



Narcissus and Echo

In the solitudes of the hills we find her, and yet we may also come on her unawares in the din of a noisy city. She will answer us where the waves are lashing themselves against the rugged cliffs of the coast, or we may find her where the great yellow pillars of fallen temples lie hot in the sun close to the vivid blue water of the African sea. At nightfall, on the lonely northern moors, she mimics the cry of a wailing bird that calls for its mate, but it is she who also prolongs the roll of the great organ in a vast cathedral, she who repeats the rattle and crack and boom of the guns, no matter in what land the war may be raging. In the desolate Australian bush, she makes the crash of the falling limb of a dead gum tree go on and on, and tortures the human being who is lost, hopelessly lost, and facing a cruel death, by repeating his despairing calls for help. And she echoes the children's voices as they play by the seashore or pick primroses in the woods in spring, and when they greet her with laughter, she laughs in merry response. They may fear her when the sun has gone down, and when they are left all alone they begin to dread her mockery. Yet the nymph who sought for love and failed to gain what she sought must surely find some comfort on those bright days of summer and of spring when she gives the little children happiness and they lift their voices to hear her again and again and again.

When all the world was young, there was no nymph in the forest more lovely and more joyful than she whose name was Echo. Artemis would smile on her for her fleetness of foot when she followed her in the chase, and those whom she met in the leafy pathways of the dim, green woods, would delight in her merry chatter and

her good-natured humor.

It was a dark day for Echo, though, when she crossed the path of Hera, queen of the gods. The jealous goddess sought her errant husband, who was amusing himself with some nymphs, and Echo, full of mischievous glee, kept her in talk until the nymphs had fled to safety. Hera was furious when she found out that the frolicsome nymph had dared to distract her, and ruthlessly she spoke fair Echo's doom.

"Henceforth," she said, "the tongue with which thou hast cheated me shall be in bonds. No longer wilt thou have the power to speak in greeting. To the tongues of others thy tongue shall be slave, and from this day until time ceases thou shalt speak only to repeat the last words that have fallen on thine ears."

Hera then left the maimed nymph alone in the forest.

One day soon after, Narcissus, the beautiful son of a nymph and a river god, was hunting in the forest when Echo noticed him pass. To her, he seemed more fair than god or man, and once she had seen him she knew that she must gain his love or live unhappily for the rest of her life. From that day on, she haunted him like his shadow, gliding from tree to tree, nestling down amongst thick fern and undergrowth, motionless as one who stalks a wild thing, watching him afar while he rested, gladdening her eyes with his beauty. So did she feed her hungering heart, and sought to find contentment by looking on his face each day.

At length, the perfect moment finally came when Narcissus was separated from his companions in the chase and, stopping suddenly where the evening sun spotted the pathway of the forest with black and gold, heard the nymph's soft footfall on the rustling leaves.

"Who's here?" he called.

"Here!" answered Echo.

Narcissus, peering amongst the trees' long shadows and seeing no one, called "Come!"

And "Come!" called the glad voice of Echo, while the nymph, with fast-beating heart, felt that her day of happiness had come indeed.

"Why do you shun me?" then called Narcissus.

"Why do you shun me?" Echo repeated.

“I don’t,” said the lad, “please, come out and meet me.”

“Meet me!” she said, and not Aphrodite herself could be fairer than was the nymph as she pushed aside the leaves of the trackless wood, and ran forward with white arms outstretched to him who was lord of her life.

With cold eyes and a colder heart, Narcissus recoiled from the nymph as she laced her arms around his neck.

“Away! Off!” he cried, shrinking back as if from something that he hated. “Away! I would rather die than that you should have me!”

“Have me!” cried Echo pitifully, but she pled in vain. Narcissus had no love to give her, and his scorn at her aggressive affection filled her with shame. Heartbroken and embarrassed, Echo fled. In the solitude of mountain cliffs and caves and rocky places, and in the loneliest depths of the forest, Echo hid her grief, and when the winds blew through the dark branches of the trees at night, moaning and sighing, they could hear far below them the voice of Echo repeating their lamentations. For her, long nights followed hopeless days, and nights and days only told her that her love was all in vain. Then came a night when the winds no longer saw the figure of the nymph, white and frail as a broken flower, crouching close to the rocks they passed over. Grief had slain the body of Echo. Only her voice was left to repeat their mocking laughter, their wistful sighs – only her voice remained.

Meanwhile, Narcissus, slayer of happiness, went on his way, and other nymphs besides fair Echo suffered from loving him in vain. One nymph, less gentle than Echo, poured the tale of her love that was so rudely scorned into the sympathetic ears of Aphrodite, goddess of love, and implored her to punish Narcissus for his callous ways.

Hot and tired from hunting one day, Narcissus sought a lonely pool in the woods, there to rest and to quench his thirst.

As he stooped down to drink, a face looked at his through the crystal clear water, and a pair of beautiful eyes met his own. His surprise and joy at the sight of what he felt sure must be the most beautiful creature on earth, was evidently shared by the nymph of the pool, who gazed fearlessly up at him.

Round her head she had a nimbus of bright white curls and her eyes sparkled,

flecked with sunshine. When Narcissus smiled at her in rapture, her red lips also returned the smile. He stretched out his arms towards her, and her arms were stretched to him. Almost trembling in his delight, he slowly stooped to kiss her. Nearer she drew to him, nearer still, but when his mouth would have given itself to that other mouth that was formed like Cupid’s bow – a thing to slay hearts – only the chilly water of the pool touched his lips, and the thing of his delight vanished away. In passionate disappointment, Narcissus waited for her to return, and as soon as the water of the pool grew still, once more he saw her exquisite face gazing wistfully up into his. Passionately, he pled with the beautiful creature – spoke of his love – besought her to have pity on him, but although the face in the pool reflected his every look of adoration and of longing, time and again he vainly tried to clasp in his arms what was but the mirrored likeness of himself.



In full measure had the avenging goddess meted out to Narcissus the restless longing of unsatisfied love. By day and by night, he haunted the forest pool, and ere long the face that looked back at his was pale as a lily in the dawn. When the moonbeams came straying down through the branches and all the night was still, they found him kneeling by the pool,

and the white face that the water mirrored had the eyes of one of the things of the woods to which a huntsman has given a mortal wound. Mortally wounded he truly was, slain, like many another since his day, by a hopeless love for what was in truth but an image, and an image of his own creation no less. Even when his shade passed across the dark River Styx, it stooped over the side of the boat that it might try to catch a glimpse of the beloved one in the inky waters.

Echo and the other nymphs were avenged, yet when they looked on the beautiful dead Narcissus, they were filled with sorrow, and when they filled the air with their lamentations, most piteously did the voice of Echo repeat each mournful cry. Even the gods were pitiful, and when the nymphs would have burned the body on a funeral pyre which their own fair hands had built for him, they sought it in vain. For the Olympians had turned Narcissus into a white flower that droops its beautiful face toward the ground. The flower still bears his name to this day.

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