

## Mirrors

Dominic sat in the apple tree. Not on, but in, tucked between two intersecting limbs with his legs hanging off either side of the ninety degree union. He touched the rosary beads that hung from the tree; his sister had given them to him before she had run away with somebody from the service. He had thanked her and gave her a practical kiss on the cheek because it was the only thing he could think of doing. He hadn't seen in her in four years and superstitions disgusted him, but he kept the beads around because he felt guilty the way children feel guilty ignoring their stuffed animals as they age.

In the heat, Dominic remembered the ideas of stuffed tigers and lions and bears. The things he had in his crib, the faded noses of animals that he carried around in blankets or pushed in strollers. He had put an ocean between him and his childhood. Whether it existed or not, he couldn't retrieve it. He couldn't hold it up to the ceiling of this forest and pretend because he couldn't remember what those things felt like.

What he really missed was his wife, wherever she was. He missed sensations, the way she lay on top of his back, crushing his chest and shortening his breath. His desire was boundless and it felt like a balloon: lifted, soaring, for the heavens-religious or not. The world was beyond desire, or love, yet he only sought it out in that context. He had coined a term for it, years ago. The term that rests on the bookshelf in the living room, collecting dust until someone moves the shelf and knocks it off. It breaks on the floor and no one knows what it is. Just that it's everywhere and odorless.

He had forgotten what they did while they were together. It seemed rushed at the time. Forced embraces, doctor's appointments, crying and then, unreciprocated love words. I never wanted this, I hate you, I am afraid of what I need. But Dominic could not forget the way her lip quivered. It was the fear of failing, the fear of not being good enough for someone else. And the inability to convince oneself that it isn't them, but merely, the equal and opposite reaction of someone experiencing the same things. You are a mirror. It is all inside of me.

Dominic stopped thinking for a moment. It made him feel heavy. He looked about at the orchard. It was dried up, though not fruitless, stuffed away in the hidden recesses

of a large hollow forest. The leaves on the trees hung in crippled, dry silence. The orchard sat on a hill, overlooking faded tree after faded tree all the way down to the coast. The water was a bright blue eggshell finish with smears of wave cap white. You could hear the waves crash against the shore if you pretended to.

Dominic lifted his legs and pressed his naked feet against the tree. In his right hand he clutched a weathered notebook. His left pressed the body of the old M1 rifle against his leg. He passed the time by bouncing his eyes from tree to tree, as if their trajectory was his own. Then, they drifted up towards the sun and he could feel a sneeze coming on, the tickle in his nose leading his head towards the shivered light.

Suddenly-footsteps. The unmistakable sound of human movement. Dominic set the notebook down on an adjacent limb. He lifted the rifle and lent its sight into the forest. For a while, there was nothing but the sound. Dominic prepared himself over and over to see, react. But there was nothing. The echo of the dead, woody hollow made it seem like the thing had been circling him for hours.

Finally, a head slid through the woods and he saw bare feet on dry moss and dusted ground, dull thuds one by one, speeding up when the forest spread itself open, slowing down when constricted. The feet slowly wove around tree after tree, pivoting, planting, pushing onward. Dominic watched in lonely amusement.

It was a boy, probably in his late teens. Malnourished. Dominic could tell by the rope thin neck and limbs and the tiny, protruding belly. And the feet. They were black from miles of hostile dust and dirt.

The boy burst out of the forest into the orchard, slowing at his discovery. Dominic let the rifle sight follow suit. Run to me. Hum for me. Take your sweet time because I will see you soon.

Unnoticed, Dominic stalked the matted head of brown hair for ten yards or so before squeezing the trigger. From his point of view, the barrel of the gun ejaculated a thin line of white smoke.

The head lost its upper portion, the tree in front of it was artistically lent a hasty brushstroke of dark crimson and the air glittered and shimmered with blood sparkle.

The body crumpled in the crunchy grass. It had not cried out.

Dominic dragged the thing across the orchard, leaving a broken trail of blood and gray matter. He refused to look at the head.

When he got to the pit and pile of others, he pushed the body in and then walked back carefully along the red line. He felt a pain in his stomach and sternum when he got to the tree and ignored it. It was too easy to feel as if he was going to suffer for what he was doing. Despite this, he had no real moral dispute. The little voice had died a while back. But like all good people he felt the aches and pains of these lost feelings like childhood. They would scratch at the surface of the dirt and Dominic would throw up his soul and marvel at what it looked like.

Tell yourself the truth.

What do you really think?

After a while, Dominic could think of nothing. So he focused on that and climbed the tree. Back in his perch, Dominic pulled out his notebook. He began to write.