

Amid the Alien Corn

Canticle for Two Female Voices



Libretto by E. Louise Beach

Music by Gerald Cohen

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Both: In a former time,
in an ancient place,
hardship and famine
wracked the land.
Instead of wheat,
grim thistles thrived.
Corn cockle instead of barley.

Naomi and her husband
with their two sons
left their home
for they were starving.
Left Judah for the
meadows of Moab.

Over time the sons married
Women of Moab.
But then God gathered in death
husband and sons.
Beloved men,
but they perished too young.

(Musical Interlude)

Both: This is how things are:
Wives no more.
We wander shoeless
on shards of woe
that cut and prick
and wound and nick.

Old memories stab us
like daggers and darts
that scratch and nip
and notch our hearts.
Old memories of selves
once tendered.

Naomi: Ruth, widow of my son,
you have become my friend,
my cohort,
my partner,
and my right hand.
My sole companion in grief.

Naomi: Cold stones and lonely
corridors lead
to the stores and cellars
of our desire.

Ruth: Our loved ones lie
in faceless time.
Reluctant relicts,
yet we abide.

Both: Our husbands gone,
we sing a bitter song.
The house of memory
our only home.

Naomi: A pitiable widow
marooned in Moab,
I will leave this place
to seek comfort of kin.
I will leave this place
for the barley harvest
and return to Judah's now
wheat-golden fields.

Ruth: I will go with you to Judah.

Naomi: No, my daughter.
Do not come with me.

Ruth: I will go with you to Judah.

Naomi: You're a Moabite.
Judah is not your home.

Ruth: I will go with you to Judah.

Naomi: Stay in this country
where you are known.

Ruth: Wherever you go,
I, too, will go.
I will make of Judah my very own.
Wherever you go,
I will follow.

Naomi: My heart grown hollow,

is once again filled
with hope and happiness.

Ruth: Your people my people,
your God my God,
I'll make of Judah my very own.
Wherever you stay, I will stay.
Wherever you die, I will die,
and there will I be buried.

Both: Nothing but death can divide us!

Both: Come, sun. Look quietly on.
Our husbands gone,
we sing a kindred song.
Together, we'll seek refuge in Judah.
We'll journey back
to a land of bounty,
back to Judah
of newly plenteous bread.

Ruth: I will live amid the alien corn;
cull after reapers in the field.

Both: Ever us will God fold in that ample cloak.
Ever us will God shield.