

Echo and Narcissus

(Time – 7:34)

There once lived a man, a prophet, who could see into the future the way you and I remember our pasts. His name was Teiresias. One day a woman came to him. She'd given birth to a child she'd named Narcissus, and Narcissus was so beautiful he broke hearts as he wriggled in his cot. She was afraid one of the immortals would envy his beauty and destroy him. Tiresias shook his head. 'The gods pose him no threat. He will have a long life, unless he learns to know himself.' Shaking her head the woman walked away.

Years went by and with every passing day Narcissus became more beautiful. Wherever he went women fell in love with him. But they never approached him because of his flaw. He wore about himself a glassy pride that kept his suitors at bay.

Up on Olympus Zeus was about his usual pursuits: chasing, kissing nymphs, goddesses, travelling to the earth in disguise, pursuing women. He barely bothered to hide his misbehaviour from his wife. He'd enlisted the help of a nymph called Echo. If ever Zeus' wife Hera came too close to catching Zeus in the act, Echo was to distract her with an endless stream of pointless prattle until Zeus had finished.

They played this trick once too often. Zeus' wife Hera saw through it. 'Nymph, always you want the last word. From now on you shall have nothing else.' Echo opened her mouth to answer and out came 'Nothing else. Nothing else. Nothing else.' From then on she could not speak for herself. She was condemned to trail behind others, stealing meaning from their last few words. She went to the earth. By chance she saw that lovely young man Narcissus. She fell in love with him at once.

For months she followed him, waiting for the words to come with which she could proclaim her love. At last, the moment came. Narcissus and his friends went hunting in a forest. They became separated from one another. Narcissus called, 'Is anybody here?' Echo joyfully stole the word: 'Here!' 'Then come to me, come to me!' She ran to him. She put her arms around him. He pushed her away. 'Get off me! What are you? I suppose like all the others you love me.' 'Love me,' she said 'Love me.' 'I would rather die' said Narcissus 'than let you lie with me.' 'Lie with me,' she said 'Lie with me.' 'Leave me alone.' He fled. 'Alone,' said Echo 'Alone. Alone.'

Poor Echo was a slender thing. Her sorrow made her slighter still. She became spindly, bony, pale, gaunt, feeble, frail. One morning when she tried to stand her sharp bones ruptured through her thin skin. Her body collapsed in on itself. Only her voice survived, hiding in caves, hiding among high hills.

Weary of that stupid nymph Narcissus went to a pool to drink. It was a perfect pool, as smooth as any mirror. He leant over the side and saw a face of such beauty that suddenly he was filled with another kind of craving. He leant forward to kiss it but it broke into wrinkles. He gave a cry of anguish. He lay beside the pool like a fallen statue. He was transfixed by it.

Time and again he tried to capture it. He mistook this image for the other person who would complete him.

And so the prophecy of Tiresias was fulfilled. Narcissus had learned to know himself, and his awful torture began. No thought of food or drink would take him from the spot. His eyes could never have their fill. At last he said, 'You, please, come to me. Lie with me. Love me. When I laugh I see you laugh. When I smile you smile. When I cry you shed tears. You give me every indication that you love me and yet we do not embrace. I think I understand: I am in love with myself. Always we will be together and yet always we will be apart. I have loved you in vain.' Echo took the words: 'I have loved you in vain. I have loved you in vain.'

Narcissus closed his eyes and lay his head upon the ground. His soul drifted out of his open mouth beneath the crust of earth, down a steep flight of stairs, into the underworld, into the land of many guests, the realm of the dead. As his soul drifted across the River of Forgetfulness it left behind all memory. Even so, some urge too powerful to resist drew it to the edge of the river, where it leant over the side and stared at the greasy smear of a reflection that quivered on the surface of the water.

Up on the earth rumours reached a village: lovely Narcissus was dead. So the people searched the forest to burn the corpse with proper honours. But they never found a body. Instead they came upon a delicate flower with white and yellow petals leaning over the edge of a pool as if gazing at its own reflection.