

The Judas Tree

Play by Fengar Gael
Lyrics by James Schevill
Music composed by Anika Paris
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*“A portion of this yew
Is a man my grandsire knew,
Bosomed here at its foot;
This branch must be his wife,
A ruddy human life
Now turned to a green shoot.*

*These grasses must be made
Of her who often prayed,
Last century, for repose;
And the fair girl long ago
Whom I often tried to know
May be entering this rose.*

*So they are not underground,
But as nerves and veins abound
In the growths of upper air,
And they feel the sun and rain,
And the energy again
That made them what they were!”*

Thomas Hardy, *Transformations*

CHARACTERS:

The Judas Tree can be performed by an ensemble cast of ten: three men, four women, and a chorus of three or more singers.

THE LOS ANGELENOS:

ARTURO SALVIA, a middle-aged retired detective
ELENA ABRIL FIERO, an alluring middle-aged landlady
WILLIAM THORNFIELD, a middle-aged private detective
LILLIAN BRACKEN, the prosecuting attorney; mid-thirties
TERRANCE COLLARD, the defense attorney; mid-thirties
DOCTOR IRIS VALERIAN, a middle-aged psychiatrist
VINNIE PIMPINELLA, a middle-aged bartender
OFFICER OF THE COURT

THE BOARDING HOUSE TENANTS:

EARL LUPINE, a middle-aged war veteran
WENDY YARROW, a runaway; age seventeen
RITA CATALPA, an middle-aged cafeteria server
DOUGLAS MULBERRY, a middle-aged gambler

THE CHORUS CORPUS FLORA:

THREE (OR MORE) DECEASED BOARDERS who sing and dance

SUGGESTED DOUBLING:

William Thornfield / Earl Lupine
Vinnie Pimpinella / Douglas Mulberry / Terrance Collard
Rita Catalpa / Doctor Iris Valerian

TIME:

1958

PLACE:

Los Angeles. A stylized set suggests a courtroom facing down stage, as if the audience were collectively seated on the judge's bench. In another area, minimal furnishings suggest the rooms of a boarding house, and a cluster of intertwining roots represents its garden. Embedded inside the roots are several corpses wrapped like mummies in earth-soiled gauze.

PROLOGUE

(Buzzing insects are heard as moonlight reveals the intertwining roots of a garden. Embedded inside are several mummified corpses who form the CHORUS CORPUS FLORA. A disheveled middle-aged man, ARTURO SALVIA, crouches to the side and slowly rises, his arms raised, his fingers splayed. As ARTURO stands erect, the LOS ANGELENOS enter the courtroom, strolling past him to their seats in the gallery while the CHORUS CORPUS FLORA sing.)

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

*Happy is she who plants
A garden that will flower and flame,
Dying in time to create the hours
Visions and dreams come again.
Los sacrificios, los sacrificios,
Los sacrificios, los sacrificios.*

*Happy is she who plants
a garden against sorrow and death,
Color after color flares,
Proving eternal breath.
Los sacrificios, los sacrificios,
Los sacrificios, los sacrificios.*

(ELENA ABRIL FIERO, a seductive Latina woman, enters last, circling ARTURO, then taking her seat in the gallery.)

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

*Elena, Elena,
Mistress of Death,
Elena, Elena,
Giving us life
In a flower's breath!*

(Darkness descends to black.)

SCENE 1

(The courtroom: the LOS ANGELENOS and an OFFICER OF THE COURT stand as if a Judge has entered. ARTURO, now posed in the gallery, leaps up and speaks. His voice is unnaturally pitched and cannot be acknowledged by the others.)

ARTURO

It was Elena who made me a tree, Your Honor!

OFFICER OF THE COURT

The case of the People of California versus Elena Abril Fiero.

ARTURO

I've wrested my roots from the ground to testify, but the stench, oh, the stench...

(ARTURO and the LOS ANGELENOS sit as LILLIAN BRACKEN, the prosecuting attorney, steps forward, directing her speech to the judge.)

LILLIAN

Elena Fiero's guilt was established in the first phase of her trial. Now the defense will attempt to convince us that Mrs. Fiero is incapable of understanding the true nature of her crimes and should be excused from legal responsibility. I hate to disappoint him, Your Honor, but the prosecution does not find Mrs. Fiero to be insane in the legal sense or psychotic in the medical sense. She suffers from antisocial personality disorder which means she lacks conscience or remorse. She cares only for her own pleasures, in this case a bizarre cult of sacrifice resulting in the callous, premeditated murder of thirty-seven innocent people. Before I begin, I notice the state's former key witness is present in the courtroom. His name is Arturo Salvia.

(ARTURO stands.)

LILLIAN

Please note for the record that he is unable to speak and has been declared incompetent to testify.

(ARTURO sits.)

LILLIAN

While Mr. Salvia may suffer from delusions, I'm confident we can prove that Mrs. Fiero does not. Since the defense has decided to reserve its opening statements, I call the state's first witness: Mr. William Thornfield. We might pause to wonder what future savageries

LILLIAN (cont'd)

would have transpired if Mr. Thornfield hadn't had the courage and determination to find his missing niece. What if he had never asked Arturo Salvia to investigate? What if those guilty graves had never been exhumed?

ARTURO
Guilty graves!

LILLIAN
Guilty graves,...

LILLIAN

... your honor, graves that call for justice: the life of the defendant, Elena Abril Fiero, for the lives of her victims!

LILLIAN
Guilty graves!

ARTURO
Guilty graves....

ARTURO

... your honor, graves so rank with horror that even now I feel a cold prickle of sweat on my limbs, and the impulse to retch is overwhelming.

(From their graves in the garden, the CHORUS CORPUS FLORA sing.)

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

Los sacrificios, los sacrificios...

(Darkness descends on the garden.)

SCENE 2

(A dimly lit barroom where VINNIE PIMPINELLA, the bartender, WILLIAM THORNFIELD, and ARTURO have entered from the gallery. ARTURO is now his former self.)

THORNFIELD

Art Salvia and I used to work together, Your Honor -- when we were both detectives, first class. His wife inherited a bundle, so he went to college and became a smart ass. They're divorced now, and I figured he had some time on his hands. I asked him to keep an eye on the Fiero woman.

ARTURO
Why me?

THORNFIELD

'Cause it's personal; I trust you. I tried to talk my agency into another search, but they think I'm nuts, and besides, she's of age.

ARTURO

Maybe they've got a point. Maybe some time off wouldn't hurt.

THORNFIELD

This *is* my time off!

ARTURO

Then how about some bass fishing?

THORNFIELD

Then how about a fuckin' favor?! Look, the kid's name is Laurel. She and her mom were real tight. She always sent postcards from wherever she went -- even hopped up in some greaser's trailer. Six months ago the postcards stopped comin' so Ivy gave me her last address: Fiero's place. Yesterday I stop by, I show her Laurel's picture, but she says she's never seen her. Bullshit -- she's lyin'. I know 'cause her eyeballs go shifty. Then it turns out she's got a record -- forgin' checks, shopliftin'.

ARTURO

Small potatoes. She gets down on her luck and needs a few bucks.

THORNFIELD

Her file's a classic -- dirt poor family, lots of moves, three marriages.

ARTURO

Sounds like half the people I know.

THORNFIELD

Cut the crap, Art. All I'm askin' is that you hang around, get to know her. I'm continuin' my investigation in Albuquerque. She served time there and saw a shrink. I'll check back in a week.

ARTURO

Maybe by then Laurel will have surfaced.

THORNFIELD

No, something's happened, and I'm bettin' this bitch is in on it.

ARTURO

In on what? What exactly do you think she's done?

THORNFIELD

That's what you've gotta find out. But I've got an angle: she's always travelin' to Mexico so maybe she's tied in with one of the drug cartels. Look, I can tell you think I'm full of shit, but Laurel's my sister's only kid, and I owe her plenty. Just say you'll stick around. She comes here every night about dusk -- like a vampire. She's a looker, so buy her a drink, turn on the ole charm.

(THORNFIELD exits the bar as LILLIAN continues her speech, and ARTURO reverts to his tree self.)

LILLIAN

But it was poor Mr. Salvia who was charmed, Your Honor.

ARTURO

In the bold bosomy bloom of womanhood, she trod the path to my heart. I wasn't always a tree, your honor.

LILLIAN

And now she's charmed the defense into believing she hears strange voices that make her prey on innocent tenants. Yet testimony after testimony will reveal direct and incontrovertible evidence that Mrs. Fiero possesses a very keen capacity to distinguish reality from fantasy.

(LILLIAN steps aside as VINNIE, the bartender, addresses the judge, and EARL LUPINE enters, seating himself nearby.)

VINNIE

Fantasy? No way. She was hip -- with a classy chassis. She'd bring in big bunches of flowers to brighten up the place. I get my share of lowlifes -- with the lousy change they beg off the streets. They all knew her. 'Course I was the one who called her "The Twilight Lady" 'cause she always came in at twilight. Later, the guys who hang here started callin' her Twinkles. She was cool, you know, light on her feet. She'd come waltzin' in, sayin'...

(ELENA ABRIL FIERO enters, thrusting a colorful bouquet at Vinnie. SHE has a slight Mexican accent.)

VINNIE
... amigos!

ELENA
Amigos!

ELENA
Everybody gets a round on Elena!

VINNIE

When she was cranked, she'd buy everybody in the place a drink.

ELENA

But not that one.

VINNIE

'Course sometimes she'd spot guys she didn't go for -- like Arturo Salvia.

ARTURO

(as his former self) Why did you look at me and say, "Not that one?"

ELENA

Instinct.

ARTURO

I don't like being singled out like that. Why don't you give me another look?

ELENA

You hear that, Vinnie? This hombre wants me to give him another look. Don't you know a real look is dangerous?

ARTURO

Come on, why don't you like me?

ELENA

You think I know why? You think everything happens with a rhyme or reason?

ARTURO

Well, I like you; I especially like your gladiolas.

ELENA

What do you know about gladiolas?

ARTURO

Their leaves look like swords, but the flowers are bright and open -- like the ruffled skirts of dancers -- flamenco dancers.

ELENA

(pause) All right, Vinnie, give this hombre another beer.

ARTURO

So you're beginning to approve of me?

ELENA

Maybe. Now I have to talk to my friend, Earl. (*turning towards Earl*) So? You thought about my proposition?

EARL

Yeah.

ELENA

Yes or no?

EARL

Yeah, I guess.

ELENA

“Yeah, I guess” doesn’t sound too enthusiastic, but never mind. I can rent the room like (*snapping her fingers*) that. You just stay where you are, Earl. The Veterans Home is a fine place for old soldiers -- even the bushes are lined up for battle.

EARL

I never noticed.

ELENA

The Chinese say evil travels in straight lines. Nature is curves, peaks, colors. Your gardeners have no feeling for nature. I’ve seen them pull up their trucks, dumping poison into the good earth. Me, I only use natural fertilizers. They stink to high heaven, but nobody’s got bloomers like me, right, Vinnie?

VINNIE

She’s got a real nice place.

ELENA

It’s only three blocks away on F Street, the white stucco with jacarandas and agapanthus in full lavender bloom, surrounded by purple bougainvillea and roses so red people stop their cars just to gawk.

EARL

(*he coughs*) Yeah?

ELENA

You’re missing out, Earl. Besides, I could use a handy man like you around the place. You do any plumbing?

EARL

Maybe.

ELENA

How about carpentry work?

EARL

Made a birdhouse once.

ELENA

My front steps are sagging like an old man's belly. It's the weight of my boarders -- from eating too many helpings of roast turkey with homemade stuffing. Of course, my specialty is sweet corn tortillas, enchiladas that melt in your mouth, and salsa made from home grown tomatoes.

EARL

Maybe I will take a look. *(he coughs)*

ELENA

Come tomorrow, around ten o'clock. I'll be in the kitchen, baking bread.

EARL

Look, Elena, I can't promise nothin'. I'm not well, y'know, got wounded in the war -- shot down in Duderstadt.

ELENA

Our war heroes should live in warm, friendly houses. But if it doesn't work out, you can always go back to the Vets. *(waving)* So long, Vinnie, don't let my flowers get thirsty.

ARTURO

Thanks for the beer. Next time it's my turn -- if you'll allow me the pleasure.

ELENA

Hey, this hombre has class. Maybe I misjudged you, mister. Here's my card.

ARTURO

"Elena Abril Fiero." That's a firey name -- Mexican, right?

ELENA

I came from Ensenada with bright lights shining in my eyes.

ARTURO

It looks like they're still shining.

ELENA

Are you flirting with me?

ARTURO

Just being observant.

ELENA

My ancestors fought with Montezuma.

ARTURO

Mine rode with Cortez. We won.

ELENA

Nobody won. Now the races are all mixed up. Who are you?

ARTURO

Arturo Salvia. "Arturo" for my Colombian Uncle; "Salvia" for my Spanish American father. I'm an accountant.

ELENA

I had you marked as a cop, undercover, or a hustler who's been around. Of course, you can't go by looks. (*arranging her bouquet*) You take my birds of paradise. They look innocent, but they have their secrets, and they're proud.

ARTURO

Can flowers be proud?

ELENA

They're like people -- with deep, twisted roots. I had to plant a garden to learn that.

ARTURO

It sounds very special. I'd like to see it someday.

ELENA

Are you married?

ARTURO

Divorced. I have a son in the navy.

ELENA

If you're not busy, come over next Thursday around six. Stay for dinner with my boarders, if you want. Maybe I'll make my chili pie ala Fiero.

ARTURO

Sounds hot and spicy.

ELENA

That's how I like it. Hey, Vinnie, you tell Arturo where I live!

(ELENA exits. The CHORUS CORPUS FLORA sings as ARTURO'S tree-self speaks, and LILLIAN addresses the judge.)

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

La Madreguera, la Madreguera...

ARTURO

You probably find it strange to hear a woody perennial speaking, Your Honor, but all trees are sentient, miracles of shade and sensations which may explain why I and I alone have detected the odor.

LILLIAN

Why would such a meticulous landlady solicit a tenant like Earl Lupine?

ARTURO

(sniffs) Something overly ripe and rotten,...

LILLIAN

A war veteran tranquilized for post-combat depression, not to mention a weak bladder and chronic emphysema.

ARTURO

....vile vapors making my gorge rise. If you're pretending it's not here to be polite, well, quite frankly...

ARTURO

... I can't ignore it.

LILLIAN

I can't ignore it,...

LILLIAN

... Your Honor. I just can't ignore the fact that Earl Lupine was a far from ideal tenant. Clearly, Elena Fiero was consciously targeting fragile, unstable victims for her diabolical cult!

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

*Elena, Elena,
Mistress of Death;
Elena, Elena,
Giving us life,
In a flower's breath...*

SCENE 3

(LILLIAN remains standing in the courtroom as lights reveal the dining room of the boarding house. ARTURO and ELENA enter to join the four boarders who are seated at the table: RITA CATALPA, WENDY YARROW, DOUGLAS MULBERRY and EARL LUPINE.)

ELENA

(bowing in prayer) May this bounteous feast from our fertile Madreguera replenish our bodies and fill our spirits with her blessings.

RITA, WENDY, DOUGLAS, EARL

Amen.

LILLIAN

The dinner table testimonies will confirm that Mrs. Fiero, like many antisocial personalities, appeared to blend in well, performing the role of an attractive and amicable hostess.

DOUGLAS

Smells ga-ga-good. *(to Arturo)* What'd you sa-sa-say your name was?

ARTURO

Arturo Salvia, but please, call me Art.

ELENA

I never liked nicknames; to me you will be Arturo.

RITA

You signed on or just checkin' the place out?

ELENA

He's my guest. I met him at Vinnie's. Didn't like him much at first, but he's growing on me.

RITA

Well, you know what they say -- never trust a first impression. If you've got a strong feelin', it can go either way. I hated Wendy here at first, but she's all right, a sweet kid, just quiet. Not like some of 'em, always yap, yap, yap.

DOUGLAS

Yeah, you ga-got to fight to get a wa-wa-word in edgewise.

ELENA

Rita's been here the longest, five years now.

ARTURO

Five years?

RITA

Five years!?

RITA

Seems more like five days!

(The BOARDERS freeze whenever ARTURO leaps up to speak as his tree-self.)

ARTURO

The great advantage to being a tree is that we're geniuses at the art of observation. Alas, I was only human at the time: deaf, dumb, and blinded by the luster of Elena's scarlet lips. Between forkfuls, she swallowed my heart, and with its fluttery farewell went my last scrap of discretion.

RITA

I read her ad in the paper. I was a real down and outer. My old man skipped and took everything, even my wigs, the bastard.

ARTURO

(gesturing to Rita) The older female was a common little cabbage of the mustard variety: dense with a round head on a short, stout stalk.

RITA

Elena let me stay till I earned some money and could pay up. I work at the Hawthorne School down the street -- in the kitchen, servin' up slop to the brats. It's okay for now, but I'm lookin' for somethin' better.

ARTURO

The males were onions: bulbaceous, transparent, and sometimes pickled. *(gesturing to Wendy)* As for the cherry tomato: she was green with her juicy pulp sucked dry by a worm.

RITA

Say somethin' to Art here, Wendy. Don't be shy.

WENDY

Did you try the guacamole?

RITA

Tell Art how smart you are. She reads all the time, good stuff too, none of the sleaze I buy. She ran away from home 'cause her dad was all touchy feely if you get my drift -- and a lush besides.

WENDY

Rita, please...

DOUGLAS

Look who's ta-ta-talkin'.

RITA

Who asked you?

DOUGLAS

You're dri-dri-dribblin' on your boob.

RITA

Aw, shhhhhhit!

ARTURO

There they are: a tableaux of tenants, though it's unfair comparing them to the makings of a salad -- it demeans the vegetable world.

RITA

Anyway, Elena sees Wendy bawlin' at the bus station, and takes her in. Elena's a saint, God's honest truth.

ELENA

Don't believe it.

RITA

Believe it! Now Wendy's gettin' her diploma -- at night school. Durin' the day she cleans houses. Doug and I say she should join the army, get a college education, be a nurse or somethin'.

EARL

I joined the 104th infantry, the Timberwolves. (*he coughs*) Got wounded in Duderstadt.

RITA

That's right, honey, you already told us.

ELENA

You remember Earl, from Vinnie's?

ARTURO

Yes, of course.

DOUGLAS

If you're pa- pa- plannin' to stay, she don't allow no loud noises, no bla-bla-blarin' radios. That's why I like it here. I get the shakes if I hear ta-ta-too much noise.

RITA

Doug's a mechanic, fixes planes. He used to, I mean -- till he got bonked on the bean. He gets disability though, enough to get by.

DOUGLAS

I can sp-sp-speak for myself.

RITA

He's been at Elena's a year, maybe longer. He keeps busy, mostly at the track.

DOUGLAS

I read the fa-fa-forms, but I ain't ga-got a system.

RITA

You ain't got much luck either.

DOUGLAS

Who asked you?

RITA

Touchy, touchy.

ELENA

We make a big, happy family. I could take seven, but four's good and five is perfect.

RITA

(to Arturo) What about you? You seem educated. You a teacher or somethin'?

ARTURO

I'm an accountant.

DOUGLAS

You sure ga-ga-got an appetite!

EARL

(coughing grotesquely) Ahhhhhhchaaaaggghhhh...

RITA

Oh, for chrissake!

ELENA

Earl, are you all right?

DOUGLAS

Qua-qua-quick! Get out your sniffer!

(EARL clamps an inhaler to his mouth.)

RITA

You scared the bejesus outta me!

EARL

(wheezing) Sorry, folks, I'll be fine, just fine. *(to Art)* Happens all the time, ain't nothin'.

RITA

Thought you were havin' the big one, Earl.

DOUGLAS

Ja-just leave him be. Ma-ma-mind your own beeswax!

RITA

(flipping her finger) Up yours!

(The BOARDERS freeze.)

ARTURO

Is it any wonder I've branched out of the species? Of course, there are minuses to being a tree. Now that I'm thriving on water, soil and sunlight, I've lost my taste for Elena's sumptuous meals: the tangy melons, savory cheeses, the succulent roasts...

RITA

So, Art, are you signin' on or what?

ARTURO

No, I have a home, a cottage near Venice Beach.

RITA

We never had an accountant before. We've had salesmen, an actor -- so he said -- loads of drunks and druggies, and that last guy was a painter, a real loser. Took off out of the blue without payin' up. Never met a painter who wasn't bad news. Maybe it's the fumes.

ARTURO

So you've had quite a few tenants pass through?

ELENA

Nothing unusual these days. L. A.'s full of drifters.

DOUGLAS

My advice is ga-ga-get references. You've had ta-ta-too many losers.

RITA

Hah! Where were your references?

EARL

Folks ain't reliable no more.

ELENA

After dinner, I'll show you the garden.

RITA

Prettiest yard on the whole damn street.

DOUGLAS

The whole damn city!

(The BOARDERS return to their seats in the gallery.)

SCENE 4

(The CHORUS CORPUS FLORA sing, dancing around ELENA and ARTURO as they enter Elena's garden.)

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

*Impatiently we grow,
Spreading our roots
From the dead;
Out of the living earth,
Into the day of birth,
The day of birth,
The day of birth...*

(The CHORUS CORPUS FLORA hum, retreating to eavesdrop as ARTURO'S tree-self speaks to the judge.)

ARTURO

Forget me not, your honor. After all, I'm the only witness to that stroll in the garden. Before I broke soil, I cared nothing for gardens or gardeners, but Elena knew the benefits of fresh air and sunlight. To me, Elena *was* fresh sunlight.

ELENA

Mira, Arturo, I've made a great discovery: a new kind of garden, my own santuario.

ARTURO

It was magical: a blaze of colors and scents unlike any I'd ever seen.

ELENA

This is my Eden; the first was deserted.

ARTURO

I reminded her that the occupants were expelled (*to Elena*) for eating the forbidden fruit.

ELENA

Either way, the garden went to seed. I know a better world is possible, but not with our bloodthirsty gods. I've discovered a new god who is really the old one, a divinity from before history. Her name is La Madreguera.

ARTURO

La Madreguera...?

ELENA

I'm going to tell you a secret, Arturo, a secret you already know: nothing matters except saving your soul. Why is it that knowing that doesn't transform the world? It should, shouldn't it?

ARTURO

Well, yes, I...I suppose. (*pause*) I'm sorry, I just don't know how to respond to you.

ELENA

Ha, ha! As you would to any woman. The wine's made me tipsy. Still, I've been lifted out of servitude; I've been saved.

ARTURO

From what?

ELENA

From a wasted life. I was a drifter once myself. You learn how to disappear from place to place, how to live without a name. Then one day I drifted out of myself and saw the view from the rooftops. That when I heard their music.

(A melodious humming is heard.)

ELENA,

At first I thought it was whispering winds, but they were making their own sounds -- listen! Can't you hear my trumpet vines? My fluted bowers? Even their colors sing!

ARTURO

(pause) I never had a garden.

ELENA

Everyone has a garden, Arturo. We're all united by the great chain of plants that burst forth from the earth and are reborn in the flesh of our bodies. Your fruits are your thoughts and feelings which spread invisible roots uniting with other roots, yours with mine, mine with yours. Jesus said, "I am the vine and you are the branches." Even Jesus knew the earth as a garden.

ARTURO

I never thought of it that way.

ELENA

The earth is our Madreguera. She's deeply rooted, but her spirit soars through my trees and flowers. You may think I'm loco, Arturo, but I know they're divine. I know it in my soul, and that's why they flourish.

ARTURO

Yes, well, you're very special, Elena. You've certainly had a positive affect on your tenants.

ELENA

Most of them will never have stable families or decent jobs. This is the best family they'll ever know, but there's no real trust. Their wounds are so deep, they can't hide the desperation in their eyes. I don't know why, but there's something inside me that loves vagrants and vagabonds -- maybe they remind me of myself. *(pause)* Why are you smiling?

ARTURO

I'm thinking of Earl. How does he remind you of yourself? He's so frail and sickly.

ELENA

No, no, he's heroic. Imagine how painful it is -- your heart racing, your teeth rattling while your lungs fill with fluid. He knows the truth: he knows that soon he's going to die. He knows that in order to live he's going to have to find a good enough reason. Of course, there's plenty of reasons -- my geraniums for instance. Did you ever see such vivid pinks and reds?! You're smiling again.

ARTURO

When you speak, you seem to glow. I don't have that kind of passion for anything. I guess I'm getting old.

ELENA

Then fill your eyes with my stargazer lilies. You should see how they dance when the pollen flies from the male stamens to the eager female pistils. We chicas know the cha cha of flowers, how they dance, bursting with fertile seeds and bulging with pleasure -- very sexy, my flowers.

ARTURO

Like you, Elena. Your mouth is so moist, your lips like petals. I can't stop staring.

ELENA

Would you like to open them with your fingers and lick my teeth? *(pause)* I'm sorry.

ARTURO

Please, don't apologize. I love the way you talk.

ELENA

Would you like to play paradise?

ARTURO

Just show me how.

ELENA

Oh, there's plenty to do in paradise, so many flowers to name.

ARTURO

(embracing her) So much devotion to give.

ELENA

Honeysuckle, pussy willow, lippia, cockscomb...

(During Elena's Litany, SHE pulls ARTURO to the ground mounts him, then freezes as his tree-self speaks.)

ARTURO

We counted each other's ribs, your honor, right beside the geraniums! Elena heard them sing while my hands roamed down to her velvety bush, and soon we were swimming -- in the sticky sweet streams of our pearly saps.

(The CHORUS CORPUS FLORA spring to life as the lovers collapse in ecstasy.)

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

*Geranium, geranium,
Grow red in the sun!
Geranium, geranium,
Our life is one.*

*Geranium, geranium,
Red colors we give,
Los muertos, los muertos.
We die to live!*

(The sunlight fades to moonlight.)

SCENE 5

(Inside Vinnie's bar, THORNFIELD continues his testimony. ARTURO'S tree-self sits beside him, facing the judge.)

THORNFIELD

When I came back from Albuquerque, I tried to convince Art. I told him she was a dangerous, exploitive leech.

ARTURO

Detectives and trees are very much alike.

THORNFIELD

Like I said, she has a criminal record.

ARTURO

Both are shat upon by vultures of every description.

THORNFIELD

Six years ago she was diagnosed as a compulsive klepto.

ARTURO

Both pass gas, attract insects, and benefit from seed dispersal.

THORNFIELD

A year later she was re-diagnosed as a chronic schizo. *(to Arturo)* In other words, she's a grade A wreck.

ARTURO

Both record crucial events, are alert to threats and intruders, and both strive towards pithy conclusions. So you see, it strikes me as ironic that my human self accused him of *(to Thornfield)* barking up the wrong tree!

THORNFIELD

Listen, I got a chance to talk to the last shrink who treated her. He says she keeps relivin' the trauma of seein' her ole lady beaten to death by her perve father.

ARTURO

(as his human self) What...? Are you saying her father *killed* her mother?

THORNFIELD

Yeah, when she was five.

ARTURO

My God, I...I didn't know.

THORNFIELD

This shrink says she's your classic Freudian sublimator, which means she's scared shitless of anything dark in her subconscious, so she plays Lady Bountiful and denies her killer tendencies.

ARTURO

Poor Elena...

THORNFIELD

She cons people into thinkin' they're safe, but her dark side regards them as scum.

ARTURO

Dark side? No, no, she's nothing like you think.

THORNFIELD

Listen to me, Art, you're not listenin'!

ARTURO

All I know is that in the two weeks that I've been at her place, I've gained ten pounds, I smoke less, drink less, and wake up feeling like a kid again. As far as I can see, her only interest -- other than me -- is planting the most beautiful garden in L.A. The truth is I like her. I mean I *really* like her.

THORNFIELD

Oh, shit, oh, Jesus, you haven't screwed...? (*pause*) Are you nuts?! I bet she likes it fast and clean.

ARTURO

So far she likes it the same way I do -- slow and with conversation.

THORNFIELD

You moron! What if she's a killer?! A fuckin' killer?! Sure, she's stacked and loaded with personality, but it's just a front. It's what gives her power. She draws suckers like you in, then bang! She shoots off your balls for target practice.

ARTURO

Maybe you're the sucker -- for letting one lousy postcard lead to some extremely paranoid deductions, and it won't be the first time either.

THORNFIELD

Alright, alright, so how come when I looked through the local missing persons, two cases listed her place as the last known address? Is that a coincidence?!

ARTURO

She gets loads of odd balls and drifters passing through. She admits it; she *likes* them.

THORNFIELD

Did she ever say she sees things or hears voices? Schizos have hallucinations.

ARTURO

She hears music. So what?

THORNFIELD

They're moody too -- cool as Clyde one minute, then they're cruisin' for a bruisin' or think they're Jesus Christ.

ARTURO

Well, she is religious -- about her garden. She's always out there on her knees.

THORNFIELD

Praying...?

ARTURO

Pruning or weeding. It's a real passion with her, something I thought I'd lost until...

THORNFIELD

Cut the gas, Art! I don't want to hear it! Just promise me you'll hang here on Fridays and tell me what's happenin'. Keep questioning the tenants, break 'em down. They've probably got a convenient case of mass amnesia. These cult maniacs stick together.

ARTURO

You should hear yourself! Besides which you're looking like shit and you drink too much.

THORNFIELD

Screw you! Just remember: in between all that fuckin' and feedin' your face, if anybody says anything about a kid like Laurel -- even remotely like Laurel -- I wanna know!

(Lights fade on the bar as the CHORUS CORPUS
FLORA sing from Elena's garden.)

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

*With lavender lantana
Weaving carpets for the earth,
Covering the sodden ground,
She dreams of her rebirth.
La Madreguera, La Madreguera...*

(Darkness descends.)

SCENE 6

(In the brightly lit courtroom, LILLIAN steps forward to address RITA while ELENA and ARTURO plant bulbs in the garden.)

LILLIAN

The state calls...

LILLIAN
...Rita Catalpa.

RITA
Rita Catalpa.

RITA

Anybody with eyes could see there were sparks between them. Pretty soon he was helpin' in the garden, trimmin' shrubs, mowin' the grass. 'Course none of us knew he was a detective till I heard him fess up. My window's usually open, and not that I got nose trouble, but I couldn't help hearin' her say...

RITA

... let's take a vacation.

ELENA

Let's take a vacation.

ARTURO

Okay, where?

RITA

She was always takin' trips to...

RITA

...Mexico.

ELENA

Mexico!

ARTURO

I took a tour to Mexico City once.

ELENA

Mexico City is not Mexico. Would you like to see the Mayan ruins at Palenque? We could visit the sacred tombs. Then we could climb the stone stairway that leads to the Terraced Gardens of the Sun. That's where I first saw my Madreguera.

ARTURO

Really? You actually saw her?

ELENA

She has the face of a flower, but her hands and feet are like mine. I first heard her voice long ago, when my mother was dying.

ARTURO

Tell me, Elena, tell me about your mother.

ELENA

She was a true bruja, a good witch who cast spells and cured sickness, but she couldn't keep him from hurting her.

ARTURO

Keep who? Who hurt her?

ELENA

My father beat her in the kitchen, but she crawled to where the roses were singing. I picked small bouquets and arranged them around her body, covering her bruises..

THE CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

La Madreguera, la Madreguera...

ELENA

That was when I first heard her speak a language I'd never known. She called herself Ocean and Sand, River and Stone, Perennial Spring Virgin and Mistress of the Wild Poppies. Finally, she called herself La Madreguera, Earth Mother of All Life. Oh, Arturo, have you ever wanted to be something else? A spirit belonging to trees and flowers, a part of nature.

ARTURO

Sure, I'd be one of those wild poppies and aim my pollen towards your pistil. Come on, let's play paradise.

ELENA

(pulling away) Stop mocking me! I thought you'd understand, but you don't. Go away!

ARTURO

I'm sorry. Come here, sweetheart. I never meant to offend you. I know how much all this means to you, but I'm afraid I just don't believe in your Madreguera or anything else really.

ELENA

Nothing transcending yourself?

ARTURO

Not the way you mean.

ELENA

Then I'll call you ardilla. You're like a squirrel who hoards your faith and cheats your soul of its destiny.

ARTURO

I guess I prefer to find heaven on earth.

ELENA

How can you find heaven if you don't see the divinity in all living things?

ARTURO

I'm sorry, Elena, I just don't believe in idealizing nature. Your roses and rabbits aren't moral or immoral; they simply act according to their natures.

(ELENA paces while The CHORUS CORPUS FLORA hum softly, luring her to an area of the garden.)

ARTURO

If you think human beings should base their behavior on nature, then we'd be justified in doing anything we want whenever we like. Are you looking for something?

ELENA

Shhhhhh! Here! Here it is: this is where we'll plant a eucalyptus tree! *(pause)* There are sacred intersections: places on the Earth Mother's body crossed by winds, animal tracks, and pollen dropped by bees and birds. The Mayans knew that sacred crossings require sacred plantings. Listen, Arturo, I can *see* the crossings. They're filled with dancing lights, so brilliant the energy reverberates. Can't you feel it?

ARTURO

No.

ELENA

Hold my hand. *(closing her eyes, whispering)* Now do you feel it? Do you?

(The humming swells in volume as ELENA freezes and ARTURO'S tree-self speaks.)

ARTURO

Yes, yes!! My fortress of flesh was electrified: hot and cold tingling vines coiled through my toes, swirled up my legs, my spine, to my neck, shooting sparks to my scalp, through the shafts of my hair! It all happened in an instant, but I was too stunned to confess to Elena.

ELENA

At least you seem happy here. Oh, Arturo, we should stay here always, even after death.

ARTURO

I'm too alive to think about death.

ELENA

There is no death, only a passing through rainbows of light. The Mayan's believed in transformation, in people changing into monkeys, snakes, and trees. Would you rather be a tree or a monkey?

ARTURO

I'd be a giant redwood and live a thousand years.

ELENA

Now I feel close to you again. You have to believe in ghosts, Arturo. If you don't respect the ghosts of your ancestors, how can you live? You don't know who you are.

ARTURO

Do you really want to know me? Even if the truth ruins everything?

ELENA

Nothing can hurt our love.

ARTURO

Elena, remember when we first met and you wouldn't buy me a drink?

ELENA

Sure, I thought you were a cop.

ARTURO

I'm a detective, or used to be -- for an agency in Burbank. A former colleague asked me to keep an eye on you.

ELENA

(pause) This former colleague -- what did he want?

ARTURO

He thinks you might be involved in a drug smuggling ring. He said you have a record for theft and forgery, and might be connected to the disappearance of his niece. Her name is Laurel Linden. Ever heard of her?

ELENA

Well, what do you think?

ARTURO

Suppose you tell me.

ELENA

The theft is correct; so is the forgery; so is the prostitution. Did he tell you about that?
(pause) When you're hungry, you'll steal anything. From there it's easy to become a whore.

ARTURO

Elena...

ELENA

You want the truth? I'm a whore -- retired.

ARTURO

(pause) I wish I didn't believe you.

ELENA

Why not? I'm not ashamed. You can make more money than you ever imagined. But I wouldn't screw just anyone. They were all dark like you: fuerte y formal, but not so strong I couldn't escape if I had to. I always liked being on top, hoisted on their masts like a free sail. I won't be smothered; I won't be submissive! As for Laurel: sure, I knew her. She was a delicate little camellia, but an addict, and so restless when you touched her, she jumped. She took off with her boyfriend. I'm not a squealer and I'd never harm anyone -- especially Laurel.

ARTURO

Do you know where she went?

ELENA

She didn't leave an address. *(pause)* Are you sure you're retired?

ARTURO

I'm sure.

ELENA

You mentioned smuggling, and I confess I once smuggled a case of Tequila across the border.

ARTURO

Elena, honey, I don't care what you've done. Please come and live with me; you can sell your house...

ELENA

No, I can't leave my garden!

ARTURO

Why not? We'll make a new one, get a fresh start.

ELENA

But my borders need me.

ARTURO

Then let me live here with you. I'll put my place up for sale. All I think about is you; it's not just joy, it's...it's...

ELENA

It's sex, hombre, it's sex.

(THEY kiss passionately as the CHORUS CORPUS FLORA dance around them.)

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

*Geranium, geranium,
Grow red in the sun,
Geranium, geranium,
We now are one.*

(Darkness descends to black.)

SCENE 7

(Earl Lupine's bedroom. ARTURO'S tree-self addresses the judge while EARL paces, unable to sleep.)

ARTURO

Oh, the freedom of freedom! We're only bald for a season, and are blissfully free of herpes, hemorrhoids, toothaches, and smells like the one consuming this courtroom. Trees are unfailing barometers, aesthetic to a fault, and selfless sharers of nutrients with an interest in all forms of human nature, however grim and grotesque.

(ELENA enters Earl's room with a steaming mug.
HE sits on the edge of his bed.)

ELENA

I thought you might like some hot chocolate and whiskey to help you sleep.

ARTURO

Trees commune with other trees, and a vast variety of verdant growth -- which is why I can testify about this particular aspect of the case.

EARL

Can't never sleep, always coughin' or havin' to take a piss. Makes me plumb crazy.

ARTURO

It seems the kumquat under Earl's window remembered every detail.

EARL

Ought to see a doctor, I guess. Just afraid he'll find some other things wrong.

ELENA

Life can be cruel. You drag along like an old lizard from year to year, then one day you snap your tail and your spine cracks like lightning. The next thing you know, they're sticking tubes up your nose, and you're screaming to die in peace. Of course, nobody hears you 'cause you're so drugged you can't lift your tongue to talk. Even my chili couldn't raise it!

EARL

It's terrible, terrible, I'm tellin' you. I've seen it happen. The doctors keep you hangin' on; they don't let you go when it's time.

ELENA

If only we could leave with dignity, asleep in our own beds.

EARL

Sure, but it ain't our call.

ELENA

What if it were?

EARL

Hell, yeah, I'd go tomorrow.

ELENA

That's all I wanted to hear. The weak just slide off, but the strong know when they're beaten and there's nowhere to go but under the Madreguera to be born again.

EARL

Well, I'm a Methodist, but I say live and let live. When vets die, they get buried in the cemetery with military honors. Then they go to heaven or hell.

ELENA

Under the eucalyptus tree, that's heaven enough for me.

EARL

(pause, stretching out on his bed) Your drink's workin' good.

ELENA

I promise you, Earl, you'll find peace in my garden.

EARL

I'm gettin' real sleepy...

ELENA

No more bitter dreams, Earl, sweet dreams...

EARL

(faintly) You should've been a doctor.

ELENA

I'm better than a doctor. I'm a bruja, a priestess,...

ELENA

...a priestess!

ARTURO

A priestess!

(The moonlight dims as EARL loses consciousness and descends towards death.)

SCENE 8

(The CHORUS CORPUS FLORA sings and join ELENA gently wrapping EARL in strips of gauze.)

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

*Gardens live and gardens die,
Their fragrant flowers soar;
Glowing, glowing in the night,
With their sacrificial light.*

(ARTURO'S tree-self stands aside and speaks between ELENA'S invocation, while the CHORUS CORPUS FLORA chant.)

ARTURO

Dead of nightshade. The tragic un-
fulfillment, the doom of a man never
brought to perfect bloom. As a tree,
I'm introspective, always absorbed.
Transformed, I feel the rapture she
must have felt.

ELENA

With these precious oils of her
sweetest daughters...

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

Gardens live, gardens die,

Gardens live, gardens die,

Gardens live, gardens die,

Gardens live, gardens die,

Gardens live, gardens die,

ARTURO and ELENA
 ...Magnolia, Gardenia, Jasmine, Rose.

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA
Gardens live, gardens die,

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

*Every garden knows
 Who grows there lonely,
 And who clusters together
 In the hunting weather.*

ELENA
 Oh, blessed Mother, prepare for the
 sacrifice of your cherished son, Earl.
 Make his eyes become the eyes of the
 earth, his ears become the ears of the
 earth, his voice become the voice of
 the earth, singing the universal song
 of praise to you, Divine Madreguera.

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA
Gardens live, gardens die,

Gardens live, gardens die,

Gardens live, gardens die,

Gardens live, gardens die.

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

*Every garden knows
 That out of fertile seed
 Flames resurrection
 With its healing hope.*

ARTURO

Hark, oh, heliotrope! The exquisite arboreal joy of hearing the holy harmonies! The
 lower, the higher flora fortissimos whistling with the wind!

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA and EARL

*Gardens live and gardens die,
 Blooms fall in final peace;
 Dying, dying in the night,
 With the sacrificial rite.
 Los sacrificios, los sacrificios...*

(Moonlight fades to black..)

SCENE 9

(In the courtroom LILLIAN calls DOUGLAS from the
 gallery to testify.)

LILLIAN

The state calls Douglas Mulberry to the stand. Now please, Mr. Mulberry, tell the judge about your conversation with Mrs. Fiero on the night of June fifteenth.

DOUGLAS

Well, she said Earl wanted to be bu-bu-buried in the ga-garden, that he wanted to feed the earth. Hell, Judge, I didn't know what she was ta-talkin' about. I was scared, I can tell you.

(ELENA approaches DOUGLAS in the boarding house.)

DOUGLAS

I was ga-gettin' ready for ba-ba-bed when she comes up on me and says, Douglas...

DOUGLAS

...you've got to help me.

ELENA

You've got to help me!

ELENA

It's Earl. I'm afraid he's passed away.

DOUGLAS

"Oh, Lord," I said, "da-did you ca-ca-call an ambulance?" If only I'd called an ambulance, ba-but she wouldn't let me.

ELENA

It's too late. Anyway, that's not what Earl wants. He wants to be buried in my garden, but he's too heavy to carry by myself.

DOUGLAS

Ba-ba-but what about his family?

ELENA

We are his family.

DOUGLAS

You ca-can't bury him here, Elena. It's not sanitary. They've ga-ga-got health regulations. It's not legal; it's not ci-ci-civilized.

ELENA

Is it civilized to drain a man dry, pickle his organs, and lay him out all greased and powdered so we hardly recognize him?! There are higher laws, laws which transform rotting flesh to fertile sprouts of life. Earl's giving back some of himself.

DOUGLAS

Is that wh-what he said?

ELENA

Not exactly.

DOUGLAS

Sounds more like somethin' you said.

ELENA

My words but his intentions. Listen, I promised Earl, and if we give him back to the vets they'll stuff him in a pine box and bury him next to a stranger. Earl wants my trees shading his head and flowers at his feet. He wants to be near people who loved him.

DOUGLAS

La-la-loved him? Hell, he hardly said two words. Look, Elena, I can understand you wantin' to ka-ka-keep your promise, ba-but Earl ain't here, now is he?

ELENA

He wanted to feed the earth as she fed him. That's a very generous wish, and I'm not going to let him down.

DOUGLAS

Look, Elena, when somebody da-da-dies, you're supposed to sign da-da-death certificates, notify the pa-pa-papers, stuff like that.

ELENA

Sure, but if he's legally dead, then his checks stop coming, and you won't be getting your share to bet on the ponies, now will you Dougie boy?

DOUGLAS

Ja-ja-Jesus, Elena, what are you ta-ta-tryin' to pull?

ELENA

I'm doing this for a good cause, but I'm not afraid to take advantage of a lousy system.

DOUGLAS

You're just as gr-greedy as everybody else. Shhhhhhit! I'm ca-ca-callin' the cops!

ELENA

Not if you want a cheap place to live. Now are you going to help me or are you going to start packing? You can't breathe a word about this to anyone ever! You're the only one here I trust.

DOUGLAS

Wh-what about Arturo?

ARTURO

Yes, what about Arturo?

ELENA

Arturo hasn't got your imagination.

DOUGLAS

Yeah?

ARTURO

Hah! Bitter bite of frost and ice! Of course I have imagination -- whole trunks full! Alas, not enough to suspect my Venus was baiting her trap.

ELENA

I know how to show my gratitude. Don't worry about the rent for the next five months. Plus you get a cut of Earl's checks. Twenty percent.

DOUGLAS

Fifty percent!

ELENA

Forty percent.

DOUGLAS

Okay, bu-but make it ten months free rent.

ELENA

Five months!

DOUGLAS

Nine!

ELENA

Six!

DOUGLAS

Nine!

ELENA

Seven!

DOUGLAS
Eight!

ELENA
Seven!

DOUGLAS
Eight!

ELENA
Deal!

ARTURO
We pedigree trees don't condone graft over craft, and if I were a birch, I'd give her a branching!

ELENA
Shhhh, now we've got to be quiet. Arturo dug a hole for my new eucalyptus so we've got a good start on the grave.

DOUGLAS
What about Wendy? She stays up late.

ELENA
She's sound asleep. I ought to warn you, though, I wrapped Earl in gauze so he looks like a mummy.

(ELENA leads DOUGLAS to Earl's body.)

DOUGLAS
Oh, Jesus Christ almighty.

SCENE 10

(In the moonlit garden the CHORUS CORPUS FLORA sing a welcoming song, caressing EARL.)

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

*Look how your roots entwine you,
See how your branches grow,
Leaves of green will adorn you,
Soon you'll have seeds to sow.
Above you shines the stars and moon;
You'll feel the wind, the rain, and snow,*

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA (cont'd)

*Yes, you're beginning to breathe out free,
Just like a eucalyptus tree.*

EARL'S CORPUS

Yes, I'm beginning to breathe out free,...

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA and EARL'S CORPSE

... just like a eucalyptus tree!

EARL'S CORPSE

*All of my life I lived in pain,
Never a chance to breathe and grow;
In the army I lost my soul,
Feet got heavy, breath got slow.
Yes, all of my life, a vagabond
A city man, a life gone wrong.
Lost in concrete from head to toe.
Never knowing I was born
To breathe out free...*

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA and EARL'S CORPSE

...Just like a eucalyptus tree!

(Blackout.)

SCENE 11

(The courtroom where ARTURO'S tree-self and WENDY enter to testify.)

ARTURO

Curious as it may seem, it was the jacaranda that woke her.

WENDY

Usually I fall right to sleep, but I guess I was restless.

ARTURO

It's leaves quivered, shuddering against the panes.

WENDY

I heard a...

WENDY
...tap, tap, tap,...

ARTURO
Tap, tap, tap!

WENDY
...but it was only a branch against the window.

ARTURO
Exactly!

WENDY
There was enough moonlight to see they were digging, both of them. Later, Doug came inside and went straight to his room, but Elena stayed to pray.

(In her garden, ELENA enacts the burial blessing: SHE kneels, undulating, her arms uplifted. ARTURO'S tree-self imitates her movements, and the CHORUS CORPUS FLORA chant.)

ARTURO
Behold! His fallen spirit rejoining the perfection of nature. The priestess Elena rebirthing the universe through the fauna-flux-flora generations. Then she feasted on her garden: edible roots, barks, leaves, and berries, and drank such nectars that opened her senses to the universal song that even the pansies heard, the toadflax and pimpernel. And the bees, oh, the bees! They accompanied her on their bee violins while the hornets harped and dragonflies brushed the piano keys. I tell you, Your Honor, there are symphonies everywhere!

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA
Los sacrificios,
Los sacrificios,
Los sacrificios,
Los sacrificios,
Los sacrificios,
Los sacrificios,
Los sacrificios,

WENDY
Elena fell to her knees and lifted her arms, and then I heard a humming, and she started chanting...

WENDY
...La Madreguera, La Madreguera.

ELENA
La Madreguera, la Madreguera...

WENDY
She just kept repeating it over and over. Then she said,...

CHORUS CORPUS and ELENA
La Madreguera, la Madreguera.
La Madreguera, la Madreguera...

WENDY
...accept the sacrifice of your son.

ELENA
Accept the sacrifice of your son,...

ELENA
...who makes your blessed womb his tomb.

ELENA
Divine Madreguera, covered with
eucalyptus roots; Earl is eucalyptus,
eucalyptus is Earl, and thus entangled
they become the sacramental mystery
of the Queendom Madreguera...

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA
Los sacrificios,

Los sacrificios,

Los sacrificios...

ELENA
...forever and ever.

ARTURO
Forever and ever.

(Moonlight turns to sunlight as ARTURO, WENDY,
and ELENA enter the boarding house dining room to
join DOUGAS and RITA who are seated at breakfast.
WENDY continues her testimony and joins them.)

WENDY
The next morning Elena said Earl got called to help out his sick cousin in Sacramento.
I suspected what they'd done, then two days later the place started to smell.

ARTURO
(as his tree-self) Oh, the reek was rank, very rank indeed!

WENDY
Arturo noticed it when he came back from visiting his sister, but Elena told him...

WENDY
...it's a bad sewer line.

ELENA
It's a bad sewer line.

ARTURO
(sniff) Tincture of turd with rancid milk and something fruity wafting from the pantry.

RITA
It sure kills your appetite. *(to Wendy)* You haven't touched your sausage.

ELENA
I've called the city six times already. They said it's fixed and the smell should go away
in a few days. I bought some lime to pour around the place.

RITA

Ole Earl picked a fine time to jump ship, but I sure don't miss his coughin' -- hack, hack, hack! Funny thing is I can hardly remember his face. 'Course he never said much -- which goes to show the importance of keepin' up your end of the conversation.

WENDY

Maybe I'll call or write him a letter. Did he leave an address or phone number?

ELENA

I'll check his room.

WENDY

The night Earl left, we played scrabble together. He knew plenty of words.

RITA

So how come he never used 'em?

WENDY

He was shy, I guess, but why did he leave so late?

ELENA

It must have been an emergency.

RITA

He ain't the first to leave in the middle of the night. There was that painter who skipped, and then that doped up cutie from -- where was it?

ELENA

Anyone for dessert? It's homemade apple pie.

WENDY

No thanks.

RITA

(to Elena) Just a sliver, honey. *(to Wendy)* You ain't eatin' enough to feed a scarecrow.

DOUGLAS

Pasadena! She came from Pa-Pa-Pasadena.

ARTURO

Was her name Laurel?

RITA

That's right!

DOUGLAS

How di-di-did you know?

ELENA

I told him.

RITA

Poor kid. The only friend she had was packed in powder.

ELENA

No, she had a boyfriend; I met him.

RITA

No shit? Anybody for a movie? Get away from the stink. *(to Elena)* You ought to sue those city bastards. Hey, Arturo, can you sue the mayor for makin' the place smell like an outhouse? And this ain't the first time either. I've been here five years and it's happened at least six times.

(WENDY chokes; DOUGLAS drops his spoon.)

RITA

It's almost as bad as when you use that fish fertilizer. Hey, what the hell? I guess you don't have a garden like that without payin' a price.

(The BOARDERS freeze while the CHORUS sings.)

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

*You pay a price for a garden!
You pay the price for a garden!
To make beauty flower,
You must kill the weeds,
Let loose the soil,
And plant the precious seeds.
You pay a price for a garden!
You pay the price for a garden!*

(By the end of the song, ELENA, DOUGLAS, and RITA have returned to their seats in the gallery, leaving ARTURO and WENDY.)

SCENE 12

(ARTURO'S tree-self testifies as WENDY approaches.)

ARTURO

Oh, the noxious bouquet of human decay! While it may have been ill-mannered, at least we didn't pretend it wasn't there -- the way everyone in this courtroom does! So I wasn't the least bit surprised when Wendy asked if I'd like to...

ARTURO

...take a walk.

WENDY

Take a walk...

WENDY

...with me, Arturo -- please?

(ARTURO follows WENDY as they stroll in circles.)

ARTURO

So she led me down F Street, past Mrs. Palmetto's junipers, past the Betula's sycamores.

WENDY

She didn't call the city 'cause it wouldn't do any good -- 'cause it's not the sewer pipes that stink: it's Earl.

(ARTURO stops in his tracks.)

WENDY

Elena and Doug buried him. *(pause)* I saw them! They don't know, but Doug did most of the digging. Then he left, but Elena stayed and prayed. Are you all right?

(ARTURO nods.)

WENDY

I don't know how he died. Maybe he had a heart attack, but they should have called the police or the hospital.

ARTURO

(pause) Are you sure?

WENDY

There's only one way to be sure. I can tell you where to dig. By the...

WENDY

...eucalyptus tree.

ARTURO

Eucalyptus tree.

(Darkness descends as THEY return to the garden. WENDY continues her testimony while ARTURO grasps a shovel and starts digging.)

WENDY

Art said we should wait till night. It's not true what they're saying, Your Honor. I mean about Art being part of a cult. He's a caring, sensitive guy. You should've seen him when we reached Earl's body.

(Droning flies are heard as ARTURO'S tree self gropes the ground, reliving the horror of discovering EARL'S twisting corpse.)

WENDY

He dropped the shovel and started clawing the ground with his hands. Later, he said it felt like he was...

WENDY

...tearing out his own beating heart.

ARTURO

Tearing out my own beating heart!

ARTURO

So many flies! Flies everywhere, buzzing louder the deeper I dig, but I'm drawn to the putrid waves of gaseous effluvia pulling me in. Finally, my fingers touch something, and I behold two watery wells that were eyes with hideous white maggots slithering from their depths. Oh, God, the stench of flesh so sickening, I say *(to Wendy as his human self)* I can't move; I can't breathe...

WENDY

Stop it, Art! Cover him up!

ARTURO

I'm suffocating...

WENDY

Hurry, please hurry!

(ARTURO shovels dirt over the corpse.)

WENDY

Don't panic, Art. We'll go to Mrs. Palmetto's and call the police.

ARTURO

No...

WENDY

But you saw it; we both saw it!

ARTURO

No! Let's go somewhere and talk. Yes, we can't act irrationally; we...we have to think; we have to...to talk.

WENDY

So, we walked to the park at the end of F Street. I puked on the way -- so did Art.

(THEY sit on a bench.)

ARTURO

I keep wishing I'd wake up...

WENDY

I won't stay in that house another minute! She's crazy, Art. What if she flipped out and killed him? What if she...

ARTURO

Stop it! All we know for certain is that she and Douglas...buried a body.

WENDY

Earl! They buried *Earl!* Doug got roped into it. He's too stupid to do anything on his own. I'm scared. Look at my hands shaking -- look at yours.

ARTURO

Earl probably had a heart attack; we both know he was in rough shape.

WENDY

So what? She's not supposed to bury him in her yard! You didn't see her chanting voodoo. It was the spookiest thing I've ever seen.

ARTURO

(pause) Wendy, what would it take to persuade you to keep quiet? Just for a few days. I want to speak with Elena alone, give her a chance to...explain.

WENDY

What if the cops dig up the place? What if she's done it before and there's more?

ARTURO

Done what? What are you saying? You shouldn't make such outrageous accusations. She's done a lot for you, for both of us.

WENDY

That doesn't mean she's not crazy! *(pause)* If we don't call the cops, we'll be suspects ourselves.

ARTURO

No! I insist on talking to her first! We owe her that; we owe her some...respect. If she's sick, then I want her to get the best medical care available. If we just turn her in, she'll get arrested, she'll be humiliated. It could get in the papers.

WENDY

Yeah, and it would be bad for business.

ARTURO

Now stop it! Don't you give a damn about anyone but yourself?

WENDY

You're real gone, Arturo, the worst case I've ever seen.

ARTURO

Save your pity for Elena -- *(walking away)* if you have any.

WENDY

Wait, Art! I...I'm sorry, but I just can't go back there. The whole place gives me the creeps.

ARTURO

Then stay at my place tonight. Tomorrow, I'll find you an apartment. I'll even pay the rent. But I'm begging you, kid, give Elena a little time.

WENDY

(pause) So what's going to be my excuse for leaving?

ARTURO

You're young; you got a better job in another town. She'll understand.

WENDY

(to the judge) Then Art found me a place to live, and I was okay till the police found me. So much for our happy family.

(ARTURO ambles to his seat in the gallery as the
CHORUS CORPUS FLORA sing.)

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

You pay a price for a garden!
You pay the price for a garden!
When the winds blow,
Earth becomes dry;
Young flowers grow,
Old flowers die.
You pay a price for a garden!
You pay a price for a garden!

SCENE 13

(The courtroom where DOUGLAS and RITA appear, forming a triangle with WENDY. All three testify, presumably on separate occasions, responding to LILLIAN'S interrogation.)

DOUGLAS

I thought Wendy had found some guy and was finally ga-ga-gettin' laid. I had no idea sh-she was wa-wa-wise to Elena.

RITA

The kid left abruptly which was weird 'cause we figured she was happy as a clam. I never believed that crap about her findin' a better job. Then Dougie was fidgetin' more than usual, and even Art was down in the mouth. "What's goin' on around here?" I joked. "It's like livin' in a morgue." Hah! Little did I know I was sittin' on her own private cemetery!

LILLIAN

I realize you're not qualified to render a professional diagnosis, but in your opinion, was Mrs. Fiero in control of her actions?

RITA, DOUGLAS, WENDY

Yes.

LILLIAN

Did you ever see her out of control?

RITA, DOUGLAS, WENDY

No.

LILLIAN

Did you consider her superior to you -- in terms of intelligence, social stability, and moral behavior?

RITA, DOUGLAS, WENDY

Yes.

LILLIAN

In fact, didn't you at one time or another, refer to Mrs. Fiero as a saint?

RITA, DOUGLAS, WENDY

Yes.

ARTURO

Ha! The gullibility of humankind!

LILLIAN

One more question: I'm sure you know Mrs. Fiero has developed quite a following. There's a growing number of disciples devoted to promoting her unique brand of paganism. There's even a petition circulating, demanding her release. It contains over three thousand names. Tell me, is your name on it?

RITA, DOUGLAS, WENDY

No.

ARTURO

Yes! I snatched the quill of a meadow lark a peck-peck-pecking on my bark!

(EARL and the CHORUS CORPUS FLORA sing as
RITA, DOUGLAS and WENDY return to the gallery.)

EARL and CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

*No more of the dirty, stinking streets
Where we wandered around our fantasies,
What fantasies!
We've crawled into the earth deep with moles,
Crawled into the earth,
Crawled into the earth,
Of Elena's garden.*

(ELENA strolls into the garden as the CHORUS
CORPUS FLORA and EARL surround her.)

EARL and CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

*Then out of the dark we began to fly,
Out of the dark we began to fly,
All the world was filled with radiant light!*

EARL and CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

*Orange and blue and green are our wings,
As we fly from death to eternal life!*

*Homeless we died in the roots of sacrifice,
And we became the birds, the birds of paradise!
Homeless we died in the roots of sacrifice,
And we became the birds, the birds of paradise!*

(ELENA departs as the CHORUS CORPUS FLORA dance and moonlight dims to black.)

SCENE 14

(In the courtroom ARTURO, THORNFIELD, the BOARDERS and LOS ANGLENOS are seated in the gallery. LILLIAN faces the judge as DOCTOR IRIS VALERIAN steps forward to testify.)

LILLIAN

The People call Doctor Iris Valerian to the stand. Doctor Valerian is a noted forensic psychiatrist and author of Thrill of the Kill, a scientific study of mass homicides. Doctor, would you say Mrs. Fiero is a religious fanatic?

DOCTOR VALERIAN
No,...

ARTURO
Hah!

DOCTOR VALERIAN

As I understand it, Mrs. Fiero believes in the sacredness of the Earth and all its life forms. I think she created her myths to help survive a brutal childhood, and to see herself as heroic. There was nothing in our conservative religious or cultural life that inspired her, so she inspired herself. She created her own god.

ARTURO
The Sod God of Gardens!

LILLIAN
Does this make her insane?

ARTURO
No!

DOCTOR VALERIAN
No,...

DOCTOR VALERIAN

...quite the contrary. It probably kept her sane. Remember, Mrs. Fiero is the product of several cultures: part Mayan Indian, part Mexican, and part American. These presented confusing claims to her mind which she synthesized through her religion.

LILLIAN

I understand Mrs. Fiero has started to chant in her cell. What effect is this having on her mind?

DOCTOR VALERIAN

A positive one. She's always ranked consistently high on every intelligence test I gave her. She also failed to exhibit any of the disorientation that often accompanies genuine insanity. In fact, I found her to be highly perceptive, articulate, and even rather charming.

ARTURO

So did I, doctor, and with an eager beaver besides!

LILLIAN

So tell us, doctor, what is your diagnosis of Mrs. Fiero?

ARTURO

Yes! Let's reap the harvest!

DOCTOR VALERIAN

Mrs. Fiero is an antisocial or sociopathic personality which means she's extremely narcissistic. She lives by her own moral code and isn't burdened by guilt or conscience. Most sociopaths are basically rather infantile in that their main purpose in life is self-gratification.

ARTURO

Hah! You've just described the entire human race -- with few exceptions!

LILLIAN

Tell me, if Mrs. Fiero is antisocial, how do you explain her popularity and good deeds? For example, her taking in vagrants or disabled veterans like Earl Lupine.

DOCTOR VALERIAN

Both benevolent and malicious acts have the same underlying motive: control. Mrs. Fiero makes herself feel superior by controlling the fate of others less fortunate, and she does this because it raises her own self esteem which -- paradoxically -- is low.

LILLIAN

Does being antisocial make her unable to stop her criminal actions? In other words, should she be exempted from liability through the “irresistible impulse criterion?”

ARTURO

Ah, the “irresistible impulse!”

DOCTOR VALERIAN

No, I believe that Mrs. Fiero could have stopped herself if she wanted to.

ARTURO

Not when we were humping, doctor, not when we were hot!

LILLIAN

Then she was not driven by hallucinations or delusions?

DOCTOR VALERIAN

No.

ARTURO

No,...

ARTURO

...by passion, doctor, by lechery, lust -- the libido!

LILLIAN

Then she’s not sick in either the medical or legal sense?

DOCTOR VALERIAN

No.

ARTURO

No!

ARTURO

No! No! She’s a vigorous, healthy specimen! Elena in moonlight, Elena at morn./ Elena the rosebud, Elena the thorn! She was a black hole, Elena was -- covered by a black bush. I know -- I penetrated deeper than you, doctor.

LILLIAN

Thank you, Doctor Valerian.

ARTURO

The truth is, I don’t miss sex, your honor. It brings one too close to humanity, and as a tree, I’m discovering humanity stinks! Poor Earl was particularly foul which is why I showered, scoured, and rubbed myself raw -- to no avail.

(The CHORUS CORPUS FLORA (which EARL has joined) leap up from their places in the garden.)

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

*Poor begets poor;
 Where was our chance?
 Why did we live in invisibility
 When we weren't free, when we weren't free,
 When we weren't free, when we weren't free,
 When we weren't free, when we weren't free,
 When we weren't free, when we weren't free!
 Oh, los sacrificios, oh, los sacrificios,
 Oh, los sacrificios, oh, los sacrificios,
 Oh, los sacrificios, oh, los sacrificios!*

(Moonlight fades to black.)

SCENE 15

(Morning sunlight floods the garden where ELENA is pulling weeds as ARTURO approaches.)

ARTURO

Oh, tears of dew, that dreaded dawn. The next morning I confronted Elena removing some nettles. I remember her skirt stretched tautly over the unbound mound of her peachy posterior, but I was furious! *(to Elena)* Look at me!

ELENA

Nobody understands...

ARTURO

I'm trying; I'm listening. How did he die?

ELENA

Peacefully. He fell into a deep sleep, then his heart stopped beating.

ARTURO

But you can't keep him in your garden! We've got to have him exhumed and properly...

ELENA

No!

ARTURO

For chrissake, Elena, you have no choice!

ELENA

No! I helped him.

ARTURO

What...? You...you helped him? You mean you...tried to save him?

ELENA

No, I helped him die. If he's found, they'll do an autopsy. They'll know.

ARTURO

You *killed* him...?

ELENA

No, I saved him; I saved his soul.

ARTURO

How...? How could you?!

ELENA

Poisons: oleander, sedgewort...

ARTURO

That's not what I meant! Christ... *(pause)* Elena, listen: what you did was wrong; it's illegal, immoral! I'm afraid I'll have to report you. If I don't someone else will.

ELENA

Who -- Douglas? Douglas told you?!

ARTURO

No! I investigated the source of the smell. I'm a detective, remember? I don't understand you, Elena. How could you take another person's life?

ELENA

I didn't "take" it. I obtained permission. I asked Earl if he wanted to die, then I gave him the gift, the joy of La Madreguera.

ARTURO

You have no right! It's not up to you to judge when someone's ready to die!

ELENA

I don't judge; I serve, and no one ever dies. Remember the sacred crossings? Where the wind blows her breath, where the rain carries her tears. These patterns show where her spirit needs to be fed. Earl's grateful, Arturo, believe me -- I could feel his joy. After he died, his soul waited then passed straight into the eucalyptus!

ARTURO

You really believe that?

ELENA

More than life.

ARTURO

(pause) Oh, Elena, my poor darling...

ELENA

I'm not "poor Elena" or "whore Elena" or "Twinkles" or any of those women you men invent! I'm the bruja, the Priestess Elena! The powers of the Madreguera penetrate and understand.

ARTURO

Listen, Elena: the world doesn't acknowledge or respect those powers.

ELENA

But in the ancient world -- they knew, they knew!

ARTURO

Well, in our world they don't! In our world you're considered a very sick woman. I'll get you the best psychiatrist available.

ELENA

No! They never understand!

ARTURO

(pause) Elena, have you done this before?

ELENA

(shaking her head as if to say no) Please, amorcito, keep our secret. If you do, the Madreguera will bless us both.

ARTURO

Stop it! Madreguera! Madreguera! I'm sick to death of the word! I hate it; I fucking hate it! I don't want to hear it ever again, understand?! Comprende?! Now, you listen to me, Elena: you're going to get help. I insist or I'll call the cops!

ELENA

(pause) Where is Earl's body now?

ARTURO

Where you left it. *(pause)* How is it I still love you? But we can't go on like this; we can't pretend nothing's happened.

ELENA

Yes, we can, mi cielo, Give it more time. You'll see, you'll forget. You might even come around to my way of thinking.

ARTURO

No, no, I won't, damn you! Everything was so...so beautiful before. Don't you get it, Elena? When you buried Earl, you buried...us.

ELENA

We can still be happy; we'll go to Palenque; we'll climb the Terraced Gardens of the Sun.

ARTURO

It's a dream, Elena. There's no garden anymore; you've turned it into a cemetery.

ELENA

Why do you find death so repulsive?

ARTURO

It's not death, Elena, it's murder.

ELENA

It's mercy.

ARTURO

It's killing!

ELENA

It's salvation! Salvation!

(ELENA runs off as lights fade.)

SCENE 16

(Midnight in the garden where the CHORUS CORPUS FLORA create an eerie humming as ARTURO'S tree self speaks to the judge.)

ARTURO

Dreams of a tall, majestic oak, / Felled to the ground by a single stroke. I couldn't sleep, your honor. That night I went digging: three steps east of the begonias...

(ARTURO digs. CORPSES of former tenants are unearthed as the CHORUS CORPUS FLORA sing.)

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>ARTURO</p> <p>...six steps north of the azaleas...</p> <p>...two steps south of the gardenias...</p> <p>...ten steps west of the hydrangeas...</p> <p>...five steps east of the lantana...</p> <p>...one step south of the roses...</p> | <p>CHORUS CORPUS FLORA</p> <p><i>Gardens live, gardens die,</i></p> <p><i>Gardens live, gardens die,</i></p> <p><i>Gardens live, gardens die,</i></p> <p><i>Gardens live, gardens die,</i></p> <p><i>Gardens live, gardens die.</i></p> |
|--|---|

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

Gardens live and gardens die;
Their fragrant flowers soar.
Glowing, glowing in the night,
With their sacrificial light...

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

La Madreguera,
La Madreguera...

(ARTURO weeps as the lights fade to black.)

SCENE 17

(In the courtroom, THORNFIELD continues his testimony as ARTURO remains in the garden.)

THORNFIELD

Art phoned and told me to meet him in the garden right away. When I came, he was still covered in dirt. He asked me to call the cops. He didn't want to be the one to rat her out. He got her the best lawyer he could find. As for me, I'm still waitin' for the coroner's office to I D the...

| | |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| <p>THORNFIELD</p> <p>...bodies.</p> | <p>ARTURO</p> <p>Bodies!</p> |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|

ARTURO

Foul, gaseous flesh pots! Unholy halitosis! It's worse than ever, rush after reeking rush of nausea... *(he coughs)*

THORNFIELD

So far there's no trace of Laurel,...

ARTURO

But you don't smell it, do you, your honor?

THORNFIELD

...no trace at all.

ARTURO

When I became a tree, I thought it would vanish, but humanity clings like a fungus.

THORNFIELD

I don't know what happened to Art.

ARTURO

The stink's latched onto my lichen, my liverworts...

THORNFIELD

He was okay for a while, then...well, hell, he was nuts about her.

ARTURO

I am the source of the smell;...

THORNFIELD

Now he's just plan nuts.

ARTURO

...I am the source of the smell!!!!

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

*We crawled into the earth,
Crawled into the earth,
Crawled into the earth
Of Elena's garden.*

(Lights fade to black.)

SCENE 18

(In the prison conference room, ELENA sits with her face washed, wearing a prison dress. Next to her sits TERRANCE COLLARD, her defense attorney. ARTURO enters to join them.)

TERRANCE

You understand, Elena, a finding of multiple homicides dictates only two possible sentences: life imprisonment without parole or death by hydrogen cyanide, or what we commonly refer to as “the gas chamber.” I think it’s in our best interest to plead not guilty by reason of insanity.

ELENA

Innocent! By the virtues of faith and mercy which have nothing to do with reason.

TERRANCE

Look, in California you get a two-phase trial. In the first they’ll find you guilty...

ELENA

Innocent! It’s *my* life, *my* trial! Only two doctors found me insane, and they couldn’t tell a turnip from a tea rose!

TERRANCE

I’m trying to act in your best interest, Mrs. Fiero. I have signed statements...

ELENA

Doctors! They only treat the body. What do they care for their patients’ souls? What do they know about my garden much less the faith that inspired it -- which is no more insane than your faith in a god who sent his only son to be crucified! In California we still have the freedom to worship as we choose, don’t we, Mister Lawyer?

TERRANCE

That’s true, Mrs. Fiero, but if you don’t plead insanity, you face the very good possibility of death.

ELENA

They can plant my body, but the Madreguera will transplant my soul in the warm womb of the earth.

TERRANCE

Great, just tell the judge that, and we’ll do fine, just fine.

ARTURO

Look, Elena, if you don’t plead insanity, you may never see another garden again -- your choice.

ELENA

Never...?

TERRANCE

(pause, to Arturo) I don't recommend a jury trial. In cases like this, we've got a better chance with a judge than a jury. I'm going to concentrate on her traumatic childhood, the hallucinations -- the "sacred executioner" angle. We have to convince the judge that she really believes she's carrying out a divine mission.

ELENA

But I am, I am!

TERRANCE

Exactly.

ELENA

You pompous bastard! You think I'm an idiot?! Stop talking like I'm not here! I don't trust you.

TERRANCE

Well, I trust you, Mrs. Fiero. You have the kind of intelligence and sensitivity that make me believe you. Don't get me wrong, I find your crimes reprehensible, but I think your motives were genuinely felt. Now the prosecution's goal is to prove your actions were premeditated, that you wanted your tenants social security checks and pensions...

ELENA

But I did! How do you think I maintained my garden -- not to mention my mortgage! You think the rents I collect are sufficient? You think the government would help me out!? We're not all as rich as you, Mister Lawyer.

TERRANCE

Look, I'm just saying the prosecutor will try to make you seem clever and acquisitive. I'm supposed to be proving your reasoning process is defective. By law, you're either insane or you're not. There's no in between here. I'm saying you're a delusional psychotic visionary; the prosecution will say you're just a greedy, run-of-the-mill thief -- until you crossed the line and became a killer.

ELENA

(covering her ears) Noooooooo...

TERRANCE

Get used to it, Mrs. Fiero, they're calling you the cream of the crop. You've broken the state record for female homicides, and the D. A. Bracken's, a tough cookie. I know you've got your fan club, but the only one testifying on your behalf is Arturo, and Bracken says he's her key witness as well.

ARTURO

Would you please leave us alone for a few minutes? We're almost out of time.

TERRANCE

Right. *(exiting)* By the way, keep up the chanting. It's driving the other prisoners bonkers, but it's a nice touch.

ELENA

Get out! Out! Out! *(pause, embracing Arturo)* Oh, Arturo, what will happen?

ARTURO

Please, Elena, you've got to cooperate. Then we can get you out of prison and into a hospital.

ELENA

I'm not a killer! I hate violence! I wanted to help people. I helped you, Arturo; I helped you love again.

ARTURO

Yes, I know. I can't stop thinking about you. How is it possible to love someone capable of...? Oh, God, why do I still want to spend the rest of my life with you?

ELENA

(pause) I love you too, amorcito. *(pause)* Our bodies flow from our spirits. I don't want to lose my spirit.

ARTURO

You won't; I won't let you. *(pause)* Elena, honey, there's something I have to ask you. I promised Thornfield I'd try to find out what happened to his niece. Remember Laurel?

ELENA

They'll never find her.

ARTURO

The papers are making a big deal about it. They're saying you buried her outside your garden; they're afraid there's even more. Elena, where is she?

ELENA

At peace.

ARTURO

Please, Elena, trust me. I have to know. It might help your case if you tell me.

ELENA

It's my secret.

ARTURO

Make it my secret too.

(The CHORUS CORPUS FLORA whisper their song from the garden as ELENA speaks.)

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

*Impatiens, impatiens,
Dark with earth,
She dreams of new birth...*

ELENA

Someday her spirit will flower in the Terraced Garden of the Sun. My little impatient one became impatiens. But you'll never find her body.

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

*Impatiens, impatiens,
In the killing hour,
She seeks the way to flower...*

ELENA

Laurel was restless like me. She loved being in motion; she loved driving fast with her radio playing, her hands tapping.

ARTURO

So she took off?

ELENA

She had visions of freedom in the mountains, so she followed her dream. A week after she left, she was killed in a collision between Sante Fe and Taos. The only thing in her wallet was my card. I claimed her as my own and paid to have her cremated. Then I sprinkled her ashes by the impatiens.

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

*Impatiens, impatiens,
With rage we plunder,
And seek to kill
Our sense of wonder...*

ELENA

She still sings to me, but you don't believe that, do you?

ARTURO

I think your perceptions have become...distorted. But I...I still love you.

ELENA

Do you love me enough to bury my body in the bosom of La Madreguera? Will you plant a pepper tree over my grave? Will you?

ARTURO

I...I don't know.

ELENA

You'll never believe me, you'll never see how I saved my tenants from cruel, undignified deaths, how they were resurrected into a world of beauty.

ARTURO

(pause) Sometimes I feel I'm beginning to understand, but no, I...I will never believe that Earl's been...resurrected.

ELENA

So I'm a killer?

(Pause as ARTURO turns away, refusing to answer, and ELENA starts pacing.)

ELENA

I don't want to see you anymore. I know it was you who turned me in. You mocked my faith and betrayed me.

ARTURO

I did it for you, for both of us! You're going to get help; you're going to get better!

ELENA

My Madreguera was mistaken. I should have buried you instead -- under a Judas tree!

ARTURO

Elena, you don't mean...

ELENA

Judas tree! Judas tree!

(ELENA grasps ARTURO by the sides of his head and pushes him to the floor.)

ELENA

Judas treeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!!!

(Lightning strikes!)

SCENE 19

(Pulsating lights reveal ARTURO enacting his transformation into a tree. The CHORUS CORPUS FLORA surround him making wind sounds and menacing whispers. ELENA sings with the CHORUS, making wild, ritualistic gestures.)

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA and ELENA

*In the Judas tree,
Wildcats and coyotes,
Lightning and thunder,
No wonder, no wonder.
In the Judas tree,
Only the curse of betrayal,
And the end of the search
For a holy grail.*

ARTURO

Frozen winters; time transfixed. The pithy hollow in my heart grows a wooden embryo: Cells divide, elongate, mature, and rings upon rings emerge. Bleeding, I'm bleeding a rich, sugary sap as my flesh crusts into knotty bark. But listen, listen! I can hear it! Yes, I hear the song!

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA and ELENA

*In the Judas tree,
Snakes and rats,
Hot melting winds,
No peace, no peace,
In the Judas tree,
Only the curse of betrayal,
And the loss of love
Piercing through the wail...*

ARTURO

My Judas tree voice! A sapling voice, but forging new fronds through the floridness of style! Feel my roots grasp the underworld of grubs, my heart shaped blossoms reaching to heaven, and oh, the prospect of never ceasing to grow no matter how long I live and love her! But the pain, oh, the paaaaaaaain...

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA and ELENA

*In the Judas tree,
Wasps and scorpions,
Torturing thorns,
No wonder, no wonder.
In the Judas tree,
Lies the love that scars;
The endless torment
Under midnight stars.*

ARTURO

No one believed me when I told them I was treeified, that I could finally hear the song!

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

*Love is a voyage into the desert
Where the Judas tree bleeds,
Where the Judas tree dies.
Love is a garden without hate, without lies,
Where the Judas tree bleeds,
Where the Judas tree dies.*

(Blackout.)

SCENE 20

(The courtroom where ARTURO has returned to his seat in the gallery, followed by the CHORUS CORPUS FLORA who position themselves nearby. TERRANCE approaches the judge.)

TERRANCE

The prosecution speaks eloquently of guilty graves, but whose guilt, your honor? Can we blame this poor woman whose childhood was dominated by a sadistic father who murdered her mother before her eyes?

ARTURO

No!

TERRANCE

No.

TERRANCE

Can we blame this woman who was orphaned to a convent? Who was later tormented by the conflict between Christian ideals of sacrifice and the human sacrifices of her Mayan ancestors?

ARTURO

No!

TERRANCE

No,...

TERRANCE

...in good conscience, we must blame our culture, our society for its failure to solve the problems of poverty, ignorance, and neglect that lie behind Mrs. Fiero's fantasy of redemption. Is it really so difficult to understand her need to transcend a degrading life of petty theft and prostitution, her need to establish a charitable boarding house, a sanctuary where the outcasts of society could be fed and sheltered.

ARTURO

And shaded! By trees! The loftiest, leafiest, most venerable of all living things!

TERRANCE

There's an intense mental anguish that results from the ever widening economic inequities we seem impotent to change.

ARTURO

It's the higher human fauna who revel in discord, recklessness! Rootlessness!

TERRANCE

So Mrs. Fiero took on the monumental task of rectifying our injustice. Unfortunately, she saw no solution but the ultimate solution. She fantasized herself into the role of a sacred executioner.

ARTURO

Humanity's weed yanker! Observe your species, your honor: constantly at waging wars, desensitized to cruelty, each one trying so desperately to out-climb the other that they're all up a tree, ha, ha!

TERRANCE

We must hold Mrs. Fiero accountable, but *not* responsible for the killing of her tenants. Doctor Valerian called Mrs. Fiero an antisocial personality, but antisocial personalities do not have hallucinations of an earth goddess named La Madreguera.

(The CHORUS CORPUS FLORA echo TERRANCE, holding their notes throughout his speech.)

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

La Madregueraaaaaaaaaa...

TERRANCE

And antisocial personalities do not have a conscience. Mrs. Fiero has a very acute conscience as evidenced by the compassion she felt for her victims.

ARTURO

Did you feel compassion for Arturo?

TERRANCE

Think of it: how could she hope to redeem their lives through sacrifice if she didn't care for their souls?

ARTURO

Did you care for Arturo's soul, Elena?

TERRANCE

She cared enough to act! Your honor, the defense calls Elena Abril Fiero to the stand!

(ELENA approaches to testify as the CHORUS CORPUS FLORA watch.)

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

*Elena, Elena,
Mistress of Death,
Elena, Elena,
Giving us life,
In a flower's breath.*

ARTURO

Oh, Elena, your adoring Arturo still loves your swagger. Look at her, your honor: what courage, what pride!

TERRANCE

State your full name for the court record.

ELENA

Elena...

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

Elena...

ELENA

...Abril Fiero.

TERRANCE

Mrs. Fiero, in the first phase of your trial, the state found you guilty of murder in the first degree.

ELENA

I killed no one; they sacrificed themselves through me, but you Americans don't understand that kind of sacrifice.

TERRANCE

That's right, Mrs. Fiero, our society and culture prohibit it.

ELENA

Don't kid yourself, Mister Lawyer. We all demand sacrifice. Every time you eat, some plant or animal sacrifices its life. Every living thing has consciousness. If you could hear the song, you'd know that.

TERRANCE

Tell me, do you hear the song now?

ELENA

Yes, but it's clearer in my garden. There was beauty there and harmony for drifters that people like you would step on.

TERRANCE

We've seen your garden, Mrs. Fiero, and it's filled with corpses.

ELENA

It's filled with souls! Souls that found peace through new birthings,...

ELENA

...new bloomings.

ARTURO

New bloomings!

TERRANCE

You mean their souls became flowers and trees?

ELENA

Yes.

ARTURO

Yes!

TERRANCE

For example, your tenant, Earl Lupine: what happened to his soul?

ARTURO

Resurrection!

ELENA

Resurrection,...

ELENA

...he entered the eucalyptus.

TERRANCE

I see.

ELENA

No, you don't! Your justice always turns to revenge, but the Madreguera has her own justice -- divine justice.

TERRANCE

One last question, Mrs. Fiero: When you poisoned and buried those bodies, did you think you were committing a criminal act?

ELENA

I'm not a criminal! I was performing my sacred duties as a priestess,...

ELENA

...a priestess!

ARTURO

A priestess!

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

*Every garden knows
The time to die and grow.
Love needs no judicial pardon
When it creates a holy garden.*

TERRANCE

Your witness, counselor.

(LILLIAN approaches ELENA.)

LILLIAN

Mrs. Fiero, your religion makes as much sense to me as many other religions. Death and sacrifice have always been at the center of religious rituals. What I want to know is how you planned those sacrifices. Did you work out the exact time of death?

ELENA

Yes, after La Madreguera revealed the burial sites.

LILLIAN

How far in advance did she tell you?

ELENA

Sometimes weeks, sometimes only hours.

LILLIAN

And did she reveal the particular person she had in mind to be sacrificed?

ELENA

Yes, but she made certain they were already dying.

LILLIAN

And just how, specifically, were they dying?

ELENA

Of drugs, booze, cancers, but mostly from old age.

LILLIAN

Do you see your vocation as a priestess as being any different from that of a man claiming to be a priest?

ELENA

We brujas have more powers, and the goddess teaches her lessons through the garden, not the battlefield. A garden is like the whole world: there are daily births and deaths, the seeding and weeding.

LILLIAN

Yes, especially the weeding; it's the weeding that's brought you into this courtroom.

ELENA

I don't use guns or bombs or maim and mutilate the land!

LILLIAN

You're an intelligent woman, Mrs. Fiero. How do we know you didn't just conjure this religion for the sake of this trial? How can you prove to us that you're really a priestess and not a criminal?

ELENA

I can't. Religion is a matter of faith.

LILLIAN

Well, I'm not convinced, Mrs. Fiero. I don't think you hear voices or save souls or have any powers whatsoever. I think you enjoy killing because it makes you feel invincible. And since I represent the people of California, I want to be absolutely certain you acted out of genuine religious conviction, not greed, not sadistic...

ELENA

I acted on the truth! I know what I see!

LILLIAN

But you're the only one here who does. Of course, I realize you've gathered quite a following, but the truth is no one really knows the Madreguera's credo but you, Mrs. Fiero. You've created a one woman religion.

ELENA

No! My mother knew. The Mayans, the Aztecs, the Incas...

LILLIAN

But they're not here to testify, are they?

ELENA

Arturo knows.

LILLIAN

Yes, but Arturo can't speak, can he?

ELENA

No. She made him a tree.

LILLIAN

Who made him a tree?

ELENA

La Madreguera.

LILLIAN

So Arturo's a tree?

ELENA

Yes.

ARTURO

Yes!

LILLIAN

Very good, Mrs. Fiero. And we all thought he'd had a stroke. Oh, I've been told it's resulted in delusional trauma and paralysis of the vocal chords, but this is the first I've heard of him being a tree. *(pause)* Please stand up, Mr. Salvia.

(ARTURO stands, expressionless.)

LILLIAN

Now, wouldn't you say he's very much alive and very human?

ARTURO

Alive yes, but wood has entered my heart.

LILLIAN

Do you still insist Arturo Salvia is a tree?

ELENA

A Judas tree.

ARTURO

A Judas tree!

LILLIAN

Mr. Salvia, if you're a tree, would you please nod your head?

(ARTURO nods.)

LILLIAN

Very clever, Mrs. Fiero, but it won't work.

ARTURO

Wooden hearts can be bitter and lacking in mercy.

(ELENA glances towards ARTURO, finally hearing his voice.)

ELENA

(softly) Arturo?

ARTURO

But mine is forgiving. I'm going to save you, Elena; I'm going to save you from yourself.

ELENA

I...I can hear him.

ARTURO

I'm going to plant a new paradise, a paradise of trees!

LILLIAN

It occurs to me that you and Mr. Salvia have conspired to make a mockery of this trial.

ARTURO

I'll sow my seeds throughout Los Angeles!

LILLIAN

I don't believe in his paralysis anymore than I believe in your Madreguera. Why don't you tell us what she looks like?

ARTURO

Seeds germinating, gestating!

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

La Madreguera...

ELENA

Seeds germinating, gestating!

La Madreguera...

ARTURO

Shoots sprouting into saplings!

La Madreguera...

ELENA

Shoots sprouting into saplings!

La Madreguera...

ARTURO

Flowers bursting from their buds!

La Madreguera...

ELENA

Flowers bursting from their buds!

La Madreguera...

(The CHORUS CORPUS FLORA continues humming throughout the scene.)

ARTURO

Let's reforest California! The country! The world!

LILLIAN

Tell me, Mrs. Fiero, do you feel any regret, any remorse for killing your tenants?

ARTURO

We'll build Judas tree towns! Tree cities! Tree nations of virgin forests! We'll reconcile ourselves to the soil, to the grasses, to the rivers, to the badgers and butterflies, and finally, to the divine, oh, the divinest of divinities! You made me a Judas tree, so come with me!

LILLIAN

Mrs Fiero?

ARTURO

Come with me!

ELENA

(to Arturo) No...

LILLIAN

I didn't hear you, Mrs. Fiero. I asked if you feel any remorse?

ARTURO

Embrace me, Elena! Forgive me, oh, please...

ELENA

(to Arturo) No! No!...

ELENA

... No!!

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

No!!

LILLIAN

That's all I wanted to hear.

ELENA

(regretting her outburst) No!

LILLIAN

No more questions, your honor.

(Blackout.)

SCENE 21

(Dim lights reveal the San Quentin gas chamber where ELENA is seated in a chair, surrounded by the CHORUS CORPUS FLORA.)

VOICE OF THE JUDGE

Elena Abril Fiero, you have been convicted of thirty-seven counts of first degree murder and are hereby sentenced to San Quentin Prison to await execution by gasssssss....

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

Gardens live, gardens die,

Gardens live, gardens die,

Gardens live, gardens die.

(The "s" of the word gas becomes the hissing sounds of engulfing vapors. Soon ELENA succumbs, slumping in her chair as the CHORUS CORPUS FLORA dance around her and ARTURO joins their song.)

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA and ARTURO

*Life begets life,
 Then death comes to call
 Like the petals of lilies
 That open then fall.
 Awakened by summer,
 Then chilled by the snow,
 Gone is our lily,
 Oh, where did she go?*

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

Los sacrificios, los sacrificios...

(Fade out.)

EPILOGUE

(A sanitarium garden where ARTURO is seated on a bench with WENDY beside him. The CHORUS CORPUS FLORA have returned to their roots while ELENA remains in darkness in the gas chamber.)

WENDY

You're in all the papers, Art. They're calling you "The Tree Man." Do you still think you're a tree?

ARTURO

(slowly) I'm a stone, a stone that crushed a lily.

WENDY

No, you're not.

ARTURO

I've lost her. Even her scent's starting to fade...

WENDY

(pause) Your hot shot lawyer's always in the papers. We're all famous.

ARTURO

They're letting me start a garden of my own here.

WENDY

That's cool. What are you going to plant?

ARTURO

Rocks and stones.

WENDY

Don't you want flowers? I'll get you whatever seeds you need.

ARTURO

Shhh. Sometimes I still hear them.

WENDY

Hear what?

ARTURO

The harmonies. There really are harmonies, you know...

WENDY

You're shivering.

ARTURO

But stones never sing...

WENDY

Why don't we sit in the sun?

ARTURO

They're so cold...

WENDY

I'm sorry, Art, real sorry.

(WENDY gently touches his shoulder. As SHE stands to leave, ARTURO also stands.)

ARTURO

But there are days...

WENDY

Yes...?

ARTURO

(staring down at his hands) There are days my arms remember -- when we were the limbs of a tree!

(ARTURO, slowly lifts his arms and poses majestically as a tree, while the CHORUS CORPUS FLORA emerge from their roots, singing.)

CHORUS CORPUS FLORA

*Happy is she who plants
A garden that will flower and flame,
Dying in time to create the hours
Visions and dreams come again.
Los sacrificios, los sacrificios,
Los sacrificios, los sacrificios.*

*Happy is she who plants
A garden against sorrow and death,
Color after color flares
Proving eternal breath.
Los sacrificios, los sacrificios,
La Madreguera, la Madreguera...*

(Moonlight fades to black.)

End of Play

