

White Noise

Don Delilo

Excerpt from Chap. 6 of 'White Noise' (1985) - debate between HEINRICH and his father

"It's going to rain tonight."

"It's raining now," I said.

"The radio said tonight."

I drove him to school on his first day back after a sore throat and fever. A woman in a yellow slicker held up traffic to let some children cross. ...

"Look at the windshield," I said. "Is that rain or isn't it?"

"I'm only telling you what they said."

"Just because it's on the radio doesn't mean we have to suspend belief in the evidence of our senses."

"Our senses? Our senses are wrong a lot more often than they're right. This has been proved in the laboratory. Don't you know about all those theorems that say nothing is what it seems? There's no past, present or future outside our own mind. The so-called laws of motion are a big hoax. Even sound can trick the mind. Just because you don't hear a sound doesn't mean it's not out there. Dogs can hear it. Other animals. And I'm sure there are sounds even dogs can't hear. But they exist in the air, in waves. Maybe they never stop. High, high, high-pitched. Coming from somewhere."

"Is it raining," I said, "or isn't it?"

"I wouldn't want to have to say."

"What if someone held a gun to your head?"

"Who, you?"

"Someone. A man in a trenchcoat and smoky glasses. He holds a gun to your head and says, 'Is it raining or isn't it? All you have to do is tell the truth and I'll put away my gun and take the next flight out of here.' "

"What truth does he want? Does he want the truth of someone traveling at almost the speed of light in another galaxy? Does he want the truth of someone in orbit around a neutron star? Maybe if these people could see us through a telescope we might look like we were two feet two inches tall and it might be raining yesterday instead of today."

"He's holding the gun to your head. He wants your truth."

“What good is my truth? My truth means nothing. What if this guy with the gun comes from a planet in a whole different solar system? What we call rain he calls soap. What we call apples he calls rain. So what am I supposed to tell him?”

“His name is Frank J. Smalley and he comes from St. Louis.”

“He wants to know if it’s raining now, at this very minute?”

“Here and now. That’s right.”

“Is there such a thing as now? ‘Now’ comes and goes as soon as you say it. How can I say it’s raining now if your so-called ‘now’ becomes ‘then’ as soon as I say it?”

“You said there was no past, present, or future.”

“Only in our verbs. That’s the only place we find it.”

“Rain is a noun. Is there rain here, in this precise locality, at whatever time within the next two minutes that you choose to respond to the question?”

“If you want to talk about this precise locality while you’re in a vehicle that’s obviously moving, then I think that’s the trouble with this discussion.”

“Just give me an answer, okay, Heinrich?”

“The best I could do is make a guess.”

“Either it’s raining or it isn’t,” I said.

“Exactly. That’s my whole point. You’d be guessing. Six of one, half dozen of the other.”

“But you see it’s raining.”

“You see the sun moving across the sky. But is the sun moving across the sky or is the earth turning?”

“I don’t accept the analogy.”

“You’re so sure that’s rain. How do you know it’s not sulfuric acid from factories across the river? How do you know it’s not fallout from a war in China? You want an answer here and now. Can you prove, here and now, that this stuff is rain? How do I know that what you call rain is really rain? What is rain anyway?”

“It’s the stuff that falls from the sky and gets you what is called wet.”

“I’m not wet. Are you wet?”

“All right,” I said. “Very good.”

“No, seriously, are you wet?”

“First-rate,” I told him. “A victory for uncertainty, randomness and chaos. Science’s finest hour.”

“Be sarcastic.”

“The sophists and the hairsplitters enjoy their finest hour.”

“Go ahead, be sarcastic, I don’t care.”

Hindi Translation Published in SANDARBH issue 159, June-July, 2025

Sandarbh is a bimonthly resource magazine published by Eklavya Foundation