

Laylage Courie

Medea in the Desert

*I could not find this vision of
Medea's final home
in the gentle rock
and sap of the south.
I had to travel.
Not for the sake of Medea
the exile, who travelled great
distances once by sea,
twice drawn through air,
but to place her.*

Mystery activates our imagination. Understanding brings it to rest. It is not easy to activate any myth with its full potential of power and inexplicableness. We know our mythology so well. We dissect it to find the anatomy of emotion in our own lives. We have a psychological explanation for each drop of mythological juice.

I - and, it seems, many others - am fascinated with Medea. There are films, books, and performances of her myth. I have discussed Euripides' text in a post-modern feminist classroom. I have seen her sacrifice her children like small Christs. I have seen her mad imagining, read about her sexuality, her childhood. The theme of the *Myth and Theatre* conference I attend as I write, is "Jealousy" and she spouts fury and example all through the dialogue and presentations. She is the abandoned woman, the woman in exile. "I am interested in her as a woman who gives all of her energy and power to another person; and what it is like when that person abandons her", says one violently-present artist about to take on the role via Euripides' text. One man wonders at "the power she asserts over her own offspring". A friend says: "They are my puppies, I can eat them if I want to". There is Kali in Medea, a human Fate who will have her way despite judgement or fair reason. Her destructiveness may not be righteous, but it is irrevocable.

I have struggled for a good number of years to understand Medea's attraction; what she activates in my imagination. "Call me a monster if you wish, a Scylla housed in the caves of the Tuscan sea. I, too, as I had to, have taken hold of your heart", she calls out, magnetic and forceful. She has taken us; caught us in a never-ending replay, recast of her life up to this moment where she hovers over our heads, furiously complete and untouchable, decked in her children's blood.

Linda Wise, my teacher at the Jealousy conference, tells me about an Australian woman who kills her children in a rage of betrayal. The woman aged twice her years with despair - her own conscience is worse punishment than any

prison. Linda says: "In the myth Medea flies off on a chariot drawn by dragons. But in real life it's not like that."

In real life, it is not like that. Medea, murderess of brother, children, kings, and princesses, escapes. In the classic world is there any hero who escapes the consequence of his actions? What do we make of a woman who loses (destroys) home, kin, love, children (all devotions typically associated with women), and yet survives? She destroys all these things but she does not destroy herself. My own preoccupation with Medea does not lie in the act of killing, but with the act of survival. What kind of joy, decrepitude, what strange liberating desolation remains beyond the destructiveness?

After Medea escapes, for the last time, across ocean and land, who is she? What does she become?

In August of 1999, for my birthday, I travelled for the first time through the red rock and glazed sky of the American South-West. A few weeks before I flew out to join the lover who invited me on this trip, he announced we could only take the trip as friends. He had met another woman and promised her that nothing would happen between "us". I chose, despite this, to go. This begins the associative array that fuses Medea, for me, to the landscape of the American South-west.

It was important to me where Medea grew up. A life of exile must be grounded in the remembrance of home; a remembrance which shapes and warps a vision of, or longing for, rest and resolution. It was not practical for me to literally write of her as a Turk. I have no experience with the country and anything I wrote would have no roots, only idealisation which obscures the ambivalence of home.

I was born, and spent most of my life, in the American South. I am comfortable with

trees, dirt fields, peach orchards, and the lethargy of heat. I know tall misshapen pines, tobacco fields, stop lights, and the decay of rural land and small towns into sprawl. There is no reason why Medea could not have come from the South: a low boat coming slowly up the river, a copper mouth twined about the fleece in the deep trees along a creek bed, sun, heat, and the actual women in the newspapers who drown, stab or strangle their sons. But I felt Medea's life moved towards a disturbing, awesome vision of peace or rest. This place, this home, should point back towards, although it would not duplicate, the home she came from. I could not find this vision of Medea's final home in the gentle rock and sap of the south. I had to travel. Not for the sake of Medea the exile, who travelled great distances once by sea, twice drawn through air, but to place her.

Nothing has struck me with force and dislocation like the great breadth and wilderness crossing Anasazi ruins as old as anything in my country, the Sonoran desert, red rock and red sand crevaced by lush, river-worn canyons. I was struck with the shock of a new terrain; a new landscape. The image of an ancient tree has very little meaning here. The eerie quiet in the floorboards of an old house makes no sense. My imagery did not belong. It is hard to even speak of the desert landscape in words. The slow, slow sift of time. Sand combed by weather. Erosion. A lizard scuttles. A rock, suddenly, tears down a red cliff wall. Long stillnesses. Saguaros, tall as trees, contain deep presences. Each cactus' form is a pure gesture both obscure and imminent.

In Chaco Canyon, olive and silver green leaves rattling at the ends of tough twigs diffuse the brilliance of red earth and blue sky. Cracked, red rock rises to high plateaux. My companion and I climb through a crevice to the top of one. We walk for several miles

along its flat rocky shales. We can see, in all directions, green scrub covering red earth, the steep rise of other mesas. We come to the ruins of a kiva - a circle dug into the ground and once covered for rituals of the Anasazi people. My companion reminds me that these North American wonders were built at the same time the Europeans were building Notre Dame. I can imagine that the Anasazi psyche would have no need for Notre Dame. I try to imagine what man-made monument could amount to anything beneath so much sky, in the shadow of red, faceted rock.

I rode in the back of a truck across miles of packed sand bordered by dunes under the desert's fire-glazed sky. I felt equal to this landscape. I felt, inexplicably, home.

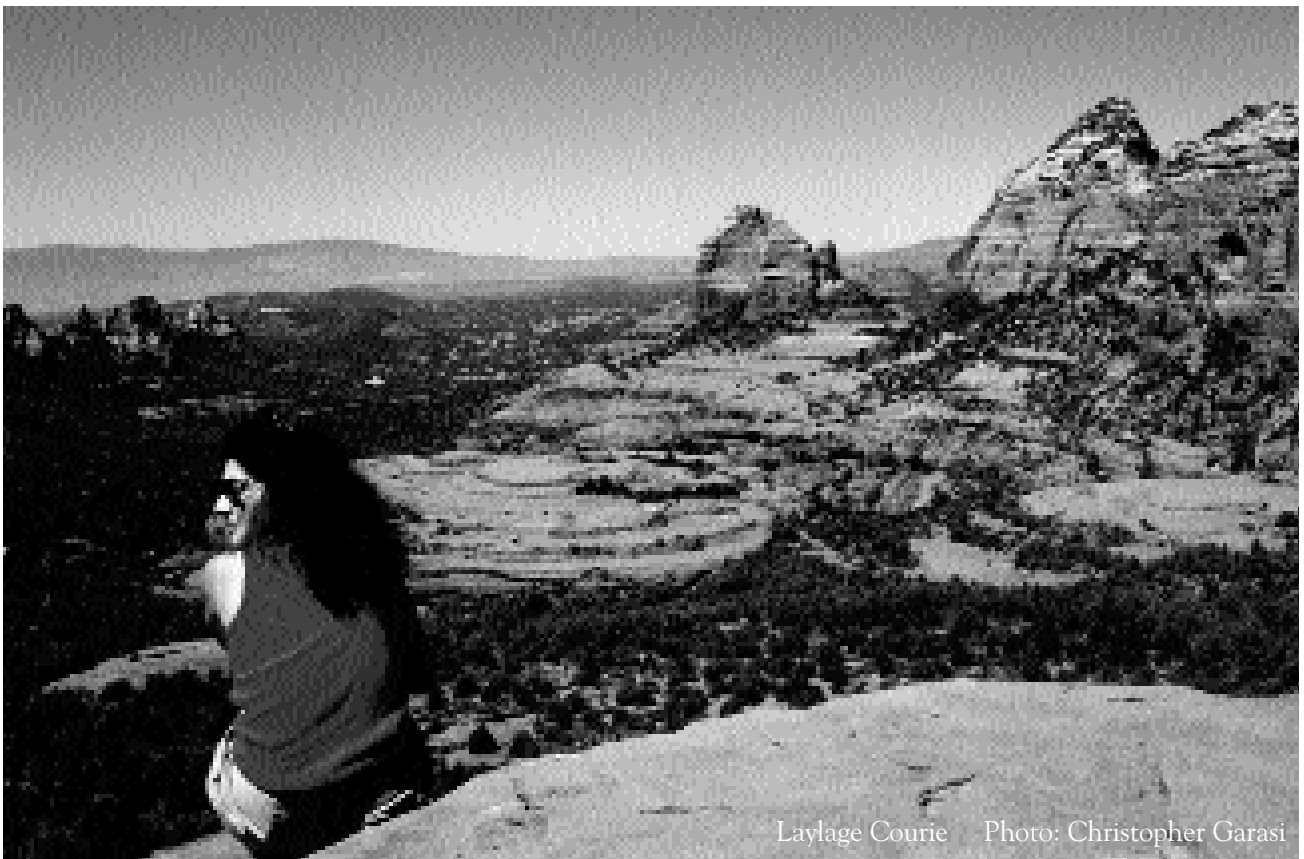
*... A woman is a small thing
among rock, cactus, sand. A hat shades her
from the sun. She stands in the shadow of*

*her own hat. Her soul, if she has one, hunts
a hare. It circles a sky too empty
to cross. Her soul is tail-less, a lizard
darting through brush. Her soul, if she'll have it,
flicks at her ankle. It slides up her thigh,
coils across her chest...*

When I came back I had long cinematic dreams. Flip-card books of desert imagery turned their pages in my mind.

Medea: at the edge of her life, along the path of a rock garden, in her own room. She throws things away, gathers other things out of pleasure or chance, only to throw them away again. *Many things can, and will, please.* She has no need outside each moment.

She remembers the stories of her homeland: a battering sun rises on the loose jaws of those who survive the night and the bones of those who do not, a sun that is



Laylage Courie Photo: Christopher Garasi

always sinking, of an earth falling to keep up with it. In her youth, at a place sacred to her people, she abandoned solitude and chose love. She beats her way back to this sacred place. Her life is a journey to become absolutely, terribly free.

*At the centre of the mind there is desert.
There is desert and a tree.
Only one thing lives there, in the tree.
Its skin is smooth.
Its tongue, dry as paper, slips and sounds the
rustle of leaves.
The tree is bare. There is no wind.*

*All around there is sand
and sand and sand, I look ahead, I look behind
red sand worn fine beneath a fired-blue sky.
No matter which way I walk, when I look back
I will find
the tree.*

*The creature drowns.
Its body snakes, mindlessly.*

*My heart crumbles.
A grey brittle flower touched with a pin
crumbles to powder.
Oh radiant dark sky,
not even the sun can endure
the epoch of East to West.
Even the sun's circle sinks towards the sand.
Its bones, white time, scatter.
They mark no passage.
They mark no narrative.*

*I open my mouth and emptiness rushes in.
My lips stretch out over my nose, chin,
stretch up over my skull,
down my shoulders, to my legs*

*my lips split, jaw breaks,
throat swollen raw and drawn thin
swallows itself, expands, contracts, trembling.
A high, still quiver.
Furious screech of feather and claw erupt.
My bones, breath, break from my body
A fierce flock of birds beat the air,
Scatter in all directions over desert, sand, rock
the dizziness of passage I take in
endless red sand and red rock
I am the peace of dry branches
Amidst the shriek of a thousand wings.*

I am home.

Italicised texts from drafts of *Arizona* (©2001) and
The Medea Monologue (©2000)
Uncredited quotes from Euripides' *Medea*

LAYLAGE COURIE (USA) is a writer and actor. She co-founded Multishades Atlanta, a consortium of writers, performers, and directors. Laylage moved to New York and worked on the May 2001 design for *Ten Minutes*, a performance in the Red Poppy production of *Salome*, and on the upcoming production of *Vita2040*. Her writing has been selected by the International Women Playwright's Festival.
www.luminouswork.org