

## WEDNESDAY EVENING WORSHIP

I'm standing in the sanctuary. Swarms of people surround me – all followers, worshipers together tonight. I look around, and as my eyes scan the huge room I see no marble statues of the Apostle Paul or molded forms of the Virgin Mary. I see no heavy cross, metaphorically stained with sinless blood, hanging behind the stage. I don't hear any soft notes of an organ floating through the warm air, which is not lit by glazed glass lamps overhead. This room is dark. Red and blue lights shine steadily, aggressively out across the crowd. Behind the empty stage there hangs a poster about twenty feet wide and high. The image is a head – just a shaved head with a hand covering the face. The fingers are tensed – anguish, I think, anguish or rage. Perhaps both. The people around me are packed tight, with enough room for me to turn around only if I shove a little. The air is thick with the breath of hundreds, the sweat of hundreds, as we wait.

I'm close to the front, perhaps ten feet between myself and the metal fence that sets a six-foot barrier between crowd and stage. The bar runs along in

front of the whole platform, and in the area that it creates there are four men – large men – spaced evenly. They are the only people allowed in that space; that reserved, set apart, indeed that sacred space. A person inside there could touch the stage, perhaps even touch those people who may be on the stage, and this is decidedly disallowed.

They are wearing orange shirts, these men, orange shirts that set them apart from everyone else. I survey the masses around me; most are wearing dark colors, if not black. The men in orange stand dutifully in that space, watching the movement all of the people. They stand before the eager crowd like priests between the world and God.

Suddenly the stage lights start flashing rapidly, colors bouncing off all the faces focused intently on the stage, and out stride three men. The scream that rises from the mouths of all around me is deafening as these ordinary human beings take their positions on stage. One climbs behind the drum set that has been waiting for him. He lifts the sticks, and strikes

out a thunderous beat for a second or two. The screaming intensifies. The crowd looks left as the bass player rolls a few harsh, violent notes out across their waiting ears and shakes some hair from his face. A strum of a guitar, then a faster, more aggressive strike of all the strings brings all eyes to center stage. Here is the god tonight of this place of worship. He wears jeans and a short sleeve shirt, and could just as easily be one of the faces in the crowd. He greets everyone with a what's up everybody, to which the only reply is an even louder, unified roar. The strumming of his guitar, the rolling of the bass, and the thundering of the drums has blended into a prelude of sorts as the center stage singer does the typical yammering on about how he loves playing in this city. The instruments fade together and are silent for a moment. Then, on command of the drummer's count, they tear into their first song.

The orange-shirted priests are now watching the crowd even more attentively, but nobody is watching them. I have been crushed even closer to the front by the hundreds of people behind me all trying to get

as close as possible to the stage. Everybody is jumping in time with the music, elbows flinging all around, fists raised to the air as a sign of support and involvement in the moment. As the music becomes more intense, a group to my left starts shoving and bouncing even more energetically than before. I don't know what the words are in the current song, but both verses have been completed along with both choruses, and the guitar bridge is coming to a close. A prolonged note along with the momentary shiver of a cymbal struck once brings the emotional involvement in this song to a climax just before the catharsis begins. The guitar bass and drums are attacked viciously by their owners, producing that mournful rage expressed so acutely by the poster behind them. The chorus is screamed over and over and over into the microphone with a perfect, raspy edge in the voice.

Now the guys to the left who were before starting to get more aggressive have formed a full-fledged mosh pit. It is a space that has been forced open in the crowd, perhaps ten feet in diameter, and

inside are about seven guys running, stumbling, shoving, colliding and doing their very best to dominate their peers. Whenever two collide, one inevitably bounces roughly into the people on the outer edge, who shove him even more forcefully back into the center to get crushed by whoever deems him a good target. A guy about six feet tall now enters the pit. His shirt is off, displaying an impressively built upper body and a large tattoo across his shoulders. He has dark hair, and heavy eyebrow ridges that make him look like a boxer, or perhaps a battle hardened mosher. He is dominating the pit now as the music rages on. Guys half his size bounce off him, guys twice his size bounce off him. All the commotion reminds me of a scene from a cheap action film where the fighting happens too fast to know what's going on. Maybe that is one of the selling points of the mosh pit. Aside from taking out rage on your fellow band worshipers, and aside from physically expressing the raw emotion of the music, one of the main things this pit does is give a stage and a hardcore soundtrack to whoever is man

enough to enter. In the pit you are no longer imitating the music – everybody around is watching you, not the band, and the music is imitating you. The violence you commit is validated and encouraged by its rageful sound. After several songs, the pit fades.

Now the show has been going on for well over a half hour, and the people toward the back of the crowd are getting more restless. We at the front are all packed too tightly for anyone else to squeeze in, but that won't stop them from getting as close as possible to their gods. As I'm standing, eyes focused on the stage, a foot suddenly crams into the back of my head and a body lands on my shoulder. Instinctively I lift it off and shove it, and watch as the body gets shuffled over the remaining heads before being grabbed by a priest in orange, set on the ground, and hurried out of the sacred area. This young man seems to have started a mass pilgrimage; all the seekers and committed followers from the back are now on their way to the front.

The men in orange are busier than ever. So many fervent worshipers trying to touch their god.

Maybe it's the ride, maybe it's the rebellion, maybe it's simply that they get to kick people in the head, but something is drawing these people in droves. The orange interceptors have no more than a couple of seconds to catch one pilgrim and set him or her down before another one drops into their arms from the edge of the sea of shuffling hands.

As the show continues, the amount of overhead travelers increases even more. Now the last song is playing, and I can barely watch the stage for the amount of traffic that needs my assistance. The priests are doing their utmost, but as I help shuffle one young lad over my head and into the hands of those in front of me, I notice that all the nearby clergy are occupied and in no position to receive this one. At this point it is beyond his control where he goes, for the people are packed too tight in front for him to roll and drop down into the crowd. I see him slide, slide, slide, then fall with a flail of limbs onto the unforgiving cement of the sacred area. I guess fanaticism has its cost.

When the last song ends and the band leaves the stage, the lights in the room brighten, and people

filter away from the stage seeking drinks and lost friends. The commotion has subsided, and now with shoulders beginning to get sore, I make my way to the exit, dodging and ducking between people – only shoving when necessary. My ears ring as a reminder of the event, and as I push through the door, my sweaty face is chilled by a gust of cool air. And now, with no central point on which to focus their attention, no being to whom all respect is given with raised fists, no god to command and unify their thoughts actions, these once fervent but now exhausted worshipers that surround me begin to disperse. In small, isolated groups they find their cars. Singly, separately, some disappear down alleys. Stage crews disassemble the speakers and sound equipment, taking down that twenty foot poster that recently reflected the feelings of the audience. The room is now empty, but needs not wait long before its polytheistic pilgrims return to unite under some other banner – raising their fists in ardent adoration of the one who will unify the motion of their disparate bodies and mesmerize their fragmented thoughts, until they again disband under waning city lights.

–*Niel Burbury*