Narcissus and Echo

from *I Am Arachne*

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Adapted by Fishtank Staff



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OH ME, OH MY, another boring day in the underworld!

Which mirror shall I look in first today? The big one there on the wall? Or the small one here on the table? The tiny one I wear as a pendant around my neck? Or the pocket mirror I carry with me everywhere?

And after I admire myself for a while, then what shall I do?

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Perhaps I'll paint another self-portrait . . . but if I *do* paint myself, what pose should I choose? Should I recline on the chaise longue? Or draw myself in profile? Should I smile? Or look thoughtful? Decisions, decisions, there are so many decisions to make, and yet every day is the same here. Thank goodness, I have my mirrors. I'd be bored stiff without them.

You must be wondering what I'm doing here. I'm young, I'm handsome, so why come down to hell prematurely?

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It's a fascinating story, really, and one I never tire of telling (because it's about *me*). It began when I was a boy. I was so handsome that every girl I met fell madly in love with me. By the time I was sixteen, I had broken hundreds of hearts.

Yes, all the nymphs adored me, especially one named Echo. Echo was the most lovesick girl I've ever known. Night and day, she followed me everywhere, hiding behind rocks and trees, gazing at me like a lovesick cow. She rarely said a word; in fact, she *couldn't* speak unless someone spoke to her first.

It was all Hera's fault. And Zeus, too. They had the worst marriage in the universe, and Zeus always had a secret girlfriend or two. One day he decided to have a private picnic with the nymphs. Afraid that Hera might find out and cause a scene, Zeus told Echo to distract Hera for as long as she could.

When Hera appeared, looking for Zeus as usual, Echo ran up to her and began chattering nonstop. For half an hour Echo talked and talked and talked! Finally Hera, suspecting a trick, said, "Enough!" and, pointing a finger, sealed Echo's lips.

"From now on, my girl," Hera said, "you'll say nothing unless you're spoken to. And when you do speak, you'll mirror what you hear. You'll say only what others say. No more."

"*—say only what others say? No more?*" repeated Echo stupidly.

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Poor Echo! After that, she was usually mute as a stone. But that didn't stop her from following me everywhere. Finally, I couldn't stand the sight of her.

"Go away!" I told her. "I don't want you to follow me!"

"*Follow me!*" she begged, and pitifully held out her arms.

"No!" I said. "Listen to me, you brainless girl, I do not love you. Do not love me!"

"*You do not love me?*" she asked, her eyes wet with tears.

"That's right," I repeated coldly. "I do not love you. So do not love me."

"*Love me*," she senselessly begged

And so it went. Talking to Echo was hopeless. But the other nymphs thought I was heartless. They said I'd treated Echo badly. (Truth to tell, they were fed up with my conceited ways themselves.) They prayed to Artemis that I—like Echo would fall in love with someone who would never love me back.

Soon after, I came upon a pool in the forest that I had never noticed before. It was clear and smooth as poured silver. When I knelt to drink, the water shimmered like a looking glass. And in the water I saw a boy, a beautiful boy, looking up at me, his eyes wide with longing and surprise.

In a heartbeat, I fell in love with a perfect stranger.

"Do you love me?" I asked. The boy stared at me. His lips moved, but he made no sound.

"Kiss me!" I begged. When the boy did nothing, I bent to kiss him, but the minute my lips touched the water, he melted away. I waited for the water to clear, and there he was again, wide-eyed and waiting.

But each time I plunged my arms in the pool, hoping to haul him out, he disappeared. So I sat there, miserable, knowing for the first time what it was like to be love's prisoner.

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Weeks passed that way, with me rooted to the spot. Instead of my infatuation passing, I only desired the beautiful stranger more and more. I couldn't eat or sleep, and gradually began to pine away. I lost weight, and my skin took on a deathly pallor. When I was just a pale shade of myself—but still handsome!—Hermes led me down to the underworld.

On the ferry ride across the river Styx, I looked over the boat railing and sighed. The boy in the pool had followed me! There he was in the dark water, looking up at me, longing in his eyes. He *did* love me.

"Farewell," I said, as I stepped off the ferry. Faintly I heard a reply, "Farewell," but it was only lovesick Echo on the far shore making a mockery of my love.

Pluto was waiting for me. He looked at me and shook his head in disgust.

"So you're Narcissus," he said. "I've heard all about you, The gods in heaven told me you're a hopeless case. We'll set about that.

"Normally," Pluto went on, "I'm here to punish souls. I take away their pleasures and give them horrible, senseless jobs to do. But in your case, I have something a little different planned. I want you to take these"—he pointed to a pile of glittering mirrors stacked haphazardly next to his throne—"and decorate your room here any way that you please."

"That's all?" I asked, surprised. "No shirts of flame? No unquenchable thirst or gnawing hunger? No stones to endlessly roll up a hill?"

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"Narcissus," said Pluto, "this is the modern age! We're moving beyond simple medieval torture into something more up-to-date. I think what we have planned for you is more than adequate. Now go. And make sure you take *all* the mirrors."

"Thanks!" I said, and thought to myself how generous Pluto was.

In my room I hung the mirrors everywhere—on all four walls and even on the ceiling. Then I lay back in a chaise longue Pluto had thoughtfully provided. I looked up at my reflection on the ceiling and thought to myself, *Narcissus, you really are a handsome fellow!*

For several days my situation seemed ideal. I couldn't understand the gruesome tales I'd heard about the underworld.

And then it began . . . the echo. At first, it was just occasionally—

Narcissus, I love you, love you, love you ...

—but, lately, I hear it night and day. Could Echo have followed me here?

Narcissus, I love you, love you, love you . . .

Narcissus, I love you, love you, love you . . .

Over and over and over! Despite the commendable sentiments, I'm ready for a break. It's like the *drip, drip, drip* of a leaky faucet, or the endless, maddening *tick, tock, tick* of a clock.

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Narcissus, I love you, love you, love you . . .

Narcissus, I love you, love you, love you . . .

Narcissus, I love you, love you, love you . . .

I tell you, my head is ringing. There it is again! Can you hear it? It seems to be getting louder.

Narcissus, I love you, love you, love you . . .

Narcissus, I love you, love you, love you . . .

Narcissus, I love you, love you, love you . . .

Narcissus, I love you, love you, love you . . .

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Whenever I complain to Pluto about it, he just smiles and tells me it's all in my imagination. He pats me on the shoulder, says, "Poor boy!" and walks off unconcerned.

If it doesn't stop soon, I'll go mad. I'm exhausted, I can't sleep, and today in the mirror I saw the worst thing I've ever seen in my life—

My face with a wrinkle on it!

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