

Echo & Narcussis

Or, rather, Echo. And not Narcussis.

Echo felt her throat fill with
shark fins, or else glass
shards, or maybe great slabs
of lava, the kind that sheer
off volcanoes and slide
silently down slopes towards
sleeping villages.

Juno's face, that beautiful
face that Echo had loved
for years, stared out as if
wearing a mask, her lips
distorted in a snarl, words
fizzing like firecrackers all
over the room. Echo opened
her mouth to point out that
Jupiter's orders had to be
followed, that to not follow
them meant metamorphosis,
or worse - banishment while
still in a woman's body. But
not a sound came out. Her
voice had gone. Wiped clean
away like a troublesome
spillage.

Juno opened her burgundy
leather handbag, pulled out a

*women silencing women
is no way out of this
predicament.*

*Perhaps there is
still much to fear
in a woman with
something to say,*

compact mirror and a lipstick in a silver case like a bullet. She perched on the edge of the sofa and reapplied her lipstick while Echo tried to ask her what was happening to her. Juno merely carried on with her repairs, pulling a series of face which on another woman would have looked grotesque but on Juno looked like a gymnast limbering up before a world record dismount from a beam.

‘And that’s the last time you’ll delay me with your ridiculous chatter,’ Juno stood up as she put everything back in her bag and snapped the clasp shut.

‘You should have learnt when to speak and when not to. And stay away from my husband, you silly, silly bitch.’

‘ “Silly bitch,” ’

Juno laughed and slapped Echo hard across the face.

‘Oh dear,’ she said. ‘Did that hurt?’

‘ “That hurt,” ’

Juno swept out of the room

and yet more to fear in a man with nothing to say.

But who could be heard in all this clamour, this din?

that it is only those who have the right vocabulary, who can be relatable.

The same, in other words.

Trust me. I am just like you.

as only Juno could, all
swirling dark velvet and
long wavy dark hair. It was a
mystery why Jupiter would
bother with those nymphs
at all when he had Juno.
Appetite was a funny thing.

Sorry about that.

*lie. I am not like you. I
am only like myself.*

All of the words Echo
wanted to hear sung aloud in
the bright world, were stuck
inside her like veins of gold
deep underneath mountains.
The only choice she had was
to repeat or to not repeat,
and even then, the effort of
not speaking, of crushing her
lips together to suppress the
words, even pinching them
between her fingertips was
sometimes not enough and
words would spill out where
they were least wanted. Echo
could not disagree, deny
or disavow. She could only
agree or consent. People
would not always wait for
her to write a note on her
reporter's notebook, twisted
of paper stuck in its spiral
binding. They were either
too bored or too impatient,
or the opportunity was too

*to repeat or not to repeat as
in to remain silent.
Their words or no
words. Their ideas
or no ideas.*

*Begs the question,
though: who are
these people?*

Exactly?

good to pass up. Without a voice of her own she lived under the constant threat of misunderstanding or misappropriation. She was much misused. Much more than she would have been as a doe or a calf.

of this and I could be inclined towards surrender. Were it not for the possibilities of love, of course.

And then one day, in a small gallery, she saw her and Echo was transfigured. Her name was Narcissus. She didn't come out very often, Echo has seen her maybe one or twice at a basement club in town where a steep staircase led down, it's bannisters tangled with fairy lights, to the dark room. Narcissus had sat at the bar, her face lit by the blue light of her phone screen as she pecked and swiped at it. Then, Echo had seen her at the cinema watching an old silent movie on her own. Echo had glanced at her profile along the aisle as the light from the screen played on her face. Echo waited until Narcissus had finished glancing at the photographs and followed

Ah, love.

Save me.

Fool me.

her outside. Narcissus looked like she had come to life suddenly, stepped off her pedestal and walked out of Michelangelo's studio and into a time that wasn't quite ready for her, but wanted to be, would try to be. As Narcissus walked down the street, passed the shops, stopping to look in the windows, to touch her face or her hair, people turned and looked at her. Sometimes they paused before carrying on their way as if taking a moment to commit what they had seen to memory.

Echo followed Narcissus down the busy street and down a quieter side street, ducking into a doorway in case Narcissus saw her, and then across a main road where she disappeared through a revolving door into a boutique hotel. She made her way to the small restaurant, with Echo trying to melt into the ornate wallpaper as she trailed in her wake. It was nearing lunchtime and most of the

if we have had to make an appointment with our own life and the people in it. A script to stick to, cues that must not be missed.

I didn't forgotten my lines, I realise it's like that nightmare, I never knew them and I have been cruelly pushed in front of an audience utterly unprepared and unprotected.

tables were full of men and woman who looked like they were on a quick break from a photoshoot. Cutlery was left untouched and most of the drinks looked like bright green soup. The walls were mirrored and everywhere Echo looked she could see people spinning out into infinite restaurants. Glasses were raised to an infinite number of lips. Phones raised to an infinite number of gazes. All those best lives lived over and over. Echo sat behind Narcissus so she wouldn't be noticed, hidden from view in the multitude of ever repeating people. Narcissus was not lost to Echo though. Her transcendent beauty was in the centre of everything that surrounded Echo.

'Is anyone there?' Narcissus said, in wonder at the weight of Echo's staring.

' "One there," ' Echo said, still camouflaged among the fashionable faces.

Narcissus shot up from her fashionable slouch in

Is this love, then?

surprise. ‘Come here!’ she said.

‘ “Come here,” ’ Echo said, her voice strong and steady like Narcissus’s voice. A pure melody on spring’s morning air.

Narcissus stood up and looked around the clearing, looking right in Echo’s direction as if she sensed her presence precisely, but seeing only the designer plants. ‘Why are you running away?’ she said.

“” Running away,” ’ Echo said.

Here is someone, Echo thought, who will understand. I will write down my story and explain what happened to me and how it was all a misunderstanding and I will give this person my still-mending heart because they will keep it safe and we will be joined forever-ever by our simple astonishment at how the universe is not cruel and hard but true and kind because it has given us each other. ‘We must come together!’

Ah, love.

Narcissus said.

‘ “Come together!” ’ Echo turned around and touched Narcissus lightly on the shoulder to announce herself. Narcissus recoiled. Her lips were twisted by disgust, nostrils flaring as if the scent of Echo’s shame and embarrassment hung on the air, sharp and pungent.

‘May I die before you enjoy my body!’ Narcissus shouted, waving for her waiter to rescue her.

‘ “Enjoy my body,” ’ Echo said, as if her humiliation was not deep and dark enough.

Echo packed a small bag. She gave her cat to her neighbour, telling him she was going away for a long while. She went to the train station and bought a ticket to the first place her gaze fell

What is being lost here in all honesty? An acceptable list of words regurgitated in an acceptable order and context so that I can be accepted. By whom?

Accepted as casually as I am dismissed.

I used to talk a lot but I say a lot more now I am silent. That golden volume.

on when she looked at the departure board. She passed

neat notes to people asking
for what she wanted.
The train raced on for hours
and hours at first stopping
often but then, as it left the
city behind, less and less.

*And so it seems that this absence
of words, imposed and enforced, is
punishable by exile to the very depths
unmapped places (deep and dark) like
the trenches at the bottom of the ocean
where the weight of the water could
crush your bones to a fine powder.*

Houses and shops gave way
to fields and trees and then
the fields reared up into hills
which stretched out into
mountains. When she got
off the train, Echo found
a way-marker indicating a

*Or is that what they would
like you to think?*

narrow track across a field
which she followed up and
up until she disappeared into
the lavender clouds that hung
in the darkening sky. Still
she didn't stop. The tough
grass wore out and her boots

*This is an escape, a break for
freedom.*

slipped on pebbles and then
clambered over rocks until,
at last, the moon hung close,
bright and silent. Up ahead
she saw the dark mouth
of a cave opening in the
mountain. Inside, she buried
herself in her sleeping bag
and slept for a long time.

*And there is a freedom
beyond these words, high
above their towns and cities.
There is a freedom beyond
obligation. Beyond gratitude.*

Sometime later, she had
lost count of the dawns and
phases of the moon, a group
of young men arrived. They
were loud and excitable, like
Labrador puppies at feeding
time. Two of them sat in the
mouth of the cave and started
to set up a stove to make
dinner. The others hovered
just behind fumbling with
torches.

*What was I so thankful for
anyway?*

*Yes, there is peace among the
wordless stars that men have
tried to hang names on, since
they first caught them with
their telescopes.*

‘I wonder how far this cave
might go back?’ one said.

‘ “Go back!” ’ Echo said.

‘Did you hear that?’ another
said.

Echo could see now that they
were really boys. Not any
kind of men at all.

‘Hear what?’ said a boy in
a bobble hat someone had
knitted for him.

‘ “What?” ’ Echo said.

‘There’s someone in here?’
the first boy said. His torch
sputtered and he banged it
against his hand to try and
revive it.

‘ “One in here,” ’ Echo said.

*See how horrified they are
when their own words*

‘Maybe it’s a monster,’ one
of the boys said, he spoke
quietly, so quietly Echo
could only just hear him.

*Rear up at them, when they
are forced to listen to it.*

‘Maybe it’s going to eat you.’
‘ “Going to eat you!” ’ Echo
said, her voice reverberating
off the hard walls of the cave
in the fearful hush of the
boy’s campsite.
‘There’s something in here,’
a boy said.
‘ “In here!” ’ Echo said.

*Oh, shit, did I really say
that?*

‘Let’s go,’ bobble hat said.
‘Let’s get out of here.’
‘ “Get out of here!” ’ Echo
sat up and watched the last
boy’s back disappearing into
the dusk.

Yes. Yes, you did.

Soon, to match her
voicelessness, Echo became
bodiless.

*Once upon a time ‘sorry’
used to mean ‘I won’t do it
again.’ What is the use of
words that have become,
literally, meaningless?*

Maybe in her silence she
simply forget she was there,

*Perhaps once I felt I had an obligation
to add my voice to the clamour, to the
tsumani of opinion bearing down, but
not anymore.*

maybe
she
slipped
away
unnoticed
by even
herself.

And soon
all these
words
tired
of the
cave so,

launching
themselves
on the chill
winter

wind,

they set off in search of ears to hear them. Ears in high

*Now it is
the sound
of my
silence*

*that
punctuates
this*

places, ears in low places. But most of all in
cacophony.

empty places where only those who choose to listen can hear.

*And now, I will save these words to voice
what matters.*