

The Artist in the World

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In a moving retelling of her trip to Stockholm to perform at the 2016 Nobel Prize ceremony (*The New Yorker*, December 14), Patti Smith details preparations for her appearance on the morning of the event. Rehearsal with the orchestra. Tea and warm soup in her dressing room. She thought of her mother who first bought her a Bob Dylan album, when she was sixteen or so. Her favorite song was “A Hard Rain’s A-Gonna Fall.” She played it over and over then, and performed it in the years to come with her late husband. Now she was to sing the celebrated song at the Award presentation, before the King and Queen, many well-dressed guests, and Nobel laureates. But not Bob Dylan, winner of the literary prize this year. Smith thought of past honorees in Literature, in particular, Hermann Hesse, Thomas Mann, Albert Camus.

What happened next, I imagine, is a fear of every performer. Smith was so overtaken by the emotions of the moment and personal memories drifting through the song, that she was stopped short by extreme nervousness, unable momentarily to continue. She apologized and started over. It was not that she forgot the words but that they simply wouldn’t come out. Over the course of this eventful day and the next Smith pondered the meaning of her stumble. She understood the nature of commitment to the work. She realized that her life inhabited the world of the lyrics. Remorse transformed into acceptance and joy in the process of being human.

My thoughts turned to another Nobel Prize-winner, someone Patti Smith had mentioned in her article—Albert Camus. His 1957 acceptance speech, the magisterially titled “Create Dangerously,” was written in a Europe rebuilding itself after a devastating war. Admonishing ideologies of the right and the left, he turned to the subject of beauty as an inner ideal of freedom that unites the human race. In his reasoning, the artist can neither turn away from the world nor become lost in it.

Just as Patti Smith had concluded that art is for the “transformation of the people,” and that everything in the world she ever experienced became a part of her to be called forth at any moment, so Camus believed that every human being participates in the building of the world for others. Freedom of art is tied to risk. On this occasion, reading and thinking of the two, together, affirms the nobility of artists who search for authenticity in their very public expression that belies a solemn privacy.

The heroic, humanistic truths of Camus bear recalling:

Great ideas, it has been said, come into the world as gently as doves. Perhaps then, if we listen attentively, we shall hear, amid the uproar of empires and nations, a faint flutter of wings, the gentle stirring of life and hope. Some will say that this hope lies in a nation; others, in a man. I believe rather that it is awakened, revived, nourished by millions of solitary individuals whose deeds and works every day negate frontiers and the crudest implications of history.