

Everything's Zen: Review of *The Body Artist* by Don DeLillo

By Martha Kuhlman

Reading the beginning of Don DeLillo's latest book feels like groping through a room in the blinding morning light before you've had a cup of coffee. Words flow from one impression to the next through the half-articulated thoughts of Laura, the body artist, who presses the "what's it called, the lever" of the toaster as she performs her breakfast rituals. The unquantifiable molecular chasms between objects — and between words — is thrown into dizzying relief, as if we are observing a lesson in sketching negative space. Our attention is drawn to contrasts of light and dark, and to the subtle transition from one to the other in the way sunlight is refracted through the wings of a flock of birds, for example. It is a strange, hallucinatory form of writing that arrests time by drawing it out into seconds and sentences that linger strangely in the air. Chapter Six begins with a mesmerizing description of the sound of an imaginary paperclip falling.

There is something unmistakably Zen about this novel, which is an experimental composition of white-on-white, absence layered upon absence. Rey Robles, an avant-garde film director, inexplicably commits suicide; Laura Hartke, his wife, is left alone to piece together what fragments are left. Once Rey is gone, she discovers that a semi-autistic man-child has been hiding in their summer house for the entire length of their stay. This odd, nameless character, whom she nicknames "Mr. Tuttle" (after her former science teacher from high school), is endowed with the uncanny gift of ventriloquism, and can replay parts of the couple's conversations. He produces improbable grammatical constructions such as "It is not able" that defy conventional expectations of subject and object. When Laura tries to cajole him into making sense, she blurts out in frustration, "[b]e a Zen Master, you little creep." A Zen aesthetic is implicit in the motions of a Japanese woman watering her garden, the wave-like movement of highway traffic cresting a hill, and Laura's breathing exercises. One suspects that a simple summary of what the book is "about" will entirely miss the point; DeLillo's interest lies elsewhere, in the silences and gaps between words, in death and absence.

The Body Artist is a slim, light book — and a significant departure from his previous novel, *Underworld*, a tome whose sinister darkness spirals through a half-century from the Cold War to the present in 800+ pages. In many ways, DeLillo's latest book is the inverse of his earlier projects that delve into the conspiracies and complexities of history: *Libra* is a fictional replay of the Kennedy assassination; *Mao II* is a meditation on the fascination of cults and terrorists. By contrast, *The Body Artist* has a penetrating, inward focus that maps the landscape of the body and of human memory on a personal scale rather than a collective one. Rey and Laura live in a secluded environment that is largely sealed off from the roiling chaos of the outer world, although dim echoes occasionally slip in through the radio or the newspaper — the report of an underground nuclear test, or chanting in Hindi.

Like an elegant piece of origami, the novel reflects and folds into itself without ever revealing its inscrutable secret. Laura spends hours watching the live web-cam broadcast of a nearly deserted two-lane highway in Kotka, Finland. We shiver with the anticipation that someone, or something might appear — the novel's shimmering, spider-web structure is drawn taut in this silence, the quiet mystery of the present moment.