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The Body Artist (English Edition)



Par Don DeLillo
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Par Don DeLillo : The Body Artist (English Edition) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Body Artist (English Edition):

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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurThe Body Artist begins with normality: breakfast between a married couple, Lauren and Rey, in their ramshackle rented house on the New England coast. Recording their delicate, intimate, half-complete thoughts and words, Don DeLillo proves himself a stunningly unsentimental observer of our idiosyncratic relationships. But after breakfast, Rey makes a decision that leaves Lauren utterly alone, or seems to. As Lauren, the body artist of the title, becomes strangely detached from herself and the temporal world, the novel becomes an exploration of a highly abnormal grieving process; a fascinating expos of 'who we are when we are not rehearsing who we are'; and a rarefied study of trauma and creativity, absence and presence, isolation and communion..comDon DeLillo's reputation rests on a series of large-canvas novels, in which he's proven to be the foremost diagnostician of our national psyche. In The Body Artist, however, he

sacrifices breadth for depth, narrowing his focus to a single life, a single death. The protagonist is Lauren Hartke, who we see sharing breakfast with her husband, Rey, in the opening pages. This 18-page sequence is a tour de force (albeit a less showy one than the author's initial salvo in *Underworld*)--an intricate, funny notation of Lauren's consciousness as she pours cereal, peers out the window, and makes idle chat. Rey, alas, will proceed directly from the breakfast table to the home of his former wife, where he'll unceremoniously blow his brains out. What follows is one of the strangest ghost stories since *The Turn of the Screw*. And like James's tale, it seems to partake of at least seven kinds of ambiguity, leaving the reader to sort out its riddles.

Returning to their summer rental after Rey's funeral, Lauren discovers a strange stowaway living in a spare room: an inarticulate young man, perhaps retarded, who may have been there for weeks. His very presence is hard for her to pin down: "There was something elusive in his aspect, moment to moment, a thinning of physical address." Yet soon this mysterious figure begins to speak in Rey's voice, and her own, playing back entire conversations from the days preceding the suicide. Has Lauren's husband been reincarnated? Or is the man simply an eavesdropping idiot savant, reproducing sentences he'd heard earlier from his concealment? DeLillo refuses any definitive answer. Instead he lets Lauren steep in her grief and growing puzzlement, and speculates in his own voice about this apparent intersection of past and present, life and death. At times his rhetoric gets away from him, an odd thing for such a superbly controlled writer. "How could such a surplus of vulnerability find itself alone in the world?" he asks, sounding as though he's discussing a sick puppy.

And Lauren's performances--for she is the body artist of the title--sound pretty awful, the kind of thing Artaud might have cooked up for an aerobics class. Still, when DeLillo reins in the abstractions and bears down, the results are heartbreaking: Why shouldn't the death of a person you love bring you into lurid ruin?

You don't know how to love the ones you love until they disappear abruptly. Then you understand how thinly distanced from their suffering, how sparing of self you often were, only rarely unguarded of heart, working your networks of give-and-take. At this stage of his career, a thin book is an adventure for DeLillo. So is his willingness to risk sentimentality, to immerse us in personal rather than national traumas. For all its

flaws, then, *The Body Artist* is a real, raw accomplishment, and a reminder that bigger, even for so capacious an imagination as DeLillo's, isn't always better. --James Marcus

Chapter One
Time seems to pass. The world happens, unrolling into moments, and you stop to glance at a spider pressed to its web. There is a quickness of light and a sense of things outlined precisely and streaks of running luster on the bay.

You know more surely who you are on a strong bright day after a storm when the smallest falling leaf is stabbed with self-awareness. The wind makes a sound in the pines and the world comes into being, irreversibly, and the spider rides the wind-swayed web. It happened this final morning that they were here at the same time, in the kitchen, and they shambled past each other to get things out of cabinets and drawers and then waited one for the other by the sink or fridge, still a little puddled in dream melt, and she ran tap water over the blueberries bunched in her hand and closed her eyes to breathe the savor rising. He sat with the newspaper, stirring his coffee. It was his coffee and his cup. They shared the newspaper but it was actually, unspokenly, hers. "I want to say something but what." She ran water from the tap and seemed to notice. It was the first time she'd ever noticed this. "About the house. This is what it is," he said. "Something I meant to tell you." She noticed how water from the tap turned opaque in seconds. It ran silvery and clear and then in seconds turned opaque and how curious it seemed that in all these months and all these times in which she'd run water from the kitchen tap she'd never noticed how the water ran clear at first and then went not murky exactly but opaque, or maybe it hadn't happened before, or she'd noticed and forgotten. She crossed to the cabinet with the blueberries wet in her hand and reached up for the cereal and took the box to the counter, the mostly brown and white box, and then the toaster thing popped and she flipped it down again because it took two flips to get the bread to go brown and he absently nodded his acknowledgment because it was his toast and his butter and then he turned on the radio and got the weather. The sparrows were at the feeder, wing-beating, fighting for space on the curved perches. She reached into the near cabinet for a bowl and shook some cereal out of the box and then dropped the berries on top. She rubbed her hand dry on her jeans, feeling a sense somewhere of the color blue, runny and wan. What's it called, the lever. She'd pressed down the lever to get his bread to go brown. It was his toast, it was her weather. She listened to reports and called the weather number frequently and sometimes stood out front and looked into the coastal sky, tasting the breeze for latent implications. "Yes exactly. I know what it is," he said. She went to the fridge and opened the door. She stood there remembering something. She said, "What?" Meaning what did you say, not what did you want to tell me. She remembered the soya granules. She crossed to the cabinet and took down the box and then caught the fridge door before it swung shut. She reached in for the milk, realizing

what it was he'd said that she hadn't heard about eight seconds ago. Every time she had to bend and reach into the lower and remote parts of the refrigerator she let out a groan, but not really every time, that resembled a life lament. She was too trim and limber to feel the strain and was only echoing Rey, identifyingly, groaning his groan, but in a manner so seamless and deep it was her discomfort too. Now that he'd remembered what he meant to tell her, he seemed to lose interest. She didn't have to see his face to know this. It was in the air. It was in the pause that trailed from his remark of eight, ten, twelve seconds ago. Something insignificant. He would take it as a kind of self-diminishment, bringing up a matter so trivial. She went to the counter and poured soya over the cereal and fruit. The lever sprang or sprung and he got up and took his toast back to the table and then went for the butter and she had to lean away from the counter when he approached, her milk carton poised, so he could open the drawer and get a butter knife. There were voices on the radio in like Hindi it sounded. She poured milk into the bowl. He sat down and got up. He went to the fridge and got the orange juice and stood in the middle of the room shaking the carton to float the pulp and make the juice thicker. He never remembered the juice until the toast was done. Then he shook the carton. Then he poured the juice and watched a skim of sizzling foam appear at the top of the glass. She picked a hair out of her mouth. She stood at the counter looking at it, a short pale strand that wasn't hers and wasn't his. He stood shaking the container. He shook it longer than he had to because he wasn't paying attention, she thought, and because it was satisfying in some dumb and blameless way, for its own childlike sake, for the bounce and slosh and cardboard orange aroma. He said, "Do you want some of this?" She was looking at the hair. "Tell me because I'm not sure. Do you drink juice?" he said, still shaking the damn thing, two fingers pincer at the spout. She scraped her upper teeth over her tongue to rid her system of the complicated sense memory of someone else's hair. She said, "What? Never drink the stuff. You know that. How long have we been living together?" "Not long," he said. He got a glass, poured the juice and watched the foam appear. Then he wheeled a little achingly into his chair. "Not long enough for me to notice the details," he said. "I always think this isn't supposed to happen here. I think anywhere but here." He said, "What?" "A hair in my mouth. From someone else's head." He buttered his toast. "Do you think it only happens in big cities with mixed populations?" "Anywhere but here." She held the strand of hair between thumb and index finger, regarding it with mock aversion, or real aversion stretched to artistic limits, her mouth at a palsied slant. "That's what I think." "Maybe you've been carrying it since childhood." He went back to the newspaper. "Did you have a pet dog?" "Hey. What woke you up?" she said. It was her newspaper. The telephone was his except when she was calling the weather. They both used the computer but it was spiritually hers. She stood at the counter looking at the hair. Then she snapped it off her fingers to the floor. She turned to the sink and ran hot water over her hand and then took the cereal bowl to the table. Birds scattered when she moved near the window. "I've seen you drink gallons of juice, tremendous, how can I tell you?" he said. Her mouth was still twisted from the experience of sharing some food handler's unknown life or from a reality far stranger and more meandering, the intimate passage of the hair from person to person and somehow mouth to mouth across years and cities and diseases and unclean foods and many baneful body fluids. "What? I don't think so," she said. Okay, she put the bowl on the table. She went to the stove, got the kettle and filled it from the tap. He changed stations on the radio and said something she missed. She took the kettle back to the stove because this is how you live a life even if you don't know it and then she scraped her teeth over her tongue again, for emphasis, watching the flame shoot blue from the burner. She'd had to sort of jackknife away from the counter when he approached to get the butter knife. She moved toward the table and the birds went cracking off the feeder again. They passed out of the shade beneath the eaves and flew into sun glare and silence and it was an action she only partly saw, elusive and mutely beautiful, the birds so sunstruck they were consumed by light, disembodied, turned into something sheer and fleet and scatter-bright. She sat down and picked through sections of newspaper and realized she had no spoon. She had no spoon. She looked at him and saw he was sporting a band-aid at the side of his jaw. She used the old dented kettle instead of the new one she'd just bought because -- she didn't know why. It was an old frame house that had many rooms and working fireplaces and animals in the walls and mildew everywhere, a place they'd rented unseen, a relic of the boom years of the lumbering and shipbuilding trades, way too big, and there were creaking floorboards and a number of bent utensils dating to god knows. She half fell out of her chair in a gesture of self-ridicule and went to the counter to get a spoon. She took the soya granules back to the table as well. The soya had a smell that didn't seem to belong to the sandy stuff in the box. It was a faint wheaty stink with feet mixed in. Every time she used the soya she smelled it. She smelled it two or three times. "Cut yourself again." "What?" He put his hand to his jaw, head sunk in the newspaper. "Just a nick." She started to read a

story in her part of the paper. It was an old newspaper, Sunday's, from town, because there were no deliveries here. "That's lately, I don't know, maybe you shouldn't shave first thing. Wake up first. Why shave at all? Let your mustache grow back. Grow a beard." "Why shave at all? There must be a reason," he said. "I want God to see my face." He looked up from the paper and laughed in the empty way she didn't like. She took a bite of cereal and looked at another story. She tended lately to place herself, to insert herself into certain stories in the newspaper. Some kind of daydream variation. She did it and then became aware she was doing it and then sometimes did it again a few minutes later with the same or a different story and then became aware again. She reached for the soya box without looking up from the paper and poured some granules into the bowl and the radio played traffic and talk. The idea seemed to be that she'd have to wear out the old kettle, use it and use it until it developed rust bubbles and then and only then would it be okay for her to switch to the kettle she'd just bought. "Do you have to listen to the radio?" "No," she said and read the paper. "What?" "It is such astonishing shit." The way he stressed the t in shit, dignifying the word. "I didn't turn on the radio. You turned on the radio," she said. He went to the fridge and came back with a large dark fig and turned off the radio. "Give me some of that," she said, reading the paper. "I was not blaming. Who turned it on, who turned it off. Someone's a little edgy this morning. I'm the one, what do I say, who should be defensive. Not the young woman who eats and sleeps and lives forever." "What? Hey, Rey. Shut up." He bit off the stem and tossed it toward the sink. Then he split the fig open with his thumbnails and took the spoon out of her hand and licked it off and used it to scoop a measure of claret flesh out of the gaping fig skin. He dropped this stuff on his toast -- the flesh, the mash, the pulp -- and then spread it with the bottom of the spoon, blood-buttery swirls that popped with seedlife. "I'm the one to be touchy in the morning. I'm the one to moan. The terror of another ordinary day," he said slyly. "You don't know this yet." "Give us all a break," she told him. She leaned forward, he extended the bread. There were crows in the trees near the house, taking up a raucous call. She took a bite and closed her eyes so she could think about the taste. He gave back her spoon. Then he turned on the radio and remembered he'd just turned it off and he turned it off again. She poured granules into the bowl. The smell of the soya was somewhere between body odor, yes, in the lower extremities and some authentic podlife of the earth, deep and seeded. But that didn't describe it. She read a story in the paper about a child abandoned in some godforsaken. Nothing described it. It was pure smell. It was the thing that smell is, apart from all sources. It was as though and she nearly said something to this effect because it might amuse him but then she let it drop -- it was as though some, maybe, medieval scholastic had attempted to classify all known odors and had found something that did not fit into his system and had called it soya, which could easily be part of a lofty Latin term, but no it couldn't, and she sat thinking of something, she wasn't sure what, with the spoon an inch from her mouth. He said, "What?" "I didn't say anything." She got up to get something. She looked at the kettle and realized that wasn't it. She knew it would come to her because it always did and then it did. She wanted honey for her tea even though the water wasn't boiling yet. She had a hyper-preparedness, or haywire, or hair-trigger, and Rey was always saying, or said once, and she carried a voice in her head that was hers and it was dialogue or monologue and she went to the cabinet where she got the honey and the tea bags -- a voice that flowed from a story in the paper. "Weren't you going to tell me something?" He said, "What?" She put a hand on his shoulder and moved past to her side of the table. The birds broke off the feeder in a wing-whir that was all b's and r's, the letter b followed by a series of vibrato r's. But that wasn't it at all. That wasn't anything like it. "You said something. I don't know. The house." "It's not interesting. Forget it." "I don't want to forget it." "It's not interesting. Let me put it another way. It's boring." "Tell me anyway." "It's too early. It's an effort. It's boring." "You're sitting there talking. Tell me," she said. She took a bite of cereal and read the paper. "It's an effort. It's like what. It's like pushing a boulder." "You're sitting there talking." "Here," he said. "You said the house. Nothing about the house is boring. I like the house." "You like everything. You love everything. You're my happy home. Here," he said. He handed her what remained of his toast and she chewed it mingled with cereal and berries. Suddenly she knew what he'd meant to tell her. She heard the crows in large numbers now, clamorous in the trees, probably mobbing a hawk. "Just tell me. Takes only a second," she said, knowing absolutely what it was. She saw him move his hand to his breast pocket and then pause and lower it to the cup. It was his coffee, his cup and his cigarette. How an incident described in the paper seemed to rise out of the inky lines of print and gather her into it. You separate the Sunday sections. "Just tell me okay. Because I know anyway." He said, "What? You insist you will drag this thing out of me. Lucky we don't normally have breakfast together. Because my mornings." "I know anyway. So tell me." He was looking at the paper. "You know. Then fine. I don't have to tell you." He was reading, getting ready to go for his cigarettes. She said,

"The noise." He looked at her. He looked. Then he gave her the great smile, the gold teeth in the great olive-dark face. She hadn't seen this in a while, the amplified smile, Rey emergent, his eyes clear and lit, deep lines etched about his mouth. "The noises in the walls. Yes. You've read my mind." "It was one noise. It was one noise," she said. "And it wasn't in the walls." "One noise. Okay. I haven't heard it lately. This is what I wanted to say. It's gone. Finished. End of conversation." "True. Except I heard it yesterday, I think." "Then it's not gone. Good. I'm happy for you." "It's an old house. There's always a noise. But this is different. Not those damn scampering animals we hear at night. Or the house settling. I don't know," she said, not wanting to sound concerned. "Like there's something." She read the paper, voice trailing off. "Good. I'm glad," he said. "You need the company." You separate the Sunday sections and there are endless identical lines of print with people living somewhere in the words and the strange contained reality of paper and ink seeps through the house for a week and when you look at a page and distinguish one line from another it begins to gather you into it and there are people being tortured halfway around the world, who speak another language, and you have conversations with them more or less uncontrollably until you become aware you are doing it and then you stop, seeing whatever is in front of you at the time, like half a glass of juice in your husband's hand. She took a bite of cereal and forgot to taste it. She lost the taste somewhere between the time she put the food in her mouth and the regretful second she swallowed it. He put down the juice glass. He took the pack out of his shirt and lit up a cigarette, the cigarette he'd been smoking with his coffee since he was twelve years old, he'd told her, and he let the match burn down a bit before he shook it out in meditative slow motion and put it at the edge of his plate. It was agreeable to her, the smell of tobacco. It was part of her knowledge of his body. It was the aura of the man, a residue of smoke and unbroken habit, a dimension in the night, and she lapped it off the curled gray hairs on his chest and tasted it in his mouth. It was who he was in the dark, cigarettes and mumbled sleep and a hundred other things nameable and not. But it wasn't one of his, the hair she'd found in her mouth. Employees must wash hands before leaving toilet. It was his toast but she'd eaten nearly half of it. It was his coffee and cup. Touch his cup and he looks at you edgewise, with the formal one-eyed glare of a boxer touching gloves. But she knew she was making this up because he didn't give a damn what you did with his cup. There were plenty of cups he could use. The phone was his. The birds were hers, the sparrows pecking at sunflower seeds. The hair was somebody else's. He said something about his car, the mileage, gesturing. He liked to conduct, to guide an extended remark with his hand, a couple of fingers jutting. "All day yesterday I thought it was Friday." He said, "What?" Or you become someone else, one of the people in the story, doing dialogue of your own devising. You become a man at times, living between the lines, doing another version of the story. She thought and read. She groped for the soya box and her hand struck the juice container. She looked up and understood he wasn't reading the paper. He was looking at it but not reading it and she understood this retroactively, that he'd been looking at it all this time but not absorbing the words on the page. The container remained upright. She poured a little more soya into the bowl, for grainy texture and long life. "All day yesterday I thought it was Friday." He said, "Was it?" She remembered to smile. He said, "What does it matter anyway?" She'd put a hand on his shoulder and then nearly moved it up along the back of his neck and into his hair, caressingly, but hadn't. "I'm only saying. How does it happen that Thursday seems like Friday? We're out of the city. We're off the calendar. Friday shouldn't have an identity here. Who wants more coffee?" She went to pour water for her tea and paused at the stove, waiting for him to say yes or no to coffee. When she started back she saw a blue jay perched atop the feeder. She stopped dead and held her breath. It stood large and polished and looked royally remote from the other birds busy feeding and she could nearly believe she'd never seen a jay before. It stood enormous, looking in at her, seeing whatever it saw, and she wanted to tell Rey to look up. She watched it, black-barred across the wings and tail, and she thought she'd somehow only now learned how to look. She'd never seen a thing so clearly and it was not simply because the jay was posted where it was, close enough for her to note the details of cresting and color. There was also the clean shock of its appearance among the smaller brownish birds, its mineral blue and muted blue and broad dark neckband. But if Rey looked up, the bird would fly. She tried to work past the details to the bird itself, nest thief and skilled mimic, to the fixed interest in those eyes, a kind of inquisitive chill that felt a little like a challenge. When birds look into houses, what impossible worlds they see. Think. What a shedding of every knowable surface and process. She wanted to believe the bird was seeing her, a woman with a teacup in her hand, and never mind the folding back of day and night, the apparition of a space set off from time. She looked and took a careful breath. She was alert to the clarity of the moment but knew it was ending already. She felt it in the blue jay. Or maybe not. She was making it happen herself because she could not look any longer. This must be what it means to

see if you've been near blind all your life. She said something to Rey, who lifted his head slightly, chasing the jay but leaving the sparrows unstartled. "Did you see it?" He half turned to answer. "Don't we see them all the time?" "Not all the time. And never so close." "Never so close. Okay." "It was looking at me." "It was looking at you." She was standing in place, off his left shoulder. When she moved toward her chair the sparrows flew. "It was watching me." "Did it make your day?" "It made my day. My week. What else?" She drank her tea and read. Nearly everything she read sent her into reverie. She turned on the radio and tracked slowly along the dial, reading the paper, trying to find the weather on the radio. He finished his coffee and smoked. She sat over the bowl of cereal. She looked past the bowl into a space inside her head that was also here in front of her. She folded a section of newspaper and read a line or two and read some more or didn't, sipping tea and drifting. The radio reported news about a missile exploding mysteriously, underground, in Montana, and she didn't catch if it was armed or not. He smoked and looked out the window to his right, where an untended meadow tumbled to the rutted dirt road that led to a gravel road. She read and drifted. She was here and there. The tea had no honey in it. She'd left the honey jar unopened by the stove. He looked around for an ashtray. She had a conversation with a doctor in a news story. There were two miles of gravel before you reached the paved road that led to town. She took the fig off his plate and put a finger down into it and reamed around inside for flesh. A voice reported the weather but she missed it. She didn't know it was the weather until it was gone. He eased his head well back and rolled it slowly side to side to lessen the tension in his neck. She sucked the finger on her fig-dipping hand and thought of things they needed from the store. He turned off the radio. She sipped her tea and read. She more or less saw herself talking to a doctor in the bush somewhere, with people hungry in the dust. The cigarette was burning down in his hand. She picked up the soya box and tipped it toward her face and smelled inside. When he walked out of the room, she realized there was something she wanted to tell him. Sometimes she doesn't think of what she wants to say to him until he walks out of whatever room they're in. Then she thinks of it. Then she either calls after him or doesn't and he responds or doesn't. She sat there and finished her tea and thought of what she thought of, memory traces and flary images and a friend she missed and all the shadow-dappled stuff of an undividable moment on a normal morning going crazy in ways so humanly routine you can't even stop and take note except for the Ajax she needs to buy and the birds behind her, rattling the metal frame of the feeder. It's such a stupid thing to do, read the newspaper and eat. She saw him standing in the doorway. "Have you seen my keys?" She said, "What?" He waited for the question to register. "Which keys?" she said. He looked at her. She said, "I bought some lotion yesterday. Which I meant to tell you. It's a muscle rub. It's in a green and white tube on the shelf in the big bathroom upstairs. It's greaseless. It's a muscle rub. Rub it in, my love. Or ask me nice, I'll do it for you." "All my keys are on one ring," he said. She almost said, Is that smart? But then she didn't. Because what a needless thing. Because how petty it would be to say such a thing, in the morning or any time, on a strong bright day after a storm. Copyright 2001 by Don DeLillo