Echo and Narcissus

by Ovid (Adapted)

Long ago, in the ancient world, there was born to the blue-eyed Nymph Liriope, a beautiful boy, whom she called Narcissus. An oracle foretold at his birth that he should be happy and live to a good old age if he "never saw himself." As this prophecy seemed ridiculous his mother soon forgot all about it.
Narcissus grew to be a stately, handsome youth. His limbs were firm and straight. Curls clustered about his white brow, and his eyes shone like two stars. He loved to wander among the meadow flowers and in the pathless woodland. But he disdained his playmates, and would not listen to their entreaties to join in their games. His heart was cold, and in it was neither hate nor love. He lived indifferent to youth or maid, to friend or foe.
Now, in the forest near by dwelt a Nymph named Echo. She had been a handmaiden of the goddess Juno. But though the Nymph was beautiful of face, she was not loved. She had a noisy tongue. She told lies and whispered slanders, and encouraged the other Nymphs in many misdoings. So when Juno perceived all this, she ordered the troublesome Nymph away from her court, and banished her to the wildwood, bidding her never speak again except in imitation of other peoples’ words. So Echo dwelt in the woods, and forever mocked the words of youths and maidens.
One day as Narcissus was wandering alone in the pathless forest, Echo, peeping from behind a tree, saw his beauty, and as she gazed her heart was filled with love. Stealthily she followed his footsteps, and often she tried to call to him with endearing words, but she could not speak, for she no longer had a voice of her own.
At last Narcissus heard the sound of breaking branches, and he cried out: "Is there any one here?"
And Echo answered softly: "Here!"
Narcissus, amazed, looking about on all sides and seeing no one, cried: "Come!"
And Echo answered: "Come!"
Narcissus cried again: "Who art thou? Whom seekest thou?"
And Echo answered: "Thou!"
Then rushing from among the trees she tried to throw her arms about his neck, but Narcissus fled through the forest, crying: "Away! away! I will die before I love thee!"
And Echo answered mournfully: "I love thee!"
And thus rejected, she hid among the trees, and buried her blushing face in the green leaves. And she pined, and pined, until her body wasted quite away, and nothing but her voice was left. And some say that even to this day her voice lives in lonely caves and answers men's words from afar.
Now, when Narcissus fled from Echo, he came to a clear spring, like silver. Its waters were unsullied, for neither goats feeding upon the mountains nor any other cattle had drunk from it, nor had wild beasts or birds disturbed it, nor had branch or leaf fallen into its calm waters. The trees bent above and shaded it from the hot sun, and the soft, green grass grew on its margin.
Here Narcissus, fatigued and thirsty after his flight, laid himself down beside the spring to drink. He gazed into the mirror-like water, and saw himself reflected in its tide. He knew not that it was his own image, but thought that he saw a youth living in the spring. He gazed on two eyes like stars, on graceful slender fingers, on clustering curls worthy of Apollo, on a mouth arched like Cupid's bow, on blushing cheeks and ivory neck. And as he gazed his cold heart grew warm, and love for this beautiful reflection rose up and filled his soul.

He rained kisses on the deceitful stream. He thrust his arms into the water, and strove to grasp the image by the neck, but it fled away. Again he kissed the stream, but the image mocked his love. And all day and all night, lying there without food or drink, he continued to gaze into the water. Then raising himself, he stretched out his arms to the trees about him, and cried:

"Did ever, O ye woods, one love as much as I! Have ye ever seen a lover thus pine for the sake of unrequited affection?"

Then turning once more, Narcissus addressed his reflection in the limpid stream -

"Why, dear youth, dost thou flee away from me? Neither a vast sea, nor a long way, nor a great mountain separates us! only a little water keeps us apart! Why, dear lad, dost thou deceive me, and whither dost thou go when I try to grasp thee? Thou encouragest me with friendly looks. When I extend my arms, thou extendest thine - when I smile, thou smilest in return - when I weep, thou weepest - but when I try to clasp thee beneath the stream, thou shunnest me and fleest away! Grief is taking my strength, and my life will soon be over! In my early days am I cut off, nor is Death grievous to me, now that he is about to remove my sorrows!"

Thus mourned Narcissus, lying beside the woodland spring. He disturbed the water with his tears, and made the woods to resound with his sighs. And as the yellow wax is melted by the fire, or the hoar frost is consumed by the heat of the sun, so did Narcissus pine away, his body wasting by degrees.

And often as he sighed, "Alas!" the grieving Echo from the wood answered, "Alas!"

With his last breath he looked into the water and sighed, "Ah, youth beloved, farewell!"

and Echo sighed, "Farewell!"

And Narcissus, laying his weary head upon the grass, closed his eyes forever. The Water-Nymphs wept for him, and the Wood-Dryads lamented him, and Echo resounded their mourning. But when they sought his body it had vanished away, and in its stead had grown up by the brink of the stream a little flower, with silver leaves and golden heart - and thus was born to earth the woodland flower, Narcissus.