncle of yours. But then...I've been a woman with her skirts in the wind, I've sped like an arrow to melon-cutting, fiestas, sugar-cakes. Many times at dawn I've run to the door thinking I heard music ebbing and flowing, but it was only the breeze. *(She laughs)* You'll laugh at me. I've had two husbands, fourteen children, six of

them dead, and yet I'm not sad, and I'd like to go on living a long time. Here's what I say: fig-trees last! Houses last! And it's only we bedevilled women who turn to dust for some reason.

YERMA: I'd like to ask you something.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: Let me look at you. (*She gazes at her*) I know what you're going to ask. There's no answer to such things. (*She rises*)

YERMA: (*Detaining her*) Why not? It's given me confidence hearing you talk. I've wanted to talk to an older woman for some time. Because I want to find out. Yes. You'll tell me...

FIRST OLD WOMAN: What?

YERMA: (*Lowering her voice*) What you know. Why am I barren? Must I spend my whole life tending chickens, or pleating curtains for my windows? No. You must tell me what to do, and I'll do it; even if you tell me to stick needles into the most delicate parts of my eyes.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: I? I know nothing. I lay down, opened my mouth, and began to sing. Children flowed out like water. Ay! Who can say this body of ours isn't beautiful? You walk out, and at the end of the street a stallion neighs. Ay! Leave me alone, girl, don't make me speak. There are many things I don't want to talk about.

YERMA: Why not? With my husband I never talk about anything else.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: Listen? Does your husband please you?

YERMA: In what way?

FIRST OLD WOMAN: Do you love him? Do you yearn to be with him...?

YERMA: I don't know.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: Do you tremble when he comes near you? Do you feel as if you're dreaming when he brings his lips close? Tell me.

YERMA: No. No, I've never felt like that.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: Never? Not even when you were dancing?

YERMA: (*Remembering*) Perhaps...just once...with Victor.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: Go on.

YERMA: He held me by the waist and I couldn't say a word, I couldn't speak. Another time when I was fourteen, Victor (he was a strapping lad) took me in his arms to cross a ditch and I started shaking so much my teeth chattered. But it was because I was ashamed.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: And with your husband?

YERMA: That's different. My father gave me to him, and I accepted him. Happily. That's the plain truth. From the first day I was married to him I thought about...children...And I could see myself in his eyes. Yes, but it was myself rendered small, manageable, as if I were my own daughter.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: Quite the opposite with me. Perhaps that's why you've no child as yet. Men must pleasure us, girl. They need to undo our tresses and have us drink from their mouths. So runs the world.

YERMA: For you, but not for me. I spend a lot of time thinking, thinking, and I'm sure that what I think about will be realised in my child. I gave myself to my husband for its sake, and I go on giving to see if the child will come, but never for pleasure.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: And the result is that you're empty!

YERMA: Not empty, no, because I'm filled with self-loathing. Tell me. Is it my fault? Should one seek in a man just the man and nothing more? Then what is one to think when he leaves you lying there in bed with sad eyes staring at the ceiling, and turns over and goes to sleep? Should I think of him or of what might come shining from my womb? I don't know, but you'll tell me, out of charity. (*She kneels down.*)

FIRST OLD WOMAN: Oh what a trusting blossom! What a sweet creature you are! Leave me be. Don't make me say any more. I don't want to speak any

more. These are matters of honour, and I don't abuse anyone's honour. You'll find out. At any rate, you should be less naïve.

YERMA: (*Sadly*) Girls brought up in the country, like me, find that all avenues to knowledge are closed to them. Everything is only muttered phrases, gestures, because they say you're not supposed to know about these things. And you too, you too are silent and you go away with a doctor's wise look, all-knowing, but denying aid to one dying of thirst.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: I could discuss it with a calmer person. With you: no. I'm old and I know what I'm saying.

YERMA: Then, God help me.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: God? No, I've never liked the idea of God. When are you going to realize he doesn't exist? It's men who will have to help you.

YERMA: But why do you say that? Why?

FIRST OLD WOMAN: (*Exiting*) Though there ought to be a God, however feeble, to strike with lightening those men with barren seed who turn the joyful fields to mud.

YERMA: I don't know what you're trying to tell me.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: (*Continuing on her way*) Well, I understand. Don't be unhappy. Hope for the best. You're still very young. What would you have me say? (*She leaves*)

(*Two girls enter*)

FIRST GIRL: We keep meeting people everywhere.

YERMA: With all that needs doing, the men must work the olive groves, and we must take them food. Only the old folks are left at home.

SECOND GIRL: Are you going back to the village?

YERMA: I'm going that way.

FIRST GIRL: I'm in a hurry. I left the baby asleep and there's no one in the house.

YERMA: Then hurry, woman. Children shouldn't be left alone. If there are any swine roaming around your place.....

FIRST GIRL: No. But you're right. I'm going now.

YERMA: Go. That's how things can happen. Surely you've locked the door.

FIRST GIRL: Of course.

YERMA: Even so, you don't realize what a little child is. Things that seem nothing to us might do away with him. A little needle, a mouthful of water.

FIRST GIRL: You're right. I'm off. I didn't think of that.

YERMA: Go now.

SECOND GIRL: If you had four or five you wouldn't speak like that.

YERMA: Why not? If I had forty....

SECOND GIRL: Anyway, you and I, who have none, live more peacefully.

YERMA: I don't.

SECOND GIRL: I do. What a bother they are! Yet my mother insists on giving me herbs so I'll produce, and in October we're going to pray to the Saint who they say grants children to women who yearn for them. My mother will ask for them, not I.

YERMA: Why marry then?

SECOND GIRL: Because they made me marry. They make everyone marry. If it goes on like this, there will only be little girls left. Anyway...in reality you're married long before you go to church. But the old women fret about these things. I'm nineteen and I hate cooking and cleaning. And now I have to spend the whole day doing what I hate. What for? Why did my husband

need to become my husband? We do the same now as before. It's all old women's foolishness.

YERMA: Hush, don't say such things.

SECOND GIRL: You'll be calling me crazy too. 'Crazy! Crazy!' (*She laughs*) I tell you the one thing I've learned in life: everybody's stuck in their houses doing what they don't want to do. It's so much better outside. I go to the stream; I climb up and ring the bells, I take a drink of anisette.

YERMA: You're just a child.

SECOND GIRL: Sure, but I'm not crazy. (*She laughs*)

YERMA: Does your mother live at the top of the village?

SECOND GIRL: Yes.

YERMA: In the furthest house?

SECOND GIRL: Yes.

YERMA: What's her name?

SECOND GIRL: Dolores. What do you ask that for?

YERMA: Oh, nothing.

SECOND GIRL: To question her about....

YERMA: I don't know....people say...

SECOND GIRL: That's your business...Look, I'm going to take my husband his lunch. (*She laughs*) There's a thing. What a pity I can't say my sweetheart! (*She exits, laughing cheerfully*) Bye!

VICTOR'S VOICE: (*Singing*)

Why sleep alone, shepherd?
Why sleep alone?

You'd sleep much deeper
on my quilt of wool.
Why sleep alone, shepherd?

YERMA: (*Listening*)

Why sleep alone?
You'd sleep much deeper
on my quilt of wool.
Your pillow's dark stone, shepherd,
your shirt all of frost,
grey rushes of winter
in your midnight bed.
The oaks weave their roots, shepherd
under your head,
and the girl's voice you hear
is the voice of the stream.
Shepherd, shepherd,
what does it want of you?
The hill's bitter grass womb.
What infant is killing you?
The thorn of the yellow broom!

(*She starts to leave, and meets Victor as he enters.*)

VICTOR: (*Cheerfully*) Where are you going, my beauty?

YERMA: Was that you singing?

VICTOR: It was.

YERMA: So fine! I've never heard you sing.

VICTOR: No?

YERMA: And what a strong voice. It's like a stream of water that fills your whole mouth.

VICTOR: I'm always happy.

YERMA: That's true.

VICTOR: And you are always sad.

YERMA: I'm not sad, but I have reason to be.

VICTOR: And your husband's sadder than you.

YERMA: He is. He has a dry character.

VICTOR: He always did. (*Pause. Yerma is seated*) Have you been to take him his lunch?

YERMA: Yes. (*She looks at him. Pause.*) What's that? (*She points to his face.*)

VICTOR: Where?

YERMA: (*She rises and approaches him*) Here...on your cheek. Like a burn.

VICTOR: It's nothing.

YERMA: It looks like one to me. (*Pause.*)

VICTOR: It must be the sun...

YERMA: Perhaps...(*She pauses. The silence is accentuated and without the slightest gesture a struggle begins between the two.*) (*Trembling*) Do you hear that?

VICTOR: What?

YERMA: Can't you hear crying?

VICTOR: (*Listening*) No.

YERMA: I thought I heard a child crying?

VICTOR: You did?

YERMA: Very near. And crying as if it were drowning.

VICTOR: There are always children round here, they come to steal fruit.

YERMA: No. It was the sound of a little child. (*Pause*)

VICTOR: I heard nothing.

YERMA: It's my imagination. (*She looks at him intently and Victor looks back then drops his gaze, as if in fear.*)

(*Juan enters*)

JUAN: Why are you still here?

YERMA: We were talking.

VICTOR: Farewell. (*He leaves*)

JUAN: You should be at home.

YERMA: I was delayed.

JUAN: I don't see what kept you.

YERMA: I was listening to the birds singing.

JUAN: That's fine. But it gives people something to talk about.

YERMA: (*Firmly*) What do you mean, Juan?

JUAN: I don't say it because of you, but because of other people.

YERMA: Other people be damned!

JUAN: Don't swear. That's ugly in a woman.

YERMA: If only I were a woman.

JUAN: Let's end this conversation. Go home. (*Pause*)

YERMA: All right. Shall I expect you?

JUAN: No. I'll be busy with the watering all night. There's not much water, it's mine till sunrise and I need to guard it from thieves. You go to bed and sleep.

YERMA: (*Dramatically*) I'll be sure to sleep! (*She exits*)

Curtain

Act II Scene 1

(A mountain stream where women from the village are washing their clothes. The washer-women are positioned at various levels.)

SINGING: *(Before the curtain rises)*

I'll wash your fine ribbons,
in the chill water.
Like glowing jasmine,
you're filled with laughter.

FIRST WASHER-WOMAN: I don't like gossip.

THIRD WASHER-WOMAN: Well, we talk here.

FOURTH WASHER-WOMAN: There's no harm in it.

FIFTH WASHER-WOMAN: Whoever wants a good name must earn it.

FOURTH WASHER-WOMAN:

I planted a sprig,
I watched it grow.
Who wants a good name
should live just so.

(They laugh)

FIFTH WASHER-WOMAN: That's how we say it.

FIRST WASHER-WOMAN: But nothing is known.

FOURTH WASHER-WOMAN: It's certain her husband's brought both his sisters to live with them.

FIFTH WASHER-WOMAN: The old maids?

FOURTH WASHER-WOMAN: Yes. They used to watch over the church and now they're watching over their sister-in-law. I couldn't bear them.

FIRST WASHER-WOMAN: Why not?

FOURTH WASHER-WOMAN: Because they make my flesh creep. They're like those huge leaves that spring up over graves. They're all waxy. They're all wrapped up in themselves. I think they must cook their food in lamp -oil.

THIRD WASHER-WOMAN: So they've arrived?

FOURTH WASHER-WOMAN: Yesterday. Her husband's back to the fields again.

FIRST WASHER-WOMAN: But doesn't anyone know what happened?

FIFTH WASHER-WOMAN: The night before last she spent sitting on her doorstep, in spite of the cold.

FIRST WASHER-WOMAN: But, why?

FOURTH WASHER-WOMAN: It's all uphill work in that house.

FIFTH WASHER-WOMAN: That's the way those masculine creatures are! When they should be making lace or apple pies, they prefer to climb on the roof or wade barefoot in the river.

FIRST WASHER-WOMAN: Who are you to say that? She's no children, but it's not her fault.

FOURTH WASHER-WOMAN: Those who want children have them. The ones who are spoiled, lazy, and soft aren't prepared to suffer a wrinkled belly.

(They laugh)

THIRD WASHER-WOMAN: And they dab on face-powder and rouge and pin a spray of oleander on, and go looking for anyone but their husband.

FIFTH WASHER-WOMAN: That's the truth!

FIRST WASHER-WOMAN: But have you seen her with anyone?

FOURTH WASHER-WOMAN: Not us, but others have.

FIRST WASHER-WOMAN: Always, others!

FIFTH WASHER-WOMAN: On two occasions, they say.

SECOND WASHER-WOMAN: And what were they up to?

FOURTH WASHER-WOMAN: Talking.

FIRST WASHER-WOMAN: Talking's no sin.

FOURTH WASHER-WOMAN: In this world just a glance can mean something, my mother used to say. A woman gazing at roses is not the same as a woman gazing at a man. She gazes at him.

FIRST WASHER-WOMAN: At whom?

FOURTH WASHER-WOMAN: Someone. Haven't you heard? Find out for yourself. Do you want me to say it out loud? (*Laughter*) And when she's not gazing at him, when she's alone, when he's not right in front of her, she sees him behind her eyes.

FIRST WASHER-WOMAN: That's not true!

FIFTH WASHER-WOMAN: And the husband?

THIRD WASHER-WOMAN: The husband acts as if he's deaf to everything. Unmoving: like a lizard in the sun.

(*Laughter*)

FIRST WASHER-WOMAN: It would all sort itself out if they had a child.

SECOND WASHER-WOMAN: It's all about people who aren't content with their lot.

FOURTH WASHER-WOMAN: Hour by hour that house gets more hellish. She and the sisters-in-law, never opening their lips, washing the walls all day, polishing the copper, cleaning the windows with their breath, and oiling the floors. But, the more that house gleams, the more it seethes inside.

FIRST WASHER-WOMAN: It's all his fault; his. When a man can't give her children he should take more care of his wife.

FOURTH WASHER-WOMAN: It's her fault, because she's a tongue hard as flint.

FIRST WASHER-WOMAN: What the devil's got into you that you talk about her so?

FOURTH WASHER-WOMAN: And who gave you licence to offer me advice?

FIFTH WASHER-WOMAN: Be quiet, you two!

(Laughter)

FIRST WASHER-WOMAN: I'd like to pierce all gossiping tongues with a knitting needle.

FIFTH WASHER-WOMAN: Be quiet.

FOURTH WASHER-WOMAN: And I the breasts of all hypocrites.

FIFTH WASHER-WOMAN: Hush. Look, don't you see the sisters-in-law are here.

(They murmur. Yerma's two Sisters-in-Law appear. They are dressed in black. They begin their washing in silence. A sound of sheep-bells.)

FIRST WASHER-WOMAN: Are the shepherds off already?

THIRD WASHER-WOMAN: Yes, all the flocks will be moved today.

FOURTH WASHER-WOMAN: *(Breathing deeply)* I love the smell of sheep.

THIRD WASHER-WOMAN: You do?

FOURTH WASHER-WOMAN: And why not? They smell of what's ours. Just as I like the smell of red mud that the river carries in winter.

THIRD WASHER-WOMAN: Fancy!

FIFTH WASHER-WOMAN: (*Gazing*) The flocks are mingling together.

FOURTH WASHER-WOMAN: It's a woollen flood. Sweeping everything before it.
If the green wheat had eyes it would tremble to see them coming.

THIRD WASHER-WOMAN: See how they run! What a herd of rascals!

FIRST WASHER-WOMAN: They're all going, not one flock's missing.

FOURTH WASHER-WOMAN: Let's see....No...Yes, yes one is missing.

FIFTH WASHER-WOMAN: Whose?...

FOURTH WASHER-WOMAN: Victor's.

(The Sisters-in-Law sit up and look at one another)

(Quietly singing)

I'll wash your fine ribbons,
in the chill water.
Like glowing jasmine,
you're filled with laughter.

I'd like to live
in the jasmine's
white snowfall.

FIRST WASHER-WOMAN:

But, alas, for a wife's barrenness!
Alas, for the one with sand at her breast!

FIFTH WASHER-WOMAN:

Say if your man
has the true seed,
that through your dress
the stream may run free.

FOURTH WASHER-WOMAN:

Your dress is a boat
of silver and air
sailing the shore.

THIRD WASHER-WOMAN:

My child's clothes now
I wash in the river
teaching the water
its lessons of crystal.

SECOND WASHER-WOMAN:

From the mountain he comes,
my husband, to eat.
He brings me one rose
and I yield him three.

FIFTH WASHER-WOMAN:

From the meadows he comes,
my husband, to dinner,
He brings me live coals
that with myrtle I cover.

FOURTH WASHER-WOMAN:

With the breeze he comes,
my husband, to sleep.
Red wallflowers for him,
Red wallflowers for me.

THIRD WASHER-WOMAN:

Flower with flower then shall be allied
when summer the reaper's blood has dried.

FOURTH WASHER-WOMAN:

And wombs be opened to sleepless birds
when winter comes shivering through the firs.

FIRST WASHER-WOMAN:

In the sheets, tears must be shed.

FOURTH WASHER-WOMAN:

Let there be singing too!

FIFTH WASHER-WOMAN:

When our husband brings us
the garland, the bread.

FOURTH WASHER-WOMAN:

Because bodies entwine and are wed.

FIFTH WASHER-WOMAN:

Because light stabs our throats through.

FOURTH WASHER-WOMAN:

And the branch's stem, it turns sweet.

FIFTH WASHER-WOMAN:

And the hills are roofed by the tent of the breeze.

SIXTH WASHER-WOMAN: (*Appearing higher up the stream*)

So that a child might fuse
the morning's frozen dew.

FOURTH WASHER-WOMAN:

And our bodies might hold
furious branches of coral.

FIFTH WASHER-WOMAN:

So that there might be rowers
riding the waves of the sea.

FIRST WASHER-WOMAN:

A child, now then, a little one.

SECOND WASHER-WOMAN:

Opening wings and beak, the pigeons.

THIRD WASHER-WOMAN:

A child crying, a son.

FOURTH WASHER-WOMAN:

And men advancing
like wounded stags so.

FIFTH WASHER-WOMAN:

Happiness, happiness, happiness
of the swelling belly beneath the dress!

FIRST WASHER-WOMAN:

But, alas, for a wife's barrenness!
Alas, for the one with sand at her breast!

FOURTH WASHER-WOMAN:

Let her shine!

FIFTH WASHER-WOMAN:

Let her ride!

FIRST WASHER-WOMAN:

Let her shine out once more!

THIRD WASHER-WOMAN:

Let her sing!

FIRST WASHER-WOMAN:

Let her hide!

THIRD WASHER-WOMAN:

Let her sing as before!

SIXTH WASHER-WOMAN:

Oh, the dawn that my child
brings, in its clean pinafore.

FOURTH WASHER-WOMAN: (*They sing together*)

I'll wash your fine ribbons,
in the chill water.
Like glowing jasmine,
you're filled with laughter.
Ha, ha, ha!

(*They wash and beat the clothes rhythmically*)

Curtain

Act II Scene 2

(Yerma's house. Dusk. Juan is seated. The two Sisters-in-Law, standing.)

JUAN: You say she went out not long ago? *(The older sister nods)* She must be at the spring. But, you know, I don't like her to go out alone. *(Pause)* You can lay the table. *(The younger sister enters)* The bread I eat is hard earned. *(To the sister)* I had a hard day yesterday. I was pruning the apple-trees, and as evening fell I began to wonder why I put so much effort into my work when I can't even raise an apple to my mouth. I'm tired. *(He passes his hand over his face. Pause)* She's not coming...One of you should have gone with her, that's why you're here eating at my table and drinking my wine. My life's in the fields, but my honour is here. And my honour is your honour too. *(The sister bows her head)* Don't take that amiss. *(Yerma enters carrying two pitchers. She halts in the doorway.)* Have you been to the spring?

YERMA: To fetch fresh water for the meal. *(The other sister enters)* How was it in the fields?

JUAN: Yesterday I pruned the trees.

(Yerma puts down the pitchers. Pause.)

YERMA: Are you staying?

JUAN: I have to guard the flock. You know it's the owner's duty.

YERMA: I know it only too well. You needn't repeat it.

JUAN: Every man has to lead his life.

YERMA: And every woman hers. I'm not asking you to stay. I have everything I need here. Your sisters look after me well. I eat roast lamb, soft bread and cheese here, and on the hillsides your cattle eat grass drenched with the dew. I'd have thought you'd be able to live peacefully.

JUAN: To live peacefully one must be tranquil.

YERMA: And you're not?

JUAN: No, I'm not.

YERMA: Don't say it.

JUAN: You know what I think. The ewe in the fold and the woman at home. You go out too much. Haven't I always said so?

YERMA: That's right. A woman in her home. When that home is not a tomb. When the chairs and the linen sheets wear out with use. But not here. Every night, when I go to bed, the bed seems newer, gleaming, as if it had just been brought from town.

JUAN: You yourself know I've a right to complain. That I have reason to be careful!

YERMA: Careful? About what? I've offended in nothing. I live obediently, and what I suffer I keep close to my chest. And every day that passes is worse. Let's be silent. I'll learn to bear my cross as best I can, but don't ask for anything more. If I suddenly turned into an old woman with a mouth like a withered flower, I might be able to smile and share my life with you more easily. Now...now leave me alone with my thorns.

JUAN: I don't understand you. I don't deprive you of anything. I send to town for whatever you wish. I have my faults, but I want to live peacefully and quietly with you. I want to sleep in the fields knowing you are asleep too.

YERMA: But I don't sleep, I can't sleep.

JUAN: Are you in need of something? Tell me. (*Pause*) Answer me!

YERMA: (*Deliberately, looking fixedly at her husband*) Yes, I'm in need.

(*Pause*)

JUAN: Always the same thing. It's more than five years. I've almost lost interest in it.

YERMA: But I'm not you. Men have another life: flocks, trees, comradeship; women only have children and childcare.

JUAN: Everyone is different. Why don't you have one of your brother's children here. I wouldn't object.

YERMA: I don't want to look after other people's children. I think my arms would freeze from holding them.

JUAN: You're half crazy with these ideas, instead of thinking only about what you should, and so you insist in running your head against a rock.

YERMA: A rock, and shameful that it is a rock, when it should be a basket of flowers and fragrances.

JUAN: Near you one feels only inquietude, dissatisfaction. In the end you'll become resigned to it.

YERMA: I didn't enter these four walls to become resigned. When my head is bound with a cloth so my mouth remains shut, and my hands are tied fast in the coffin, that's when I'll resign myself!

JUAN: Well, what *do* you want?

YERMA: I want to drink water and there's neither water nor glass; I want to climb the mountain and I've no feet; I want to embroider my dress and can't find the thread.

JUAN: The reality is you're not a woman, and you're trying to ruin a man against his will.

YERMA: I don't know what I am. Let me wander about and ease the pressure. I've not failed you in anything.

JUAN: I don't like people pointing me out. That's why I want to see this door closed tight, and all of you here in the house.

(The First Sister enters slowly and walks towards some shelves.)

YERMA: To talk with people's no sin.

JUAN: But it may appear so. (*The other Sister enters and goes towards the water-jars, from one of which she fills a pitcher.*) (*He lowers his voice.*) I'm not happy about it all. When people engage you in conversation, keep your mouth shut and remember you're a married woman.

YERMA: (*With amazement*) Married!

JUAN: And that there's such a thing as family honour, and honour is a burden we all must bear. (*The Sister with the pitcher leaves slowly.*) But it can run dark or pale in the one set of veins. (*The other Sister leaves with a platter, in a ceremonial manner. Pause.*) Forgive me. (*Yerma looks at her husband. He raises his head and his gaze meets hers.*) Even though you look at me in such a way that I shouldn't ask forgiveness, but force you to obey me, lock you up, since that's what a husband should do.

(*The two Sisters appear at the door.*)

YERMA: I beg you not to talk this way. Let the matter rest. (*Pause.*)

JUAN: Let's go and eat. (*The two Sisters go inside.*) Did you hear me?

YERMA: (*Sweetly*) Eat with your Sisters. I'm not hungry yet.

JUAN: As you wish. (*He goes inside.*)

YERMA: (*Dreamily*)

Ay, what a field of stones!
Ay what a door closed to beauty,
to ask for a son, to suffer, while the breeze
offers flowers of the slumbering moon!
These two springs of warm milk
I have, in the courts of my flesh
are twin beats of a horse's hooves,
to shake the branch of my anguish.
Ay, blind breasts under my dress!
Ay, doves without sight or whiteness!
Ay, what grief of the captive blood
goes nailing wasp-stings into my neck!
But you must come, my love, my child,

because water gives salt, and earth fruit,
and our wombs hold tender children
as the clouds are filled with sweet rain.

(She gazes towards the doorway.)

Maria! Why are you rushing past the door like that?

MARIA: *(Entering with her child in her arms.)* I hurry past whenever I have the child... You always weep! ...

YERMA: You're right. *(She takes the child and sits down.)*

MARIA: It make's me sad that you're envious. *(She sits.)*

YERMA: It's not envy I feel; it's my poverty.

MARIA: You shouldn't complain.

YERMA: How can I not complain, when I see you and other women filled with flowers within, and see myself, useless in the midst of so much beauty!

MARIA: But you've other things. If you'd listen to me, you'd be happy.

YERMA: A farmer's wife who can't bear children is as useless as a handful of thorns, almost seen as evil, even though I too come from this wasteland abandoned by God. *(Maria gestures as if to take the child)* Take him; he's happier with you. I seem to lack a mother's hands.

MARIA: Why do you say that?

YERMA: *(Rising.)* Because I'm tired: tired of them: of not being able to use them for something of my own. Because I'm hurt, hurt and humiliated beyond endurance, seeing the crops ripen, the fountains give water endlessly, the ewes bear scores of lambs, and the bitches pups, till the whole countryside seems to rise up to show me its tender sleeping young, while I feel only two hammer-blows here, instead of a child's mouth.

MARIA: I don't like what you're saying.

YERMA: Women, when they have children, don't think of those who don't. You're always refreshed, unknowing, as those who swim in fresh water have no idea of thirst.

MARIA: I won't repeat what I've always said.

YERMA: Every moment I feel more longing and less hope.

MARIA: That's wrong.

YERMA: I'll even end up imagining I'm my own child. Many a night I go down to feed the oxen, which I never did before, because women don't do that work: and when I cross the dark shed my footsteps sound like a man's.

MARIA: Everyone has their own ways.

YERMA: In spite of it all, I go on seeking. See how I live!

MARIA: And your sisters-in-law?

YERMA: You'll see me dead, without a shroud, if I should ever say a word to them.

MARIA: And your husband.

YERMA: All three are against me.

MARIA: What do they think of you?

YERMA: They're full of fantasies. Like all whose consciences are not clear. They think I want another man and don't realise that, even if I were to want one, with my kind honour comes first. They are stones in my path. But they don't see that if I wished I could become a flood of water sweeping them away.

(One Sister enters, and leaves, carrying a loaf of bread)

MARIA: Even so, I think your husband still loves you.

YERMA: My husband gives me bread and shelter.

MARIA: What troubles you endure, what troubles, but remember the sufferings of Our Lord! (*They reach the doorway.*)

YERMA: (*Gazing at the child*) He's awake now.

MARIA: In a little while he'll start to sing.

YERMA: He has your eyes, you know? Have you noticed? (*Weeping*) He has the same eyes as you!

(*Yerma pushes Maria gently and she leaves silently. Yerma walks towards the door through which her husband went.*)

SECOND GIRL: Pssst!

YERMA: (*Turning*) What?

SECOND GIRL: I waited till she left. My mother's expecting you.

YERMA: Is she alone?

SECOND GIRL: She's with two neighbours.

YERMA: Tell them to wait a little.

SECOND GIRL: But will you go? Aren't you afraid?

YERMA: I'll go.

SECOND GIRL: It's up to you!

YERMA: Tell them to wait for me even if it's late!

(*Victor enters.*)

SECOND GIRL: (*Complicitly*) Well, I'll bring the blouse.

YERMA: Whenever you wish. (*The Girl leaves*) Be seated.

VICTOR: I'm fine here.

YERMA: (*Calling to her Husband*) Juan!

VICTOR: I've come to say farewell.

YERMA: (*She trembles a little, but regains her composure.*) You're leaving with your brothers?

VICTOR: That's what my father wants.

YERMA: He must be old.

VICTOR: Yes, he's very old. (*Pause*)

YERMA: You're right to seek new pastures.

VICTOR: All pastures are the same.

YERMA: No. I'd like to go far, far away.

VICTOR: It's all the same. The same sheep: yielding the same wool.

YERMA: For men, yes, but it's different for women. I never heard a man as he ate say: 'How good these apples are!' You take what's yours without worrying over trifles. But as for me, I must say I've grown to hate the water from this well.

VICTOR: Perhaps so.

(*The stage is in soft shadow. Pause.*)

YERMA: Victor.

VICTOR: Yes?

YERMA: Why are you leaving? The people here like you.

VICTOR: I've behaved well. (*Pause.*)

YERMA: You always behave well. When you were a lad, you once carried me in your arms; do you remember? No one knows what may happen.

VICTOR: Things change.

YERMA: Some things don't. There are things shut behind walls that can't change because no one sees them.

VICTOR: That's how it is.

(The Second Sister appears and goes slowly towards the door, where she remains standing, lit by the last rays of evening.)

YERMA: But if they appeared suddenly and cried out, they'd fill the world with their cries.

VICTOR: Nothing would be gained. The ditch where it's dug: the flock in the fold; the moon in the sky; and man at his plough.

YERMA: What a pity we don't listen more to what our elders teach us!

(The deep and melancholy sound of the shepherd's horn is heard.)

VICTOR: The sheep.

JUAN: *(Entering)* Are you off?

VICTOR: I want to be over the pass by dawn.

JUAN: Have you any dispute with me?

VICTOR: No. It was a fair price.

YERMA: *(To Yerma)* I bought his sheep.

YERMA: You did.

VICTOR: *(To Yerma)* They're yours now.

YERMA: I didn't know.

JUAN: *(With satisfaction)* Well, they are.

VICTOR: Your husband will see his fields overflow.

YERMA: The bounty comes to the hands of the worker who seeks it.

(The Sister who was in the doorway goes inside.)

JUAN: Now we've so many sheep there's nowhere to put them.

YERMA: *(Darkly)* The earth is wide. *(Pause)*

JUAN: We can go together as far as the stream.

VICTOR: I wish this house great happiness.

(He gives Yerma his hand.)

YERMA: May God grant it so! Farewell!

(Victor salutes her, and at an imperceptible movement of Yerma's, he turns.)

VICTOR: Did you say something?

YERMA: *(Dramatically)* I said farewell.

(They leave. Yerma stands, gazing in anguish at the hand she gave to Victor. She goes rapidly stage left and picks up a shawl.)

SECOND GIRL: *(Silently covering her head)* Let's go.

YERMA: Yes.

(They leave cautiously. The scene is almost dark. The First Sister enters with a lamp that must not provide any light on stage but its own natural glow. She goes to the edge of the stage looking for Yerma. The shepherds' horns sound.)

FIRST SISTER: *(In a low voice)* Yerma!

(The Second Sister enters. They look at each other and go towards the door.)

SECOND SISTER: *(Louder)* Yerma!!

FIRST SISTER: *(In an imperious voice, going to the door.)* Yerma!!!

(She exits. The bells and horns of the flocks and shepherds are heard. The stage is completely dark.)

Curtain

Act III Scene 1

(The house of Dolores, the wise woman. It is daybreak. Yerma and Dolores enter with two Old Women.)

DOLORES: You were brave.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: There's no power on earth as great as desire.

SECOND OLD WOMAN: But the graveyard was very dark.

DOLORES: Many are the times I've said those prayers in the graveyard with women who wanted a child, and they were all frightened. All except you.

YERMA: I came here so it would happen. I don't think you're a deceitful person.

DOLORES: I am not. May my mouth fill with ants like the mouths of the dead if I've lied to you. The last time, I prayed with a beggar woman who'd been barren longer than you, and her womb became so beautifully fertile that she gave birth to two children, down by the river, because she didn't have time to reach the village, and she brought them to me herself in a cloth, for me to look after.

YERMA: And she walked, from the river?

DOLORES: She did. With her shoes and skirts drenched with blood...but her face was shining.

YERMA: And nothing bad happened to her?

DOLORES: What should happen? God is God.

YERMA: Of course, why would anything happen: she simply picked up the infants and washed them in running water. Animals lick them clean, don't they? My own son couldn't disgust me. I think that women who've just given birth are illuminated from within, and the infants sleep for hours at their breast listening to the flow of warm milk filling their breasts for them to suckle, for them to play with until they don't want any more, until they lift

their heads ‘a little more, my child...’ and their faces and breasts are covered with white droplets.

DOLORES: You’ll have a child now, I promise you.

YERMA: I will, because I must have one. Oh, I don’t understand people. Sometimes, when I feel certain I never will, never...a wave of fire flows upwards from my feet, and everything seems empty, and people walking in the street, and cattle and stones, seem as if they are lighter than cotton. And I ask myself: why are they here?

FIRST OLD WOMAN: It’s right for a married woman to want children, but if she doesn’t have them, why yearn so? The important thing in this world is to let life carry us along. I’m not criticising. You see how I’ve helped at the prayers. But what do you hope this land will give your son, happiness, or silver?

YERMA: I’m not thinking about tomorrow, but today. You’re old and you see things like a book already read. I know I’m thirsty and that I’m not free. I need to hold my son in my arms so that I can sleep peacefully, and, listen closely now and don’t be afraid of what I say, and even if I knew my son was going to torment me and hate me and drag me through the streets by my hair, I’d still welcome his birth with joy, because it’s better to weep over a living man who gives us pain, than over this phantom that squats year after year on my breast.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: You’re too young to take good advice. But, while you wait for God’s grace, you ought to seek refuge in your husband’s love.

YERMA: Ay! You’ve poked your finger into the deepest wound in my flesh!

DOLORES: Your husband’s a good man.

YERMA: (*Rising*) He is good! He is! But so what? I wish he was bad. He goes out on the hills with his sheep, and at night he counts his money. When he covers me, he is carrying out his duty, but my thighs feel cold as a corpse’s, and I, who’ve always been disgusted by sensual women, at that moment, I yearn to feel like a mountain of fire.

DOLORES: Yerma!

YERMA: I'm not shameless; but I know that children are born of a man and a woman. Ay! If I could only have them all by myself!

DOLORES: Remember your husband is suffering too.

YERMA: He's not. The thing is he doesn't long for children.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: You shouldn't say that!

YERMA: I can see it in his glance, and since he doesn't, he won't give them to me. I don't love him, I don't, and yet he's my only salvation. For family and honour's sake: my only salvation.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: (*Fearfully*) It will soon be dawn. You should go home.

DOLORES: Before you know it the flocks will be out and you shouldn't be seen alone.

YERMA: But I needed this. How many times should I repeat the prayer?

DOLORES: The laurel prayer, twice, and at noon Saint Anne's prayer. When you feel pregnant bring me the sack of grain you promised me.

FIRST OLD WOMAN: The mountain tops are already starting to lighten. Go on.

DOLORES: And they'll soon begin opening the gates, you must go the long way round by the ditch.

YERMA: (*Disheartened*) I don't know why I came!

DOLORES: You regret it?

YERMA: No!

DOLORES: (*Troubled*) If you're afraid I'll accompany you to the corner.

YERMA: There's no need!

DOLORES: (*Uneasily*) It'll be daylight when you get home.

(Voices are heard.)

DOLORES: Hush! *(They listen)*

FIRST OLD WOMAN: It's nothing. God be with you.

(Yerma goes towards the door, but at this moment a knocking is heard. The three women remain stationary.)

DOLORES: Who is it?

A VOICE: It is I.

YERMA: Open the door. *(Dolores is reluctant)* Will you open it?

(Whispering is heard. Juan appears with the two Sisters)

FIRST SISTER: Here she is.

YERMA: Here I am.

JUAN: Why are you here? If I could, I'd shout and wake the whole village, so they could see how the honour of my house has gone astray; but I have to swallow everything and be silent because you're my wife.

YERMA: If I could, I'd shout too, so even the dead would wake and testify to my innocence.

JUAN: No, that's not true! I can bear anything but lies. You deceive me, you trick me, and because I'm a man who labours in the fields my mind's not a clever enough match for yours.

DOLORES: Juan!

JUAN: You, not a word!

DOLORES: *(Firmly)* Your wife has done nothing wrong.

JUAN: She's been doing wrong since the very day of the wedding. Looking daggers at me, lying awake at night eyes open by my side, drowning the pillows in wicked sighs.

YERMA: Be quiet!

JUAN: And I won't take any more. Because you'd have to be made of steel to tolerate a woman who wants to stab her nails into your heart, and who leaves her house at night looking for what? Tell me, looking for what? The streets are full of men. There are no flowers to pick there.

YERMA: I won't allow you to say another word. Not a single one. You think you and your family are the only ones who care for honour, and you don't understand that my family have never needed to hide anything. Come. Come here and smell my clothes. Come closer! See if you can find an odour that's not yours, that's not come from your body. Set me naked in the midst of the square and spit on me: do what you want with me, since I'm your wife, but take care not to pin any other man's name on my breast.

JUAN: It's not I who pins it there; you do it by your conduct and everyone's starting to say it. They're beginning to say it out loud. When I meet a group of them, they fall silent; when I go to weigh the flour, they fall silent; and even at night in the fields, when I wake, it seems to me the trees fall silent too.

YERMA: I don't know the source of those evil winds that sour the wheat, but look for yourself, and see if the wheat is good!

JUAN: Nor do I know what a woman seeks leaving her house at all hours.

YERMA: (*Starting towards him, and embracing her husband*) I'm searching for you, for you. It's you I search for night and day without finding a place to draw breath. It's your blood, your help I want.

JUAN: Get away from me.

YERMA: Don't push me away, love me.

JUAN: Away!

YERMA: See how I'm abandoned. As if the moon were searching for herself in the sky. Look at me! (*She gazes at him*)

JUAN: (*He looks at her and pulls back brusquely*) Let me be!

DOLORES: Juan!

(*Yerma falls to the floor*)

YERMA: (*Loudly*) I went out searching for flowers and ran up against a wall. Ay! Ay! It's the wall I'll break my head against.

JUAN: Be quiet. Come on.

DOLORES: My God!

YERMA: (*Moaning*) Cursed be my father who gave me the blood that fathered a hundred sons. Cursed be that blood that searches in me for them, beating against the walls.

JUAN: I told you: be quiet!

DOLORES: Someone is coming! Speak more softly.

YERMA: I don't care. Let my voice at least be free, now that I'm falling into the darkest pit. (*She rises*) Let this beautiful thing at least emerge from my body and meet the air.

DOLORES: They're coming this way.

JUAN: Silence.

YERMA: Yes, yes! Silence. Don't fret.

JUAN: Come, quickly!

YERMA: That's right! That's right! There's no point in wringing my hands! It's one thing to yearn in your mind...

JUAN: Hush.

YERMA: (*Softly*) It's one thing to yearn in your mind, another thing for the body, cursed body, not to respond. It's fate and I won't raise my arms against the waves. That's right! Let my mouth be dumb! (*She exits*)

Curtain

Act III Scene 2

(The environs of a hermitage high in the mountains. Downstage are the wheels of a cart and some canvas forming a rustic tent, where we see Yerma. Women enter with offerings for the shrine. They are barefoot. The cheerful Old Woman of the first act is on stage.)

(Singing while the curtain is raised)

When you were single
I never could see you,
but now you are married we'll meet.
When you were single
I never could see you.
I'll strip you bare now
wife, and wanderer,
when midnight sounds through the air.

OLD WOMAN: *(Sarcastically)* Have you drunk the holy water?

FIRST WOMAN: Yes!

OLD WOMAN: Now let's see it work.

FIRST WOMAN: We believe in it.

OLD WOMAN: You come to ask the saint for children, and it so happens every year more single men come on this pilgrimage. What's going on? *(She laughs)*

FIRST WOMAN: Why do you come if you don't believe?

OLD WOMAN: To watch. I'm crazy about seeing it all. And to look after my son. Last year two men killed themselves over a barren wife and I need to be vigilant. And, finally, because I feel like it.

FIRST WOMAN: God forgive you! *(She leaves)*

OLD WOMAN: *(Sarcastically)* May He forgive you too!

(She leaves. Maria enters with the First Girl)

FIRST GIRL: Is she here?

MARIA: There's the cart. It cost me a lot to get her here. She's been a month without rising from her chair. I'm afraid of her. She's possessed by some idea, I don't know what, but it must be a wicked one.

FIRST GIRL: I'm with my sister. She's been coming here for eight years, but with no result.

MARIA: Those who are meant to have children do so.

FIRST GIRL: That's what I say.

(Voices are heard)

MARIA: I've never liked these pilgrimages. Let's go down to the farms where there are people about.

FIRST GIRL: Last year, in the darkness, some young men felt my sister's breasts.

MARIA: For miles around you hear nothing but dreadful tales.

FIRST GIRL: I saw more than forty barrels of wine behind the hermitage.

MARIA: A stream of single men flows through these mountains.

(Voices are heard. Yerma enters with six Women who are going to the chapel. They are barefooted and carrying ornamental candles. Twilight falls.)

Lord, who makes the roses flower
don't leave my rose to wither.

SECOND WOMAN:

Over her body that suffers
may the yellow rose flower.

MARIA:

And in your servants' bellies
set free earth's hidden fires.

CHORUS OF WOMEN:

Lord, who makes the roses flower
don't leave mine to wither.

(They kneel.)

The heavens have their gardens
of happiness in flower:
glows the rose of wonder
between briar and briar.
A ray of dawn appears
an angel watches over,
with his wings of thunder
with his eyes that suffer.
All about the leaves, there
runs a milk-white river
moistening the faces
of the stars that quiver.
Lord, may your rose bloom
in my barren flesh.

(They rise.)

SECOND WOMAN:

Lord, with your hand calm
the embers of her cheeks.

YERMA:

Listen to the penitent
in her sacred wandering.
Let your rose bloom in my flesh
though with a thousand thorns.

CHORUS:

Lord, who makes the roses flower
don't leave my rose to wither.

YERMA:

To my flesh that suffers
bring the rose of wonder.

(They leave.)

(Girls enter from the left running, with large garlands in their hands. From the right, three others the same, looking behind them. There is a crescendo of voices from the stage, accompanied by bells on horse-collars and harnesses. On a higher level seven girls appear, waving their garlands towards the left. The noise increases and two traditional Masks appear: one male and the other female. The masks they carry are large. The Male carries a bull's horn in his hand. They are not in any way grotesque, but very beautiful and with a suggestion of earthly purity. The Female shakes a ring of large bells.)

CHILDREN: The devil and his wife! The devil and his wife!

(The rear of the stage fills with people who shout and comment on the dance. It is quite dark.)

In a stream along the mountain
the sorrowing wife was bathing.
All about her body creeping
little snails through the water.
The sands all along the shore
and all the breezes of morning
brought a flame to her laughter
and made her shoulders shiver.
Ay, nakedly she stood there
lovely lady of the water!

A BOY:

Ay, how she moaned there!

FIRST MAN:

Ay the withering of love!

BOY:

In the wind and the water!

SECOND MAN:

Let her say whom she longs for!

FIRST MAN:

Let her say whom she waits for!

SECOND MAN:

Ay, with her empty womb
and with her waning beauty!

WOMAN'S MASK:

When the darkness falls I'll tell you
when the glittering night is falling.
When it gleams above our wandering
I'll rip the seams of my clothing.

BOY:

Suddenly there came the nightfall.
Ay how the night came falling!
See there the darkness gathering
in the depths of mountain water.

(The sound of guitars commences.)

MALE MASK: *(Rising, and shaking the horn)*

Ay, now how white
the sorrowful wife!
Ay, how she sighs in the branches!
You'll be red poppies, carnations,
when the man spreads his mantle.

(He approaches.)

If you come her wandering
begging for your womb to flower
don't you wear a mourning veil,
but a fine gown of soft linen.
Walk alone along the walls where
the fig-trees grow thickest,
and support my mortal body
till the white dawn moans.
Ay, how she shines there!
Ay, how she was shining there!
Ay, how the woman quivers!

FEMALE MASK:

Ay let love wreath her
with coronets and garlands,
arrows of brightest gold
through her breasts be darted!

MALE MASK:

Seven times she wept there,
nine times rose again.
Fifteen times they joined
orange-tree with jasmine.

FIRST MAN:

Strike her with the horn!

SECOND MAN:

With the rose in the dance.

FIRST MAN:

Ay, how the woman quivers!

MALE MASK:

In this wandering
the man always commands.
The husband is the bull,
ever the man commands,
and women are the flowers,
for the one who wins.

BOY:

Strike her with the breeze.

SECOND MAN:

Strike her with the branch.

MALE MASK:

Come and see the splendour
of she who is bathing!

FIRST MAN:

Like a reed she bends.

BOY:

Like a flower she bows.

MEN:

Let the young girls flee!

MALE MASK:

Let the dance flare high
and the shining body
of the spotless wife!

(The girls dance to the sound of clapping and music. They sing.)

GIRLS:

The heavens have their gardens
of happiness in flower:
glows the rose of wonder
between briar and briar.

(Two girls pass by shouting. The Cheerful Old Woman enters.)

OLD WOMAN: Let's see if you'll let us sleep now. But there'll be something else later. *(Yerma enters)* You? *(Yerma is downcast and silent.)* Why did you come here? Tell me.

YERMA: I don't know.

OLD WOMAN: You're not convinced? And your husband?

(Yerma shows signs of fatigue, and acts like someone whose mind is oppressed by a fixed idea.)

YERMA: He's over there.

OLD WOMAN: What's he doing?

YERMA: Drinking. *(Pause. Putting her hands to her forehead.)* Ay!

OLD WOMAN: Ay, ay. Less of that: show more spirit. I couldn't tell you before but now I can.

YERMA: What can you tell me that I don't know already?

OLD WOMAN: What can no longer be silenced. What shouts itself from the rooftops. The fault is your husband's, do you hear? Let him cut off my hands if it isn't. Neither his father, nor his grandfather conducted themselves like man who breed well. For them to have a child heaven and earth had to be joined. They're just balls of spit. But your family are not. You have brothers and cousins for miles around. See what a curse has fallen on your beauty!

YERMA: A curse. A blight of venom on the crop.

OLD WOMAN: But you have feet on which you can leave his house.

YERMA: Leave?

OLD WOMAN: When I saw you in the procession my heart leapt. Women come here to find new men, and the Saint performs miracles. My son is waiting for me behind the chapel. My house needs a woman. Mate with him and the three of us can live together. My son is strong. Like me. If you enter my household, there'll be the smell of babies again. The ashes of your coverlet will turn to bread and salt for your children. Come. Take no notice of others. And as for your husband, in my house there are strong hearts and weapons to prevent him even crossing the street.

YERMA: Hush, hush! It's not like that! I can't take another. I can't go seeking men out. Do you think I could know another man? Where would my honour be then? Water can't run uphill or the full moon rise at noon. No. I'll keep to the path I'm on. Did you really think I could yield to another man? That I could go and beg for what is mine, like a slave? Understand me, so you never say it to me again. I am not seeking any other.

OLD WOMAN: When one is thirsty, one is grateful for water.

YERMA: I'm like a parched field where a thousand pairs of oxen should drive the plough, and what you offer me is a little glass of water from the well. My grief is one that's already beyond the flesh.

OLD WOMAN: (*Firmly*) Then stay that way. Since you wish to. Like a thistle in a wasteland. Pinched and barren.

YERMA: (*Firmly*) Barren yes, I know that! Barren! You don't need to hurl it in my face. Don't come and pleasure yourself, as children do, with the sufferings of some small creature. Ever since I married I've been avoiding that word and this is the first time I've heard it said to my face. The first time I recognise that it's true.

OLD WOMAN: You rouse no sympathy in me, none. I'll go look for another wife for my son.

(*She exits. A large choir of pilgrims is heard singing in the distance. Yerma moves towards the cart, and her husband appears from behind it.*)

YERMA: Were you there all along?

JUAN: I was there.

YERMA: Spying on me?

JUAN: Spying.

YERMA: You heard what I said?

JUAN: Yes.

YERMA: So? Leave me and go and join the singing. (*She sits on the canvas.*)

JUAN: It's time I spoke too.

YERMA: Speak, then!

JUAN: And time I complained.

YERMA: About what?

JUAN: That I have a bitterness in my throat.

YERMA: And I in my bones.

JUAN: This is your last chance to resist this continual lament for shadowy things, outside existence, for things that are lost in the breeze.

YERMA: (*With dramatic astonishment*) Outside existence you say? Lost in the breeze, you say?

JUAN: Things which haven't happened and neither you nor I can control.

YERMA: (*Violently*) Go on, go on!

JUAN: For things that don't matter. Do you hear? That have no importance to me. That's what I had to say to you. What matters to me is what I can hold in my hands, what I can see with my eyes.

YERMA: (*Rising to her knees, desperately*) That's it. That's it. That's what I wanted to hear from your mouth. Truth is not felt when it's inside oneself, but how vast it is, how loud it cries, when it emerges, and raises its arms! It's doesn't matter! Now, I've heard you!

JUAN: (*Approaching her*) Think that it had to be so. Listen to me. (*He embraces her to help her rise.*) Many women would be happy to live your life. Life is sweeter without children. I'm happy without them. It's not your fault.

YERMA: What did you seek in me, then?

JUAN: Yourself.

YERMA: (*Excitedly*) That's it! You wanted a home, tranquillity and a woman. But nothing more. Is that true?

JUAN: It's true. As everyone else does.

YERMA: And the rest? Your son?

JUAN: (*Firmly*) Didn't you hear, it doesn't matter! Don't ask me again! Do I have to shout it in your ear so you can understand, and live peacefully for once!

YERMA: And you've never thought about it even when you could see I wanted one?

JUAN: Never. (*They are both on the ground*)

YERMA: And I'm not to hope for one?

JUAN: No.

YERMA: Nor you?

JUAN: Nor I, likewise. Resign yourself!

YERMA: Barren!

JUAN: But living peacefully. Both of us: in gentleness and friendship. Embrace me! (*He embraces her*)

YERMA: What do you want?

JUAN: I want you. In the moonlight you are beautiful.

YERMA: You want me as if you were wanting a pigeon to eat.

JUAN: Kiss me...like this.

YERMA: That, never. Never (*Yerma gives a cry and grasps her husband by the throat. He falls backward. She chokes him until he is dead. The choir of pilgrims starts up.*) Barren, barren, but I'm certain at last. Now I know for certain. And alone. (*She rises. People begin to gather.*) I'll sleep, without waking with a start to see if my blood announces new blood. With a body barren forever. What do you want? Don't come near me: because I've murdered my child! I've killed my own son!

(*The group that remained in the background gathers. We hear the sound of the choir of pilgrims.*)

Curtain

