

From *The Greek Anthology*

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LOVE

Love, you have a lot to answer for. Once you took the daughter of longing—remember Tantalus?—and turned her to stone. Cowherds gawk at the rock seeping with tears: I myself walked to the top of that mountain and found the crag jutting out looking like nothing human, but then strolling away, glanced back and saw a woman weeping, her head bent down.

She offended you, right? Thinking that love was blameless as long as it boasted of husband and children: the fruits of lawful passion. But you had a few arrows to spare for the likes of her

and me. When I fell for that girl who hung around horsemen I learned more about women set fast in stone:

Those long nights were instructive when you made her marble: eye sockets vacant and dry.
—Granite's allowed to grieve Like Niobe, from a safe distance.—Now I know what a sharpshooter you are! How archery lends you perspective:

Master of two arts, you leave
no one and nothing alone.

Macedonius the Consul (5.229)

NOTE

Niobe's father was Tantalus, the king of Sipylus, who lay suspended in Hades. His name in Greek comes from a root for enduring/longing, since the terms of his condemnation included everlasting life without slaking his hunger or thirst. The italicized passage which I have pasted into this poem of Macedonius about Niobe's monument is a version of a paragraph in Pausanias' tour of Greece:

This Niobe I myself saw when I had gone up to Mount Sipylus. When you are near, it is a beetling crag, with not the slightest resemblance to a woman, mourning or otherwise; but if you go further away, you will think you see a woman in tears, with head bowed down. (Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 1.21.3)

It was undertaken and recorded long before the writing of this poem in the sixth century AD. The distance between the "classical" tradition alluded to here, and the poet's recall of it is as great as that between Roman Britain and England just before the Norman invasion, a seeming, but in fact, a disrupted, heritage with a continuity which has become brittle and close to extinction. These early Byzantine poets, like Macedonius, carry their classical tradition along through allusions and wordplay, much of it obscure and oblique even to a learned audience at the court of Justinian. Most of his readers, however, understood that Niobe was a stock figure of bereavement whose six sons and daughters were killed by Apollo and Artemis in reprisal for her boasting of them to their mother, Leto. Niobe had exulted too loudly in her children's excellence and her own fertility.

LIFE EVERLASTING

He endures, like the verb at the root
of his name: Tantalus, who has it better
in Hell. He never set eyes on you. His
hungry mouth never clapt yours

moving away

like the rosecup

I'm forbidden to taste.

Get drunk, Hell told him, lick up
your own tears. Have a cannibal feast.
Swallow your tongue. Don't waste
a bite. It's done. Damned,
you've nothing to fear.
The great rock shudders,
yet falls. You only die once

and never again.

I'm not dead yet. But desire
fasts me. From famine and thirst

I

die

over

and over

and over again.

Paulus Silentarius (5.236)

