



## *Syringa* | Lilacs

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### Pan and Syrinx

The quiet stampede of Helios's chariot bursts out of the darkness on the tail of Eos's dawn light. The wine-stained Aegean Sea shimmers. The first birds of the dawn whistle Apollo's name. A small fire sparks to life at the spires of Arcadia's summits. And the small frame of a young nymph shivers awake.

Syrinx sheds her felted cloak and looks briefly to the east at the rising sun, then turns her back and faces the setting moon as she whispers a prayer to the god - her god - Artemis<sup>1</sup>. Like the gentle seeds of Cattail, her prayer is swept aloft on a cool breeze, carried down the northern slopes to the town of Nonacris.

In the dim morning light, Syrinx's practiced hands deftly string her horn bow. She plucks out a simple rhythm on the taut string, and a quiet smile creases the corner of her mouth. The time for the hunt has finally arrived. A deep breath fills the **naiad**<sup>2</sup>'s lungs, and in the course of a long exhale she turns her back to the sun, knocks an arrow, pulls the string to her ear, and sends the fletching whistling defiantly after Helios and his fiery

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<sup>1</sup> Artemis's name is found in several species, most notably as the genus for the mugworts (sagebrushes): *Artemisia*. Many of these plants are covered in a soft down, giving the plants a silvery sheen, reminiscent of moonlight. Artemis is associated with the moon.

<sup>2</sup> Naiads are water nymphs. In entomology, used to refer to aquatic nymphs of hemimetabolous - lacking a pupal stage - insects in several orders (e.g. Odonata, Ephemeroptera, and Plecoptera).

horses. The sun god was just so abrasive, so overbearing; give her the trickle of a small stream dancing under the pale moon's light any day.

Syrinx sighs. Though her bow may not be made of gold, she still imagines herself in the visage of Artemis. Artemis the Huntress. Artemis the Chaste. She belongs to these woods, she was delivered here amongst the cypress trees under Artemis's protection. She delights in the bounty of the forest, she is fed by the oaks, nourished by the waters, sustained by the deer.

Syrinx sighs again. For as much as she feels at home here, the woods are still so feral, so mercurial. The forest's teeth are sharp and its belly with a rapacious appetite for mortal flesh. The lecherous satyrs have always made her feel more deer than deity. Immortal Artemis, who would never know the sting of time slipping away, never thought to slow the clock by taming the wilds. Her only care was to master her craft. Syrinx would follow Artemis to Tartarus and back, and it was this that brought her up the stream to the mountaintop for her first hunt. This - the hunt - was her tribute to the Huntress.

The dappled light obscures her form as she pads quietly over the stones and dried pine needles, pulled ever forward by an invisible thread that connects her to the deer she pursues. As Syrinx stealthily creeps through the shadows, she is both the hunter and the hunted. In this she discovers the true name of the fox.

A cracked twig, a bent needle. A stag leads her deeper into the woods. Syrinx quickens her pace until she sees light filtering down to the forest floor in the distance. A clearing. The stag. A scene frozen before her. She silently slides an arrow from her quiver and aims.

"Yeeargh!" The deer bolts and a flush of woodcocks thrashes up from the underbrush, their silent forms replaced by the screaming, wild yellow eyes of a monstrous beast. The satyr<sup>3</sup> stumbles into the clearing muttering obscenities about that wine-soaked bastard son of Zeus. He burps out a lascivious poem, recalling that piney, sweet, carnal scent of Pitys<sup>4</sup>. Or was it Tragos<sup>5</sup> or maybe the young herdsman he'd lusted after in a

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<sup>3</sup> *Tragopan* is a genus of horned pheasants. Tragos (Greek) means he-goat and pan in reference to Pan himself. One of the 5 species is *Tragopan satyra*. There's also a family of butterflies, called satyrs.

<sup>4</sup> Pitys was another nymph pursued by Pan. She was transformed by the gods into a pine tree to save her from his advances. Πίτυς is the Greek word for pines, and ultimately gives us the genus for pines, *Pinus*.

<sup>5</sup> See #2 also. Tragos is Greek for he-goat, and is a root of the word tragedy (tragos + oides), a reference to the goat skins actors would wear while performing the Ancient Greek tragedies, which are a source for much of what we know about Greek mythology.

bacchanalian<sup>6</sup> haze under the full moon. That foggy, addled head of his couldn't see clearly in the light of day.

Ah, but here that smell was again, alive, present, here in this very moment. His nostrils flare up, and he rouses his heavy legs, slowly lifting his groggy form off the ground. Pan knew when a good hunt was afoot, and this was certainly that, just the thing to clear his head. He pulled a flask from somewhere, took a long draft of some saccharine, anise-scented liquor, and scanned the shadows at the edge of the woods for the source of that honey-sweet smell.

His eagle eyes fix on a small, smooth pearly patch of skin obscured against the greens and browns of the wooded edge. Syrinx's heart thumps in the pause, and like a startled rabbit, she bolts from the goat god. Pan recoils in shock, a **wolf**<sup>7</sup> startled after scaring up a grouse hidden in the snow. But in the passing moment of a skipped heartbeat he lunges forward in pursuit of his quarry, this pristine apparition. He chases her through the dark forests, over craggy exposures of rock, and into bristly tangles of briars. Syrinx's swift legs are fueled by fear, guided by instinct, and steadied by Artemis. She crashes down the mountain towards **Ladon's**<sup>8</sup> sandy stream.

Out of breath, she looks at the deep, rushing water, too wide to cross. In a panic she calls out to her naiad sisters, pleading for shelter, for them to hide her away, to protect her from the ravages of the god's passions.

The naiads sing out to her, beckoning Syrinx to sink down into the reeds<sup>9</sup>. And she does. And she's just in time to see a frenzied Pan emerge from the forest. Pan pauses. Where has she gone - could he have lost her trail? Ah, but such a waste to get all riled up only for the trail to go cold. But then, no, there, just at the water's edge. Pan narrows his eyes barely making out the timid, perfect form of Syrinx. His muscles tighten as he crouches, and then with a guttural howl, he pounces, crashing into the reeds, madly clutching at

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<sup>6</sup> Bacchus, the Roman name for Dionysus, that excessive god of ecstasy and wine, gives his name to the Chinese green heron, *Ardeola bacchus*, for its wine-dark breeding plumage.

<sup>7</sup> There are a number of wolfish things that take King Lycaon's (e.g. the eastern wolf, *Canis lupus lycaon*, the African wild dog, *Lycaon pictus*, and a subspecies of gerbil known as Tristram's jird, *Meriones tristrami lycaon*). King Lycaon tested Zeus's omniscience by feeding serving the god part of the king's son, Nyctimus. Zeus punished him by killing his offspring and turning Lycaon into a wolf. His son, Nyctimus, was brought back to life.

<sup>8</sup> A dragon who lived in the Garden of Hesperides and guarded Hera's golden apples. In his eleventh task, Heracles was stole the apples, killing Ladon in the process. Also genus of dragonfly, *Ladona*.

<sup>9</sup> The reeds referred to here would've been giant cane (giant reed), *Arundo donax*. *Arundo* from the Greek for shallows or river edge.

where she had been but a moment before. In his hands, however, he holds nothing save several hollow stalks of reeds.

It's not a great morning for Pan. Breakfast escaped and disappeared into the reeds and he'd lost his appetite anyways and his headache had returned. He sighs, his warm breath washing over the reeds clutched tightly in his fists. The hollow stems tremble. "What's this?" Pan wonders. "Oh, but isn't that a sweet and sad song, perhaps the sonorous tones of my lost lover?" The wind follows Pan's breath, threading through the hollow stems of the reeds, and a plaintive song catches his ear. Curious, Pan holds the reeds up to his lips and lets out a longer breath. The reeds, once again, tremble. Delighted, Pan lifts himself up and skips gaily down the river's edge playing his new pipes.

**Notes:** While it is unclear whether lilacs were used by the Ancient Greeks to make syrinxes (panpipes), the stout twigs have a wide spongy pith that is easily hollowed out, and the genus, *Syringa*, comes from the name for this instrument (as does the word syringe). The syrinx is also the name for the vocal structure in birds that allows them to sing such complex and beautiful songs (much like the larynx in mammals).

Like many Greek myths, mortals are subject to the whims, impulses, and base desires of gods. When they refuse, they are punished, when they relent, they suffer. Diogenes tells us that Pan's father, Hermes, taught Pan how to masturbate, and Pan in turn gifted this to shepherds. It's not surprising as Pan was an impulsive and overtly erotic god, freely consorting with humans and goats alike. And like many other satyrs - those half-man, half-goat gods with horse ears (the Roman's transformed these to goat horns) - Pan was typically depicted on vases fully aroused and often engaged in sexual acts with humans or goats.

He represents the wild, uncontrolled forces of nature that tumultuously storm internally and externally. One gets the sense the Ancient Greeks inherited the feral, base, beast god into their pantheon and that they both delighted in his impetuous nature (Pan literally means "all," as he was friend to all the gods: affable, boisterous, amusing, and mischievous, though otherwise harmless) and also feared him as he represented a more terrifying primal vision of the untamed wilderness, violent and unpredictable. In this story, and others, he attempts to rape Syrinx, the virgin follower of the virgin goddess.

Callisto<sup>10</sup>, a devotee of Artemis, was raped by Zeus and subsequently punished by Artemis for “losing” her virginity (though it was clearly violently stolen from her). For Pan to deny Syrinx of her choice to celibacy would be a violation so deep and whole, for it would rob Syrinx of that most sacred and grounding connection to Artemis.

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<sup>10</sup> Callisto was transformed into a bear and later nearly killed by her son, Arcas, while he was out hunting. Zeus spared Callisto just before Arcas’s spear pierced her skin, and sent both up to the heavens as Ursa Major (the big dipper) and Ursa Minor (the little dipper).