



## **Ecstatic Theater**

A Short Story  
by Michael Mark

## Dedication

This story is dedicated to all beings. May we all emerge from the shadows of lack and uncertainty, to discover our rightful place in the endless field of Love's Presence.

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THERE IS A THEATER DOWNTOWN, an ancient brick building nestled in a grove of glass towers, and outside there is a line of souls seeking entrance. The wall of forward-facing persons is strung out down the avenue, increasingly anxious with distance from the front, all awaiting their turn to buy their ticket— hopefully— for tonight's show. It is clear to me that there are more persons than tickets. It is clear that some of us will be denied, our hunger left unsatiated, perhaps intensified into a crippling agony. To know that one has come this close to an unexpected encounter with such Beauty and Truth, an opportunity that veritably fell out of the sky, only to fail... to be denied at the very gates...

None of us know exactly what the show is or will be about, but speculative words have leaked out and skittered through the city like squirrels released from a box in the center of town, darting uncertainly for cover. The corner of your eye discerns stochastic wisps of movement, and you wonder what they mean. It is impossible not to draw an inference.

Two nights ago, huddled over my screen, I caught a signal in the dark, the wisp of movement so described, a link that flashed through the virtual landscape and caught my attention in a 1:13 AM quest for answers. Behind the link I found a buzzing, underground discussion involving people from all over the world, and a link to the show's temporary site. I watched the exchanges for a while, and realized the people were excited and passionate, as if they had stumbled into something profound that had peeled the lid off their individual worlds. They were like a twinkling constellation of deep sea creatures whose luminescent organs had suddenly matured, winking to one another playfully in the inky darkness, lighting up the depths with their shimmering roll call.

The site I found had looked like a last minute affair- a single page with minimal content, an electronic poster for the New York visit and a few links at the bottom. The show was billed as a one of a kind experience: unscripted, alive, and pure. It's a traveling production that moves all around the world. New York this week, a small town in rural Mexico the next, a village in Malaysia the next. There's a deceased playwright who, unknown in his life, has arisen to inspire and orchestrate from his director's chair on the Other Side. They say he died alone on a ferry boat, dressed in a tattered wool jacket that was an insufficient buffer from the cold, his right hand clutching a torn and faded ticket he had carried on his person for nearly twenty years. A ticket to the only Broadway show he ever saw. He'd always thought there would be more opportunities- a turn of fortune, plenty of time, a whole world ahead of him.

His body had fallen over the side of the vessel and into the wintry channel. Kerplunk! Jacket compartments had billowed with air trying to squeeze through the seams as seawater poured into them, and before it had begun it had ended. His body had sunk, claimed by the sea, forgotten. Now he whispers into the ears (hearts) of the cast, mesmerizing in his vision, a master of moment and interlude, pulling out all the stops. He is called the Director. His entire life (and after-life) story is on one of the pages I found.

The entire production runs without fancy sets or rehearsed musical accompaniment. It's dressed down to the purest art achievable- an empty stage, a human being, a note of music, a spontaneous movement, and it's fueled by a cast of actors and actresses who have given their entire lives to their craft. They live on meager earnings made in cities and towns, and move like the wind. Blowing to and fro. Their work is the art of being shaped, like sand that is transformed into goblets. Each night they become the essence of all that is called for by the Director, taking on a myriad of forms and qualities. There are no rehearsals, no plans. Something new and unexpected is set free each night, something perfect despite its raw character, a new way of expressing Being that Creation has never thought to offer before.

Some say the cast are shape-shifters. Who can say...

At one show a woman was cured of dementia, and joined the ensemble. She helps with the lighting now. At another, in Belize, three in the audience died, all children. (Probably food poisoning or something.)

(Usually nobody dies.)

(When they do, though, it is never an accident. How could it be? Maybe if they had died on the way to the theater, or when returning home, that would be one thing. But inside... inside everything is in the hands of a great Vision. Inside, death is more like poetry, a beautiful tear cut in the fabric of a lie about what it is to live a little life in a little world.)

In Argentina the cast spoke Spanish... for just that night. Most of them know it not. They used wild bulls in the performance, in daring choreographies, and a stage full of lovers burst into an ecstatic tango. The audience wept and cheered. A young girl left there with a new and precocious ability to play the violin. She walked out in a crowd of mind-blown patrons, clutching the violin she had found in a case underneath her seat. This is how the Vision is revealed. This type of thing is normal. People arrive filled with their unspoken notions of themselves and the world, and depart bereft of language, their shells cracked open, humming sweet sounds and walking along the streets in whichever direction they happen to be pointed, savoring with teary-eyed gratitude the simplest of things: water, air, life.

In Japan, the cast put on a story of a sumo wrestler who had retired to write poetry, and failed, and ultimately died a tragic and anonymous death as an addict. He had left his devoted wife behind in shame. The story continued to build, like something coming up out of the ground, and suddenly his heart was quite clearly present in the theater. His presence filled the volume, and emotions faded and merged like sky colors at dawn as he revealed to the crowd the depth of his agony, his hopes, and his failures. The audience discovered his soul that night, speaking to them in the theater through the voice of one, solitary actor. He was real, that wrestler poet. The audience had thought he was just a character-- a fiction-- but he was not.

Somehow she was there, too, his wife, quite elderly now, in the front row, and she stood up at one point, and his spirit filled the auditorium with speechless couplets that flew around like a school of silvery fish. That night he received the acknowledgment he had craved and deserved, and the audience received a glimpse of something everlasting. When the curtain fell it took nearly a full minute for the audience to realize the performance had ended, that it was only a play- (right?)- and they coughed their swollen tongues out of the back of their dry mouths, and laughed hoarse cries, and sharply snapped their heads to one another in delightful appreciation.

I read about all of this on that website.

Consider this miracle: my apartment is just three blocks from the theater where they are performing this week. Tonight is the final show before they move on to somewhere else. The website is already down. I imagine that they will disappear into the void from whence they came. There is no advertising about where they are going next. Is this how the world is transformed? I am hungry for that undoing. I know tonight will be special. I just know that an Answer will come and find me.

All of us in this line have heard the rumors flitting around about the show, he one way and she another-- some through the inevitable whispering that must have spread through the city and into the surrounding towns. I didn't tell *anyone*. I'm guessing most of us have tried to keep this hush-hush, to keep our little secret, as we all know that seats would be limited.

I am not the only one who is predicting an encounter with transformation itself. We are all brimming with a poorly hidden sense of eager inevitability. The knowledge that our worlds will not be the same tomorrow as they are today is stark, the one idea we grasp with certainty. The feeling of premonition permeates the entire city. As if in answer to this invisible call, the ticket line is snaking down the street, around trees and over curbs, past halal vendors, toy stores and chocolate shops. Even now, as it moves slowly, it seems to be growing faster at the back end than it is shrinking at the front. Many of us came to find our place in line well before sunrise, and now it is going on early evening. I'm tired and hungry, my granola bars and bottled water long gone. I had thought I would arrive early, get my ticket, and then go into work for the day before coming back for the show that night, but that didn't exactly work out.

You can't buy tickets in advance, because the production has its own box office, its own staff, and its own hours. It's only open for a few brief hours prior to the evening's performance. Claire, a sweetheart of a woman who must be eighty years old and who has stuck with the show for longer than any of us can guess... she runs the ticket sales. I read about her on the website, too- about how she was adopted by the theater as a girl after her parents were killed in a London air raid. They found her alone, stumbling through the city in a worn pair of sandals and a tiny leather coat, snot pouring from her nose, and they scooped her up. For years, she simply lived in their company, an orphan, her life one of continuous movement around the

globe. She has grown up on a steady diet of revelation. Can you imagine all the things she has seen?

Years later she started working for the show as an attendant, helping people find their seats, learning their names. She loved to watch them enter, and then see them again on their way out, their faces aglow, their red cheeks smeared salty from the drying of tears. She said she had never wanted to be one of the cast. She just enjoys her role in making events happen, in engaging the crowd, in selling tickets and having a part that suits her. She opens the box office each afternoon at five. Her entire life story was on that web-site. I can't wait to reach the front and meet her.

I'm about forty people back, hoping you can buy food in the theater, and wondering all of a sudden if Claire is letting people buy multiple tickets. This is a contingency for which I haven't planned. I'm watching a man at the front of the line pulling out an envelope with a stack of bills and a folded list of names, and my blood pressure is starting to rise. As I watch this transaction unfold, and am dumbfounded by the realization that Claire is graciously handing over tickets to what must be half of the auditorium, I see a bellhop looking fellow in a velvet cap and jacket run by and escort someone from further down the line (behind me!) up to the front. Straight into the theater. Do not pass go. The person isn't handicapped, or elderly, or anything. It's just some guy in a leather jacket with a pleasantly surprised expression on his face.

*What is this!?*

Another attendant trots past me, and his jacket catches my attention. It says, "The Show Is Always Going On."

Ten minutes later I am dumbfounded as the ticket office closes. The show is sold out. I turn and look behind me at the string of would-be patrons who haven't yet figured it out. It is a surreal scene, and I am observing it coolly from within the time delay between the realization that has begun to sink in, and the visceral reaction sure to follow in my tissue. The line is a slow motion stack of human dominoes routed through the shade of tall buildings, down two streets, bisected occasionally by wide swaths of drifting cars, wrapping around the shaded face of one last building and onto a sunlit avenue. They are oblivious. One woman glances at her

watch. A gentle breeze lifts her hair. A man is on a cell phone, smiling, his future surely bright. I watch, devoid of feeling, as the wave of realization tumbles down the chain of linked souls, knocking them over one by one.

The placid line is jarred into a quivering dismay. Nobody wants to step out of line and lose their place, but the line itself is no longer justified. Its purpose has evaporated, boiled off completely, leaving behind a residue of famished disappointment.

Close to the front, I can hardly believe it. I'm in shock, beset by a stupor that is coagulating like blood around a cut, congealing steadily into a knot of bitter disappointment. Why did I find the website two days ago, only to have this happen? What was the point!?! Many of the people around me are becoming increasingly agitated, setting one another off like a frightened flock of mallards. First one squawks, then another, then a whole passel of them get going, and then one takes to the air, and within seconds every last one of them are swirling overhead, flapping their wings in a lazy circle that ends where it began. They alight back on the surface of the water (pavement) and settle down, but there are still one or two with something to say- a finger pointed sharply towards an offending face, a gruff word that fills the air with a smoky, acrid intensity- and on and on it goes.

The line is thickening near the front as people head for the scene of the crime, hungry now for answers, reforming around me in a slowly billowing cloud of rowdy bystanders, surly and jostling, and I have no interest in succumbing to its mood, so I turn to walk home, defeated. Angry. An elbow catches me in the side. I stumble into a person at my right, who nudges me back in defiance. I'm temporarily bouncing between human bumpers like an unwilling pinball. I want out of there before critical mass is reached, and slide through to the periphery. Looking back over my shoulder, I see the hubbub beginning to rise.

Just a half block away the streets are quieter than usual, as if everyone is someplace else, and I have a decent idea where. Did the whole damned city find out about the performance tonight? And how come everyone thought it would be so great? The vast majority of the city's denizens are typically too busy taking their lives out on one another in an ongoing, cantankerous buffeting of agendas to be bothered with a legitimate art showing, nevermind turning out in spades to see a traveling band of impoverished mystics. Where's this coming from?

These thoughts only add to my disappointment. I feel cheated and alone. I feel

like a fool. Worst of all, I feel as though something great has turned its back on me and left me in the lurch, passed me by. Maybe I truly have been a fool-- a desperate idiot. Maybe the notion that I am a being known and loved by a beneficent Creation is nothing but delusional mollycoddling. Maybe the notion that my particular life has a particular meaning is the same. It is one thing to miss out on tickets to a show. It is another to miss out on tickets to a moment in which you might glimpse, might quietly taste, the sweetness for which you have been searching your entire life. I feel like a young boy who has collected baseball cards for years, scrounging up loose change by doing chores for uncles and neighbors, who can recite the batting order of every team in the American League, who would give his right arm to see a Major League game, who finds out boys at his school will be given tickets to a World Series game by a rich benefactor, only to see them go to the kids who hardly know what a baseball is. Sure, they're excited, but its such a waste. They could never appreciate it the way I could. They don't deserve such a gift...

These thoughts circle around me like a covey of crows, nipping at my ears and eyes, but I am unwilling to let them run me entirely. It is tempting to cave in and let them carry me off, but somewhere within me is a little voice unwilling to fold. There are so many things we simply don't know. I am unwilling to surrender the notion that maybe, just maybe, everything is as it should be and that somehow this will all make sense one day.

So I walk.

Walking has always been a balm to my spirit. The body is occupied, the mind's unconscious given sufficient data to tease about and manipulate as a result of the slowly changing scenery, and somehow in the process the space is created within myself for fresh ideas to sneak up on me, for inspiration to blossom and unfold. This is what I'm counting on now, this gear-slipping consciousness that comes from steady walking. Sometimes I'll forget entire blocks and simply walk the familiar streets on autopilot, daydreaming about something that has captivated my imagination. I decide not to return straight home- just three blocks away- and to take a more roundabout jaunt through the heart of the city instead.

The early evening is eerie as I walk through the sparsely travelled streets, watching remnants of newspapers blow past, looking into empty storefronts where oblivious clerks are checking their watches and chalking the day up as one of those statistically inevitable anomalies that ripple through the city from time to time, like

the odd, half-hearted suicide attempt that will shut down a whole block once a year, or the rupture of some underground utility that results in cordoned streets and an incongruous dearth of shoppers.

I've seldom, if ever, been able to see so far down the city's long blocks. The only time comparable is dawn on a Saturday. My favorite version is the one in which the mist of the previous night's rain rises off the asphalt where the first rays of sun make contact. There are a few cabs drifting past, a runner or two, and all the rest is an emptiness illuminated in a timeless light. For me, that is the nadir of the city's teeming beauty. It's zenith is those late spring evenings when the park is full of relaxed and laughing patrons, and frisbees zoom in the ochre twilight. Both ends of the spectrum are beautiful and complete. I love to think of the city that way, like an unending oscillation back and forth between these two perfect heights of expression. It is whole because of each end, and the way they hold everything in between. In this spaciousness, in the rhythm of my walking, my bitterness recedes and thoughts not entirely my own begin to draw near.

By the time I have reached my apartment, I feel fresh and alive. I think about the joyous repercussions still to come, about the stories that may fill the air tomorrow as those fortunate enough to have seen the show begin to report on what they witnessed. I have given a renewed inner credence to the notion that those who will see the show tonight are precisely the ones for whom it is intended, and I look forward eagerly to vicarious participation through the next day's theater columns in the paper. I imagine myself in my favorite spot by the window, coffee cup in hand, reading the words and imagining the previous night's events.

I'm able to carve out some peace, despite the evening's aborted mission.

I unlock my door and hang up my coat. On my kitchen table I find an envelope. (How did that get there?) I open it and discover a hand-written note from Claire, the ticket attendant, along with a ticket to the show. Her penmanship is exquisite, a confident, curling blue swirl, and is somehow sufficient in and of itself to convey the feeling that somehow she knows me, and I her. For the second time this evening I am suddenly rocked on my heels. I wonder if the Universe is playing cat and mouse with me. She writes that the way is unique for each of us, unique and unpredictable, and that she looks forward to seeing me at the show later. I inspect the ticket, looking for signs of a ruse, and discover it is a backstage pass. The station-

ary has a tag line at the bottom instead of an address: *The Show Is Always Going On...*

I spin on a dime, suddenly glowing with anticipation once again, and return to the streets. I wonder how much time I've lost wandering aimlessly along half-empty sidewalks, cooling my insides. Thankfully, the theater is just three blocks away, and it is still early. I forget my previous hunger entirely. My strides are like arias. I scan the back of the ticket again quickly and read that the backstage entrance is on the opposite side of the block from the box office, and, faced with a blocked crosswalk, I practically trot down an avenue so as to approach the theater from the other direction.

As I approach, I hear the feint sound of yelling. It is like a wall of cheers thrown upwards into the sky from a packed stadium two blocks away, like the noise of the Coliseum drifting lazily across Rome, a volley of noise rising into the air, dispersing, and only faintly dusting the ground. The noise is intermittent but unmistakable, muted to nearly a whisper by the buildings all around. It seems to come from various directions, like the rumbling of a commercial airliner passing by far overhead when the invisible goings-on high in the atmosphere cause sound to take indirect routes to its destination. By the time you actually hear the plane, it has vectored halfway across your slice of sky. I have a moment of doubt, a crumbling sensation inside of me as if something has gone horribly wrong. The muted yelling is tinged with the unmistakable tone of violence. It is a moment in which my excitement is briefly dulled, and then I swing the door open and lunge into the theater, backstage pass at the ready.

A young woman is waiting just inside the door. She is plain and simple, completely unassuming, in a way that inspires a feeling of freedom. She is dressed in faded jeans and a black tee shirt- her brown hair up in a ponytail. She inspects my pass and waves me to follow, ushering me to a set of bleachers just off the stage where one or two others are waiting. Claire is one of them. She turns to me and smiles, as if she knows a little something about me and my yo-yo heart.

I sit down near her, and the young woman sits close by as well.

"Laura's an actress," Claire whispers to me, practically pointing. "It's her night off."

I look over at the woman. "Really?"

She smiles at my unmistakable appreciation and takes the best bow one can take when seated on a set of metal bleachers.

"They take turns doing the odd jobs that need to be done to keep things moving," Claire said, eager to share some of the inner workings of the troupe. "Tonight they told us the actors will be entering stage left- that's the other side of the stage, over there." She points directly across the vacant expanse of the stage to its hidden wing on the far side where I can just make out the figure of a man, standing in a soft red silhouette, backlit by some sort of emergency exit sign. The lighting backstage is dimmed, and the curtain is down, and it is difficult to discern much of anything besides gradations of shadow.

For a moment I think I can hear more of the yelling I had heard briefly outside just moments before, as if within myself I can hear someone calling out for help, but there is no reaction from Claire or the actress, so I force myself to forget about it. A confused and uneasy tension simmers inside of me. Then, without fanfare or introduction, the curtain begins to rise.

It is just as I imagined it would be, in that the sense of anticipation filling the theater is as thick as cream butter. The lingering of the emptiness upon the stage clearly belies the fact that the production is being birthed in that very moment, that it takes a life of its own as it comes into being. This isn't a rehearsed event, I think to myself. This is the spontaneous act of Creation. Anything could happen! I wonder how long it takes the Director to get going, to take the pulse of the crowd and to communicate the evening's vision to the company of actors and stagehands. I look out into the crowd, at the faces I can just barely discern in the dim light beyond the stage, and behold a sea of people at rapt attention, waiting.

Slowly, as if in answer, the lights over the stage dim, and a single spotlight defines a sharply cut circle right in the center of the stage. It is completely dark where we are seated, and I hear someone walk slowly across the stage's wooden panels. It seems to be the actor I saw just moments ago in cautionary red silhouette. He is carrying a simple wooden chair, old and bruised, coated in shiny varnish, which he positions directly in the center of the glowing circle, angled slightly to the stage's left. Slowly, he walks around the chair and sits down.

I wait expectantly. The entire theater is filled with a pitched silence. *What will come now!?*

Someone in the audience coughs, and then all goes quiet again. We wait, togeth-

er, our anticipation joining us into one collective, pulsing whole. As the seconds tick by, this feeling strengthens within me, and I become increasingly aware of others in the crowd. I can feel the ticking of their hearts, the shallow descent of their breathing, and most of all- the question in their minds: what is it!? What is being birthed here tonight, specifically for us...?

The feeling of connection with the entire place- the crowd, the moment, the seat beneath me, the silence in the air- overwhelms me and a tear forms in my eye as I fill with the appreciation of just how much Love there is in the room. Have you ever felt anything like that? Out of a multitude there coalesces a singular, powerful will, a clear desire. I think about why we're all there, and I realize the depth of our shared need to be touched by something beautiful, to be reminded that we are part of something genuine and living. We want so badly to be held in the hands of Truth, and sculpted. I see all of that in an instant, in a flash, and it is overwhelming. We are all here together, desiring to be sliced open by the hands of Love, with the subtle film that distances us each from each rent open and peeled back like the skin of a strange fruit. We're all hungry for this undoing. We can't seem to do it ourselves, on our own, in our isolation. Out there, on the streets, we think we're different, but held by this feeling in here, we're profoundly the same. We're quivering, waiting for the knife to slice open the night.

The actor on the stage simply sits, sometimes putting his hand up to his forehead, shielding his eyes from the hot glow of the lamps above. He wants to see into the eyes of the audience to connect with them. He seems to be asking us a question. Other times, he sits with both hands in his pockets, as if he is at the beach watching gulls fly aimlessly over the sand, completely without a care. He scratches his arms, sits up, peers into the crowd, and waits. As time passes this silence becomes deafening. He seems to be waiting on the audience, even as we are all waiting on him. He sits, and searches into the eyes of the crowd, asking that invisible question...

I am struck by the beauty of this moment, this pregnant pause in all our lives, this ecstatic moment that has drawn out all our wanting and made it plain to us. This event has pulled deep-seated emotions from within us, and floated them upon a thick, collective silence. Our longing fills the space and is held there-- shared, known, witnessed. As time passes, more and more we unravel. It becomes an awkward space to continue filling with anticipation, when nothing is coming...

It is more than some can bear.

A man bellows out from the crowd, "Get on with it!"

"Hear, hear!" another shouts tensely. "This ain't what we paid for!"

And then silence returns. Now it is swirling, however. That longing is no longer a sea of drifting clouds, but a hive of trapped bees. Our anticipation is turning on itself. Five minutes of pure silence have passed, and we're spontaneously dissolving into something uncertain and crazed. I can feel our desire zooming through the theater now like a herd of frightened gazelles, looking for a way out, seeking a culmination, a means of expression, a movement in which to dump its excess energy, but the actor is silent and steady, giving it no outlet. It begins to find its outlet in the crowd instead.

"You suck!" another yells.

Suddenly tension is building into a jagged and bristling shape. Our eagerness is curdling into dismay, and disgust. I can practically see it. I can feel it inside of me. There is a sense that a mob could develop, that somehow this great emotional reservoir that has been pooled must be drained. I can hardly believe it. The thought that we've been cheated- swindled, made out as fools- is given life, and it begins to build towards a crescendo. The silence is practically speaking the words. I am suddenly unnerved, thinking about exits and crowd control and various what ifs when a man lunges up on stage awkwardly, landing on his side like a flopping walrus, his body unused to swift movements or passionate displays. He rolls his bulky frame over on its side and clambers to his feet, disoriented by the intensity of the spotlight. The will of the entire audience has crystallized upon him. He is like a puppet. He is belligerent, red-faced, scanning the darkness behind the stage for those he can blame for the perpetration of this sham. Finding no other parties, he approaches the actor.

The actor is motionless.

The man is just two paces away, on the verge of winding up. His hand is balled into a fist, and he's just standing there, and the intensity that was once spread over so many is coalescing into this one. Like a river funneled into a narrow canyon, the emotional water is frothing and churning up the sides. If something doesn't give, we can all see that he very well might strike the actor. Hard.

I can feel the place where we want him to do it. I can feel the place where we don't, too, but I'm paralyzed. We're all caught in a tenuous balance.

The man suddenly takes another step forward like a heavy bull rush, but still he pulls up short. He is caught in between. The unexpected movement is enough.

"Stop!" a voice calls from the crowd.

"What are you doing!?" cries another.

*Stop what?* is the thought that fills the space. The question slaps the room as if a great chasm had suddenly been revealed. What is this, anyway? It is bottomless and impenetrable. Unthinking, compelled by the vacancy before them, a torrent of thoughts rush into the void. It is the sensation of potency. We could scream at the actor. We could hit him. We could call him names. We could hurt him quite badly. I won't describe the images that whirl up like phantoms and plunge down into that chasm. The release is catastrophic. Look at us... This vacancy beckons. Who, or what, will stop us? What would it matter? Our collective desperation, faced with such wanton opportunity, is almost intoxicated by its own power. Here in this darkness, we can at least-- and at last-- get even. For everything. Whatever it is for each of us, we can even the score. We don't have to behave or be polite. The space for choice has been brought to us, and it is ours to use. We all agree on this.

We won't stand for this, for being swindled.

I realize these are thoughts and feelings that float through the world at large, thoughts I have in me, thoughts each of us have tucked down there in us with our longing-- the anger and the contempt accrued over a lifetime of living in the absence of clear meaning and purpose. We stew in these thoughts all day without realizing it, and here, in this theater, mere silence has incited them to riot. I am brought to tears again at the Love that can bring us to this precipice of discovery, at the courage of this actor whose silence has unleashed these nightmares from the cages we've built around our hearts.

The man on stage takes a final step forward, driven on by the crowd's intensity, his strong right arm drawing back.

"Wait!!!" a voice yells. This voice is like a knife, slicing the darkness, foiling its twisted will. The voice is an acceptance of our anger and a command all at once-- a refusal to give chaos the reins.

The crowd is suddenly conflicted, snapped from its unconscious reverie as if slapped, awakened, and the man on stage, the agent of this nameless force, crumples. His knees buckle as the intensity of desire and rage and astonishment course through him, released at last, coursing down into the wood of the stage, rippling

through its braces and beams and into the slab underneath, then down further-down, down, down... finally into ancient rock. Look what might have been we think. Look who we are.

The man heaves in silent undulations, his big frame puffing in and out. His tears sparkle in the spotlight.

The actor picks up his chair and walks off the stage, and the curtain falls to end the Act. I realize my body is shaking.

A few minutes later the curtain goes up, and a screen is lowered. A scene appears that looks familiar, and I realize it is the line outside the theater from earlier today. The actor walks through the darkness to stand beside the screen, his figure hidden from view in the darkness. "Do you recognize this scene?" he asks.

We watch from a state of surreal calm that has replaced our previous rancor, in the wake of a storm that has pounded the coast and exhausted its fury. We cling to one another, now that we have been cleaned out, consoled by the presence of one another and the knowledge we have never been alone, despite our hidden, cracked interiors.

The scene skips ahead, to the time when the box office closes. People are mingling around outside the theater, angry and disappointed. Given our experiences just moments before, the scenes are provocative. We know exactly how the people outside were feeling just a few short hours ago, and we see ourselves in them. Some of us were them. We watch as anger and disillusionment radiate in waves through the crowd, drawing out responses, tugging at ancient disappointments.

We can almost read their thoughts...

*This isn't fair.*

*Favorites have been played. Some have clearly been chosen, and others denied. On what basis?*

*We've been cheated by an empty process, by a sham without principles or rules. We're on the outside looking in because of a fate we can't explain. Something wonderful has been taken from us. Why was it given to them? And not us?*

*We're owed something...*

*Someone deserves to pay...*

On the video screen, the door to the box office opens and a member of the company steps out to have a cigarette. It is the woman seated next to me. She walks

out placidly and fishes in her pocket for a lighter. "There!" someone in the crowd yells. "You there! What is the meaning of this!?"

Her silence is a fuel to their fire. She simply lights her cigarette and leans against the wall. We know the feeling that is growing in the crowd on the screen. Even though we know the footage being shown is taken from scenes that are now hours old, still we wordlessly implore the scene before us to unwind itself before it boils over. Please, please don't get carried away, we think as one.

We can see that the disgruntled masses are not interested in any real answers; rather, the crowd is seeking to unload its feelings of loss onto something else, anything else, any one else. I am struck, vividly, by the way my own disappointments have also sought for targets on which to unload. Our instinct is to search for the cause of injustice outside of ourselves.

As people try to move close to the young woman, to grill her about the production and its flimsy ethics, to push her for the dissatisfactory answers they know will come, one person stumbles into another. We see the slight tremor in the crowd.

"Watch it, pal," a man bellows.

The other, feeling the anger of the first strike him like a wave of heat, fires back. He shoves the first man hard in the chest. We watch in shame, the shifting colors and forms emitted by the screen transferring through the darkness onto our own faces, playing out upon us in mirror image. A scuffle breaks loose. The two men push and shove one another amidst a tight circle of distressed onlookers. Another man, disinterested in the feats of the two men, is intent upon the girl from the theater company. Others are as well. This group breaks free from the melee to deal with the real source of the problem. A woman steps forward and confronts the woman leaning against the wall with veiled fury, demanding to understand how tickets were distributed. What is the meaning of all this?

There is minimal threat of physical violence in the scene that unfolds, but the angry woman is cutting and demeaning. Her words are barbed. She calls the other woman useless and lazy, certain that she is content to make her living by cheating others, and drifting from town to town before being found out. She calls her a vagrant and a tramp. The woman is about to launch into another tirade when she is cut off by another person from the crowd. It is enough...

Too much...

The crowd begins to disperse in all directions, slowly, still spewing quiet epithets.

They just wanted to be in here, we all think together, for what we all were certain would be an amazing, uplifting experience. And we wanted to be here as badly as they. Given our performance earlier, we wondered... Are we any more deserving? Did we not just witness the selfsame tragedy in here, playing itself out through us?

I remember then the yelling I heard on my way into the theater, and the moment of queasiness that had passed over me. I wonder if that is the moment when the woman seated near me now was being vilified. The screen goes dark, then, and the curtain falls. I think about the jacket I saw earlier, the one that said, "The Show Is Always Going On", and I realize how masterfully this evening has unfolded. This show has woven itself into the very heart of our lives, into the very fabric of the city, and has served thousands of people when only a few could actually be seated inside. Our lives, I realize, will never be the same.

The lights in the theater come on, and we file out. We are handed slips of paper as we depart. I am humbled and raw, sliced open, tenuous, the film around my life hanging loosely from me, peeling away. I realize that when you think there is something you lack, when you think Love is something that may be obtained through circumstance or contriving, it does not matter whether you are on the in or the out. You can obtain your desire or not, and the result is the same.

As I walk home I read the small sheet of paper I'd been given.

It says, "So begins Act Three. We hear it will be wonderful..."