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**Narcissus**  
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## Robert Clinton

### NARCISSUS

Early in his childhood, as soon as he was able to speak, he was asked what kind of face he would like to have. They agreed when he said he'd like to have a blue face like his mother, who had hers from being born in the sea. Pith from the claws of a certain bird furnished the dye, which he let the nurse wipe over his brow and cheeks. Soon his face was blue and stayed blue; and although no one said it to him, everyone thought he was a beautiful boy.

In a year they asked what sort of hands he would have, and he told them his hands should be shiny like silver, and the fingers thin and cool, and on each finger a ring which was a band of silver with double bands of gold around it, and in the middle of each palm a soft pale circle like a kiss makes on the mirror. They only added thin steel to coil in his fingertips; and his hands, when he brought them up to his eyes at night, reflected the moonlight. Older sister made gloves from the skin of an animal she'd hunted herself and would not name, but he wore them just once.

There was school, but he wasn't very good at it. He remembered the names of lakes, especially lakes no men had seen, but he couldn't use numbers or read writing or play the guitar. The other children lowered their voices when they talked to him, without knowing it, and the old men on the platform learned to ask him easy questions: how far have you walked today, what does your mother call you when she sends you to sleep. His passion in the schoolyard was to run and run in the dust, with the other children following him (naturally some would not) until they were running in a circle around him and he was standing still, pretending he was a smooth fluted stone column.

The transparency of his body dismayed him. For two years he never undressed, or only pulled off his shirt in the milky bath water. Even in the dark he could see the blood sliding through his veins like sand in an hourglass, and what hung between his legs seemed in those years like a part of him that had not been properly packed inside. He wore a long high-collared coat on his twelfth birthday, so that only his hands and his

face were visible. This was a warm spring day his aunts had planned minutely with treasure-hunts and singing and swimming, and they went away unhappy. His father and mother then injected the planes of his body with dyes, letting him pick the colors. He chose to have his hips so green they were nearly black, and crimson legs, and arms and shoulders almond, and chest and back plough-brown. And although no one said it to him, everyone thought he was the most beautiful boy ever made, and although he said nothing, he thought he was more beautiful than anyone: man, woman, boy or girl.

So everyone came courting him. In a year a new house had to be built to hold all the gifts, with a room for gold cups and beautiful rainwater glass and nearly invisible porcelain plates; and a room that filled up with letters of pleadings and promises and careful directions to the second milepost on the old road where a yellow path leads to a cottage hidden in poplar trees; and a room just for shirts with his initials on the breast pockets; and another room with shirts whose breast pockets were filled with dried flower petals—so he was in the world's eye, and the world wanted to hold him and take him to pieces.

He met this with no understanding. It was less tiring to be graceful, and the grey stones and pale leaves made of his walking form a many-colored light, but the men and women who called to him were like gulls following a fishing boat, and he hated them and noticed them each only long enough to determine which weapon would soonest end their chasing him. To one boy he sent a servant with a sword: before the boy used it he whispered to his familiar a curse on this walking temple: *May he, too, love one he cannot have*. The sweetest part of his life awaits him: by the pool where no animals drink, and no wind or falling leaves or fish disturb the lucid surface of the well-remembered and beloved water.