

MEDEA

an opera in one act

music by Michael Hersch
libretto by Stephanie Fleischmann

MEDEA

Look at me.
I am strange, foreign.
You do not know me.
The hole in the sky
that follows me
wherever I fly.
The heaving ground beneath my feet
laced with the dust,
the skin and bone,
of generations.

Generations.
Millennia.
Fields
of children
killed
over a wandering glance,
a lazy eye,
a dinnerplate
heaped higher,
the promise
of power
gone awry.
The promise of freedom,
undercut by
weakness,
retribution.

You don't know me.
But you think you know
what I've done.

CHORUS

The Granddaughter of the sun.
She's still here.
In the light and in the shadow
of the tattered day
streaming through the trees,
the tar-pitched nights.
We cannot erase her.
She is still with us.
Still here, even gone.

MEDEA

You think you know
what I've done.
You think you know—

You hate me
for how I stand here before you,
glaring back.
You hate me
for my fluency
with healing.

Necromancy,
you call it.
You are afraid to let me impart
what I know,
to let me look inside
and see you,
to let yourselves be healed.

—the bile buried in your bowels,
the smoldering coal of spite
you won't snuff out,
the hot burn of envy, lack,
of wanting,
of wanting

tender morning light,
latticed hills,
slivering streams,
days and nights,
free of terror,
free of terror,
devoid of fear.

I left all I'd known
not for him,
the man I loved—
Jason. His sea-gray eyes,
his golden fleece—

CHORUS

We cannot
erase you.
Still here,
even when gone.
Still here.

Grandchild of the sun.
I cannot erase you.
Still here
even if you are gone.
The drone of your difference
rings my alarm
like a hammered knee,
an infected tooth.

Afraid
I'd have to face—

Morning light.
Silvering streams.
Terror.

Days and nights.
Free of fear.

Jason / The Argonauts /
Slap-dash ship slipping past
Scylla and Charybdis. / She tamed
dragons for him.

MEDEA

I left my home not for him,
but because I wanted
to lance the bile,
make strong the weak,
suture this ransacked world

with what I knew.

I wanted to mend
this world
with what I know
of roots, pollen, sap...

Roots, pollen, sap, herbs.

Herbs growing at the mouths of caves,
the thrum of forgotten words intoned.

I wanted to know
more.
To see the world.
I had no choice.
I escaped the ends of the earth,
I flew. Turned my back on Colchis,
morning light, latticed hills,
my home.
Morning light, latticed hills, days, nights,
a singing I'd known since—
The singing had stopped.
Blighted.
My brother, just a boy,
bludgeoned in the grey dawn,
by our father the king.
The carnage of that place.
by our father, the king.

Racing, cutting across the waves,
sailing away from home
with Jason and his Argonauts—

CHORUS

Make strong. Make strong the—

Suture—

Weak—

This ransacked world.

She wanted to wreak havoc. On us.

What does she know

that we don't?

Who is she to know what's in me?

How can she heal this ransacked world?

Venom. The venom of snakes,
the blood of sheep,
the piper's beak,
the mourning dove's retrices.
Flight feathers of its tail.
Herbs growing.
At the mouths of caves.

Had no choice.

The streams, the hills, the light.

Bludgeoned. Stoned, pulverized.
Throat slashed. Sunk, drowned.
Drowned, thrown away,
tossed into the deep,
limb by limb—
femur, sternum, scapula.
Buried at sea.

MEDEA

shattered heart,
heart full—
I released myself
from that place.
I thought I was free.

Where I come from
across the sea,
at the far ends of the earth,
we bury our dead in the air.
Not the ground.
The dead,
hanging in sacs from the trees.
Ancient olive limbs
festooned
with burlap-sacked pendants
shot through
with the cocooning
scent of decay.

My boys—
Pendulums swaying across time,
through wind, rain, mist, sleet.

My boys,
pendulums
swaying
across time.

MEDEA

If I could exhume
my murdered boys,
I would.

CHORUS

She hails from a brutal place.
Brutal, strange.
She cannot face—
So far from home—
Backwards flow the rivers.
The moon's afraid
to look upon the stain,
the rage her exile stirs.
Reason's rained out.
She's gone, but she will not leave.
She will not leave
me in peace.

CHORUS

The flesh of the dead
suet for the birds
who racket the twilight
with their perfumed song,
leaving only bones behind,
desiccated skin,
floating on the breeze
like blossoms.

Exhume murdered—
If she could exhume
murdered children.

MEDEA

If I could exhume my murdered children, I would.
I would carry their tender, broken bodies
home
across the sea,
to the ends of the earth.
I would hang them each in a burlap sac
from the limbs of the olives
clinging to the side of the mountain
rising up from the blue-black deep.
The grove of the dead.

CHORUS

I used to watch them play.
Running and laughing at the sun.
They say she killed them.
I cannot say.
I did not see.

MEDEA
Laughing...

They say she killed—

MEDEA/CHORUS
They say I/she killed—

MEDEA

They say I killed them.
My boys.
They say I killed my boys.
My boys.

CHORUS
I cannot say.
I did not see.
I cannot say, I—

CHORUS

They say she killed them
so the last eyes they'd look into
would be hers.
So they would not be afraid.
Those boys were born to die.
Birthed in a foreign country,
progeny of a mother
marked as strange.

MEDEA

If I could exhume my murdered children, I would.
I would carry their broken bodies
across the sea.
To the grove of the dead.
I would let the carrion crows
tear my boys' sweet flesh
from their bones,
eviscerate
body and soul.

MEDEA

But I left them behind
when I fled,
I flew towards the sun.
I flew—

MEDEA

Is this what avenging is?
Jason.
Caught between a rock and the hardest place—
he must stay, he says.
For our children.

MEDEA

You are hammering me, I reply.
Battering.
The sky, raining down stones.
And they—
They are hurling rocks,
pelting me—
as I stand between
you
and them
and my boys.

[meaning CHORUS]

[meaning CHORUS]

Our boys, he says.

They are my life.
His life?

I gave him his life.
He takes away.
The instant I step aside,
turn my back
on this place,
exile myself,
we both know they are dead.
My boys.

CHORUS

Granddaughter of the sun,
tar-pitched nights, tattered days,
betrayed. Betraying—
This one thing we thought we knew.
A child is love.
But now— But you—

Shiny golden fleece. Jason—
Feather weak.
Jason—
Jason—
Blindsided, blindsiding,
worming his way—
Jason—
Safe haven, favor, opportunity.
As she—
As we—
As we hammer,
as we batter,
raining down stones,
hammering, battering,
hurling—

I used to watch them play.
He says they must stay.
Holding sway—
holding love—
 he sways—
hostage.

MEDEA

Who would you have them look upon last
but their mother?
Whose eyes would you have them looking *into*?
Whose arms would you have
holding, kindling the heat,
the must, of their sweat-stained skin?

Whose arms
cradling pounding hearts
caged in brittle, birdlike ribs?
Whose hands would you have
smoothing calf-skin-soft foreheads?
Whose breath, caressing muddy,
game-splattered cheeks
as my whetted blade
slices open moon-white throats
so I can see inside
to the place where sound
comes from?

They say that inside
the box of the voice
is the soul—
but they are wrong:
Pulsing red flesh,
coursing rivulets,
a runnel of blood.

[To an imagined JASON, but also to the audience:]

CHORUS

They say
inside the box of the voice
is the soul.

CHORUS

She killed them.

CHORUS

I cannot say.
But kill the child,
you cut out the soul
from the shape of the sky
I hold in my chest
like a small, shattered country,
the hollow at the base of my throat
where I draw in breath,
spitting out these words.

MEDEA

If I could exhume my murdered children,
I would.

MEDEA

I would carry their broken bodies home.

If I could rid
her from my
disremembered dreams—
The hammering stones—
If I could expel
her from
my sandpaper skin,
from the touch,
the weight of my child
in my arms,
I would, I'd sleep again.

CHORUS

If I could expunge her—
My—
my complicity
from what I see
when I close my eyes—

(a plea to the Gods) Carry them home—

Soulless, loveless, bloodied, broken
skies,
dreams,
song,
fields of children,
emptied eyes,
buried
underfoot—
dust of skin and bone,
of generations,
millennia
killed—
a wandering glance,
a dinnerplate heaped higher—

CHORUS
If she could
carry them
home—

MEDEA

Carry them home across the sea,
their tender, broken bodies.

CHORUS

The grove of the dead.
If she could exhume
her murdered
children,
she would.

MEDEA

But I left them behind.
I fled—

CHORUS

She would carry them home, to the grove of the dead.

MEDEA

I left them behind.
I flew towards the sun.
I flew—

CHORUS

Towards the sun.

MEDEA

To the grove of the dead.

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German translation by Uljana Wolf available