

Tim Wenzell
Surrender

AT NIGHT THEY SMASH THEIR BEER BOTTLES on the pavement and ground their broken glass with their steel-toed boots until it becomes dust. I can hear them cursing in their drunken rages, whispering in the alley about promises of redemption. They are angry tonight, angrier than they have been in months. Perhaps it is the constant drizzle that has coated their jackets and turned the oil spots to slime beneath their feet. Perhaps they are waiting too long for trouble to arrive. No sirens have sounded, no lights have flicked on in the rooms above them, no voices have called out into the rain for them to cease their abrasions. In the silent interludes between their slurred profanities, I can sense them staring through my ground floor windows and fashioning a plan.

MARY DIED LAST WEEK in the manner that I expected, though she lasted almost through the night. The doctors fed her enough Thorazine over the years, gallons I calculated, and one day we decided it would stop. It didn't matter any more, I told them-- I was speaking for Mary, I was speaking for me. No use going on like this, trapped in a fog. Her eyes-- they filled with life just before she went gray. Her last breath rose to the surface and illuminated her face like a moon just out of a cloud bank. Though she didn't speak, or even offer her hand to me as she passed, I knew she meant to apologize for putting me through so many nights. And she was thanking me, too, for not putting her through any more nights. She was saying all of that in her last flare of life; I could always read Mary's sighs like that.

THE CRICKETS CRAWL UP under the floorboards and rub their legs together so that I can't sleep. I try to count them sometimes, separate their countenances by distinctive chirps in the hope that I will tire and drift off. With so many thousands, I always lose count, and then the memories come rushing in to keep me awake, where the empty room above the floorboards makes me open my eyes. I can't see much except for the cracks of dimmed light beyond the drawn curtains, where the remaining street-light knives through the trickles. They'll probably get to that light, too, maybe tonight in the drizzle. All it will take is a heavy stone to put that last one out and to leave me in total darkness.

They would want that; that would dignify an identity in such a dark place, milling about unseen behind the dumpsters, mingling the shuffle of their boots and the powdered glass sprinkled on the pavement with the ten thousand humming crickets. I should welcome these cave creatures, open my curtains and let them see into my room. There's nothing left to take, nothing to hide, so come see. Come see the unmade bed, the soiled sheets, the scattered papers, the frayed electrical wires, the broken sculpture of Dante, my shriveling form lying prone upon the bed. I would like them to bring their eyes to my window. Come. Come see me still consumed by Mary. She is there in the rain, she is there in the crickets, she is

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there in the planning whispers. Come see me still drowning by my dear departed Mary.

I need to get up and go to the window. I need to part the curtains.

The drizzle hypnotizes me into a deep trance and pins me to the mattress. The window just across the room is a thousand miles away, in another universe void of memory. I fight to escape, to get up, to cross my thousand mile desert. But sleep arrives like soft falling water and I surrender. I close off the room and let the sound of the crickets ease me into a dream.

Mary lurks in the alley, a dark monolith rising from the heaps of shattered bottles not yet ground to dust. Her face betrays forty years of love, for it has sunk into the abyss of slurred profanity and drunken illusion that the alley holds like treasure. She forages in the dumpster. She calls me by name to help her find something lost beneath a mountain of refuse as she raises her dark arms. I cannot see her face, for the last street light has been shattered by a rock. I must go forth blind in my dream, where the cave creatures lurk in comfort and lay down their warnings like plush carpet. "Mary," I call louder, then louder still. The mountain descends, at first in a soft rain of crumpled paper, then in a wet avalanche of meat scraps, chicken bones, and broken glass. I am consumed, taken off my feet and down into suffocation. I cannot even call her name; she has been washed away in a sea of medicine, another gray body lost among the broken branches. "Mary," I call. "Mary."

They have pried open the front door with some of their tools. "Let's take him," I hear a voice, and then so many whispers like crickets congregating. They are rummaging through the things in my desk, looking for money, some of Mary's jewelry, a ticking watch, and vanished stones. But I have sold it all. Look and see: I have nothing left except the yellowed paper of memory. I wanted to show them, let them spy me here through the open curtains, so pathetic and empty and curled into a ball. Even now, as I hear them advance, I want to get up and slide open my window and call for help. Or escape. Or fight them off with my last shreds of strength. But I am still pinned to the bed by my dream, still lost looking for Mary. Even in the bare room I am searching the shadows for her revelation and waiting to be rescued.

Soon they will be down the hall to kick open my door. Five or six or seven of them will rush into the room, so full of liquor and covered in rain. They will close the door behind them. They will surround the bed and cover my mouth and say "hush." They will take me.