

The Performer

Bill T. Jones

A performer secretly believes that there is nothing worth doing other than performing. The entire day of a performance is nothing more than preparation for that one, two, two-and-one-half hours standing in a glorious arena, a circle of transformation, a ridiculous one-ring circus, a black void with artificial sunrises, sunsets, tiny vortices of light, screaming shafts of illumination striking the performer from this side, that side. A world wherein he is completely exposed, relying on minute tricks to hide imperfections and mistakes. The performer who takes the stage must believe that he is fascinating, that he or she deserves being the locus of several hundred or thousand points of attention. The job of the performer is to pull that instant community of individuals—full of distraction, expectation, and hope—into a timeless dimensionless now. At best, he or she is a conduit, a vessel through which numerous substances are channeled. Sometimes choking, sometimes abrasive or acidic, gouging. Sometimes sweet, surprising. And sometimes nothing.

The performer feels small triumphs every time the last curtain call is taken and the sweat, like so many familiar salty kisses, pours down the temple, the bridge of the nose, skirts the eye sockets, and seeps into the mouth. The nostrils know the smell of other bodies, tired, demoralized, or ecstatic. The hands know the dusty weight of stage velour, the feet, filthy carpets that they shuffle across to and from a human environment of shower and dressing room. The performer knows waiting, the waiting for well-wishers, friends, sponsors, waiting with anticipation when one feels good about the evening, dreading a look of disappointment or an avoided glance when the evening did not go well.

I envy those who have no desire to perform, those who are content with breakfast, lunch, dinner, a good night's sleep, a vacation, a good book, a good fight, children, spring, summer, fall, those who are content with being one of many. The performer wants to be one of many, but even more, he wants to command the attention of many. Poor performer. He or she will never be satisfied. Perhaps dissatisfaction drives the performer. Perhaps dissatisfaction can, itself, be satisfaction. And then it's called wisdom. I hope so.