

**Heidi** (0:15)

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You get out of your car and walk the dark block up to the door. Three people are standing 10 feet from the door in a small, bundled, smoky clump, nodding at you from behind their squinty cigarettes. As you pull on the pitted brass door handle, the comparative warmth of the lobby welcomes you in a way so familiar you almost cry. Through the heavy, velvety black hangings that try to keep the winter outside, you approach the desk, more like the bar it once was, smiling at strangers and nodding at friends. The unpleasant exchange over money with the intensely friendly volunteer is enough to make you question this whole thing again. So much artifice. So many façades. Such a charade. You wade through this for friends, colleagues, personal gain, career maintenance, but sitting together with what seems to be a horde of gullible misfits strains the patience and strength that is needed keep pushing, to find the beating heart underneath the systemic masking and mystifications. Part of this is, you know, the inevitable side effect of an amateurism encouraged by the broad but shallow funding, and an understanding of art as a populist entertainment alternative—but part of it too is the willing ignorance required to maintain good relations with one's neighbors, to keep on good terms with the bullying, manipulative power that indulges this sector while ensuring its permanent marginality, to make nice so you aren't annihilated beneath their boots. Not for the first time, you think of the irredeemable whiteness of this world. Especially here, in the blackness just before the show begins. In the near silence of anticipation, or dread. But you are ready, with your training and experience, to let the dreck wash over you so that you can be witness to the potential ephemeral moment of intensity that struggles, too often in vain, to peek through the mound of shredded vanity hurled across the footlights. The terms of theater are in need of renegotiation. There is no point in moving forward in the same empty costumes, across the same painted sets, speaking the same wrinkled words, imitating the old shapes in hopes of forming a new gesture. There will be hope in the wreckage. But the first requirement is fire. Then will come the ash. You do not want a phoenix, no rebirthing of this hoary monster. This place needs to be razed and analyzed, examine each burnt ember for its use in shaping something else, more human, wicked and janky, mobile and alive. At intermission you alternate between the desire to choke your brain with sugar and the desire to find some kind of peace by burying your head in the program. The program wins out by not costing anything. Reading the same sentence repeatedly is not enough; 15 minutes is such a long time. When the darkness finally falls again, your shoulders descend in welcome relative solitude. After the charade is over, it's like you are holding your breath, walking through the stink, until you get to fresh air, the cold outdoors, alone on the street. The relief at getting out, into reality, is so bracing, so freeing, that you start running. A trot, a jog, and stretching into a longer pace, you begin to rise into the air in exhilarating steps, getting higher; longer paces take you above the snow drifts, the parked cars, the low buildings, into the darkness, forward and upward and apart. You're expanding, too, into smaller and smaller parts. You feel yourself spread out over the city sky in pieces. You're a cloud of tiny flakes, dispersing over the country, things below too far away to keep your attention. You become millions of particles, you become molecules. Wider and farther, you are atoms, protons, neutrons, electrons, then quarks, and much stranger stuff, until finally, at long last, as you hit the edge of the atmosphere, you entirely disappear.