DREAD PERSISTS

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The Silence
By Don DeLillo
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DON DELILLO'S LATEST FICTION TAKES PLACE ON SUPER BOWL SUNDAY, 2022. Three people, a retired physics professor, Diane, her husband Max, a retired building inspector, and Martin, a visiting former student, now a high school teacher, await the start of the game and the arrival of two friends, Tessa and Jim, who are flying in that evening from a vacation in France. Except for two early chapters, one on the plane (which crash lands), and another in a clinic where Jim gets his head wound bandaged, the mise en scéne is the small ninth-floor apartment of Diane and Max on the Upper East Side of Manhattan.

The flight from Paris, as described by Jim, an insurance adjuster, is a long, boring "immersion in a single sustained overtone," which he attempts to counter with a mulishly persistent reading aloud of the information on the overhead monitor—air speed, ETA, external temperature in Celsius, etc. Tessa, a poet who works as an editor for an online service that provides answers to questions about things like hearing loss and dementia, takes notes on their visit to Notre Dame ("crippled but living") so she can remember them 20 years later, "if I'm still alive"—an ominous foreshadowing. Then the plane begins bouncing violently, there is a massive knocking below, and

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the overhead screen goes blank. The next scene in the apartment is the equivalent of a cinematic match cut. It opens with Max listening to the football commentators babbling away as they await the kickoff. As Martin, who is only "fitfully present," states his preference for the ancient traditions undergirding World Cup football, the image on the superscreen TV begin to shake, dissolve into geometrical shapes, and then goes blank.

From this point on, the entire novella—really a long short story of approximately 15,000 words—is devoted almost entirely to three lines of discourse. The first is a range of suppositions from the five characters about the possible causes of the massive power disruption, including internet and cell phone service. Some are plausible: a power station overload (similar to the blackout in New York, New England, and parts of Canada on November 9, 1965); the flyover of military jets at the game; "a selective internet apocalypse" initiated by the Chinese. Others are more bizarre, but most are congruent with the disasters and plagues of other DeLillo novels, most notably *White Noise* (1985), *Cosmopolis* (2003), *Falling Man* (2007), and *Zero K* (2016). They include: mass surveillance software overruling itself; phantom waves from an unknown source; an internet arms race, "hack and counterhack"; satellites that "can see the socks we're wearing"; autonomous drones, cryptocurrency manipulation, surging microplastics, germ warfare, and a takeover by hidden networks "changing by the minute, the microsecond, in ways beyond our imagining." DeLillo's mastery of the fragmented nature of spoken language is displayed in these paranoiac blurts, which every year seem less so.

The second set of responses are felicitous memories, visions, and yearnings, uttered as a counter-narrative to the hidden force that "has crushed our technology . . . our secure devices, our encryption capacities, our tweets, trolls and bots." Most of these seem to be protective emanations from the subconscious, talismanic prayers. Diane recalls visiting museums in Rome:

> The paintings, the furniture, the statues in the long galleries. Arched ceilings with stunning murals. Totally, massively incredible. . . In one gallery tourists with headsets, motionless, lives suspended, looking up at the painted figure on the ceiling, angels, saints, Jesus in his garments, his raiment . . . Voices in how many languages. I think of them even now before I go to sleep, the still figures in the long galleries.

Max's contribution is two-fold, first to recall, in "a kind of plainsong, monophonic, ritualistic voice," the language of the play-by-play announcers at football games: "During this one blistering stretch the offense has been pounding, pounding, pounding." Secondly, he recalls with fondness his work as an inspector, climbing to rooftops and descending into basements, "looking and finding violations of the building code. I love the violations. It justifies all my feelings about just about anything." Jim and Tessa also contribute anti-dread memories. He recalls reaching for Tessa's hand as the plane plummets, and Tessa talks about the snippets of poetry she writes obsessively in tiny 3″ x 4″ notebooks. She wonders if the entire disaster is "a kind of virtual reality" which is an echo of Martin's question about whether people have some kind of controlling communication device implanted subcutaneously, something Morpheus and Neo might discuss in one of the *Matrix* films.

The third line of discourse in *The Silence* is Einstein's *1912 Manuscript on the Special Theory of Relativity*, fragments of which Martin quotes regularly through the evening. Einstein's vision of the universe in this work, which includes a facsimile of his hand-written pages, is Martin's way of contextualizing or subduing the events of the day by pointing to a circumambient scientific structure that might explain and resolve the spate of contradictory explanations for the massive cyber and electrical calamity that is the novella's narrative premise. In quoting from it, Martin even lapses into a version of Einstein, a native German speaker, speaking English, an amazing bit of ventriloquism on DeLillo's part. Martin's Einstein gambit is a sacerdotal anti-angst measure; it is calming, but far from being fully or permanently successful. Dread persists. And for most readers, Einstein's theories are as inexplicable as Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, which is quoted from by Diane, in passing.

DeLillo's tale brings to mind three other dystopian works: Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptic novel, *The Road* (2006), the Wachowski sisters' sci-film, *The Matrix* (1999), and Poe's 1842 short story, "The Masque of the Red Death." All three have truncated plots, but none of the three are as severely abbreviated as DeLillo's, which covers a six-hour period immediately before and after the inexplicable silence in which the five Manhattan pilgrims find themselves ensconced. In writing this brilliant, pointillist tale, DeLillo, it seems, was listening to the shrewd advice Chekhov gave to Ivan Bunin about how to write a short story: "It seems to me that when you write a short story, you have to cut off both the beginning and the end. We writers do most of our lying in those spaces. You must write shorter, to make it as short as possible."