Translated by M. B. DeBevoise, from *Mon zombie et moi. La philosophie comme fiction*, chapitre 1.

1. Losing One's Head

It started out as a dream, a dream that I've mostly forgotten by now. What was it about? I really don't remember any more. Something to do with a war, maybe a revolution, I can't say. An army, in any case, enters a town. I can still see my neighbors at their windows, waving little flags. I refuse to join in. A group of soldiers points to the house where I live. They come through the garden. They ring the bell. I open the door. They're wearing uniforms, the sort you see in children's books—motley, strewn with gold braid. They ask me questions. I mumble in reply, unsure how to answer, and one of them, apparently their leader, says to me: "Very well, we're going to cut off your head."

He grabs me by the hair and draws a huge sword. The blade glints for an instant in the light of the window, and then it is over: I feel my shoulders come apart from my neck and slide slowly to the ground. Strangely, this gives me a feeling of lightness. I have enough time to think: "This isn't painful."

I awaken, and abruptly sit up. I have the sensation of doing this, a very clear sensation, in the muscles of my stomach, even though naturally I don't pay any attention to it at first. I am breathing normally. I look at the ceiling and see the water stains that I know

so well. I feel the way one does after a nightmare, happy to wake up and find that everything is as it used to be. For a few seconds. Until I realize that something is wrong: I'm sitting up in bed, and so I shouldn't have seen the ceiling when I opened my eyes. I should have seen the wall across from me.

Now I notice in front of me an upright torso—back, shoulders, two dangling arms, and the root of a neck. Only the head is missing.

For a moment I wonder where on earth it could be. Then I understand. Perhaps I already knew, even before observing the headless torso. The head—my head, having been separated from my torso—remained lying on the pillow when I sat up.

My first thought: "I'm dreaming, my nightmare isn't over." I wait a few minutes, hoping to wake up and find that my head is once more screwed on tight, as the familiar saying has it, to my shoulders.

It's already morning. Glimmers of light steal through the shutters. My bedroom shows no sign of having been disturbed. I let my shoulders fall back on to the mattress in a single, uninterrupted motion. The springs groan under the weight of their fall. I lie there, as if nothing had happened.

Finally the alarm goes off. I hold my breath and sit up right away. Even before completing this movement I know what is going to happen. It comes as no surprise: I'm still looking at the ceiling. And once again, out of the corner of my eye, I see the same headless torso rising up from under the covers.

The alarm continues to ring. I decide to get up, which is to say to make the body from which I am separated get up. I turn it around so that the legs are hanging over the side of the bed and then, with the help of my arms, I stand up. It is strange, of course, to

see myself standing over the bed, a little like in a mirror. Minus the head, obviously. In any case, I manage to keep my balance. I am acutely aware of the floor beneath the soles of my feet and of the weight of my body. I turn toward the alarm, which I can also see, lying on the pillow, out of the corner of my eye. I raise my right arm and then lower it toward the bedside table. My hand bangs on the wood and immediately flies off, as if my torso had a bird chained to it, and comes to rest at the height of my chest, a little ways away. It seems to be waiting for me to look at it. My hand doesn't know that I've lost my head. I regain control over it. Carefully, I bring it back down to the table. Feeling its way along, it finds the alarm.

Silence returns, the silence of cities that is heard in distant murmurs and the noise of traffic.

My torso awaits my commands, standing over me, the arms dangling like those of a sort of zombie. One might suppose that he is looking at me, with an empty or, more exactly, an absent eye. The awkward thing is that I don't know what to say to him. I can't think—and yet I must. Without really considering the matter, I send him to the living room for a rest. I make him take a few steps. It's not hard, only a matter of putting one foot in front of the other. I follow our progress with my eyes: the movements are hesitant, sometimes faltering, rather like those of a tightrope walker, except for the arms, which hang lifelessly from either side of the body.

What in the world was I thinking? My zombie passes through the doorway and continues into the living room, when suddenly he bumps into the desk, which I can't see from my bed. The sound of my own fall surprises me.

I realize that my hip hurts. The hip that is somewhere on the other side of the wall that divides my bedroom from the living room. Otherwise I feel only a jumble of vague, ill-defined sensations. I don't even know what position I'm in. Probably I'm lying on my back and the painful hip is a few inches above the floor. I stretch my legs and they slam into the desk again. I move my arms and they hit the wall. I turn over on to my stomach. I pull in my arms and legs and carefully try to get up. I reach out with my hands to balance myself against the wall. Leaning on it I gradually make my way back to the bedroom. And there I am once again, except for my head, standing in the doorway. I come back toward the bed.

Certain movements have to be broken down into their component parts. Walking, as I say, is transformed into a series of steps, with one foot being put in front of the other. Nevertheless there are some elementary movements that my body performs by itself. I don't really need to think about planting my foot on the floor, for example.

I find some paper and a pencil on the bedside table, and make my zombie lie down next to me so he can take a few notes on what has happened to me. He tucks his legs under him and rests the notebook on his knees, a bit in front of me, but still I can follow the motion of his hand and read what I've written. It's not as if the zombie is taking dictation—as if I were to utter a sentence in a loud voice, or say it in my head, and he makes a written copy of my words. I really don't think about what I write before writing it, or, more exactly, before he writes it.

Life returns to normal, with its daily routines, to which I gradually become accustomed.

Forward

I make the zombie stand up over the bed. I tilt his chest at an angle of forty-five degrees or so, the arms hanging to the side. With extreme care I bring them toward my face, expecting nonetheless to be slapped. But not at all. I sense contact first in my hand, not on my cheek; the same is true when he touches my hair, my ears, the whiskers of my beard. The zombie lifts me up to his height, holding me at arms' length. I'd be looking him in the eyes, if he had eyes. This is why I have to be turned around in the other direction, facing forward, in order to point out obstacles to him. Maybe without my telling him he knows how to turn around the head he holds in his hands, to rest it against his stomach and then rotate it. I don't know. What I'm afraid of, of course, is that he'll drop me. I therefore have him put me back down, turn my head on the mattress, and then, gropingly, take me once again in his hands. All of this takes some time, since without me he's blind. I feel the bed covers beneath his hands; I hear his hands as well, wandering over them. At last he finds me again, and his hands make their way all the way back up along my face. I can feel the textures of my face, my prickly beard and my skin, which seems warm to his touch; on my face, I can feel his cold fingers.

Left and Right

I have noticed that when I am facing the zombie I confuse his left hand and his right hand, and use one when I mean to use the other. I believe this has to do with the fact that somehow I take him to be my reflection, an image in a mirror, so that when I direct my right hand to make a movement, I assume that his left hand will carry out this instruction. It is at these moments that we are most foreign to each other.

In assuming the existence of a phantom body that serves as an extension of my head, I end up reducing my zombie to nothing more than a reflection of this body. My zombie refuses to go along. He has his own hands, a left hand and a right hand, which respond to my orders but do not limit themselves to mirroring the movements that I imagine my phantom body making. What is more, I feel his pain when he bumps into something: I feel it in his hand or in his hip, as the case may be; I feel his muscles, when he grows tired from carrying me. Most of our movements—the ones we make when he is carrying me with my eyes facing forward (as his own eyes would do, if he had eyes)—are altogether natural. I sometimes forget that I am controlling these movements from a distance.

Shaving

The zombie holds me with his left hand, having positioned me in front of the mirror on a stepladder, chest-high. With his right hand he picks up the electric razor and drags it across my cheeks. Shaving didn't use to be difficult when my head was on his shoulders. I don't know why his movements are now so hurried, so clumsy. He presses the razor

against my face, which means he has to hold me still more firmly with the other hand. Pressure is exerted on my head from two directions, one hand pressing down on the skull, the other on the cheek. One morning the razor slipped in his hand and he just missed cutting my nose. I say "he"—and yet while he is shaving me I feel as though his body were mine, for a few instants anyway.

I'm in his hands, literally. It is from the outside that I consider my head, which is reflected in the mirror. It's bizarre, but despite the pressure of the razor against my cheeks I don't feel as though I'm lodged in my head, facing an anonymous body that I control; I feel as though I'm in his hands, which roam over my face. If I close my eyes, I can imagine that I'm passing the razor over a foreign object, someone else's head—like a barber, a strange, blind barber.

Going Out

We're used to each another by now, my zombie and I. Our movements are assured. We walk almost normally. He holds me in his hands, against his stomach, and I watch us in the mirror.

I have him put on a hat, securely attached to his coat by safety pins. He slips me into an half-open soft-leather briefcase, which he carries on his shoulder, pressing down on it so that the opening always faces forward. With his hat pulled down to his ears, he looks rather like a cartoon detective.

Sometimes a passerby casts a furtive glance in our direction and then looks away. A child points at us and asks his mother: "What's wrong with that man?" But most people pay no attention to us. Then, in a voice that I barely hear, someone inquires: "Do you live around here?"

My mind is on something else. Out of habit, I stop. Smiling, I reply to this unknown person: "Yes."

The man doesn't see my smile, of course, but his eyes are riveted on my zombie's briefcase, from which the voice he heard seemed to come. I hesitate for a moment, and then explain:

"I'm a ventriloquist."

"Ah."

Then the man moves away, having thought better of trying to get the information he sought from us. My zombie and I go back home.

One afternoon, before going out, I notice while putting on my hat that my zombie's neck has gotten longer. There's no question. At first the line of his shoulders was interrupted only by a fold of skin. Now there is a neck—a burgeoning neck, in fact. A neck sprouting a small, wrinkled knob of flesh.

This irregular mass slowly develops. Tiny hairs appear on top, like down; then the first sign of organs, scarcely formed. When my zombie leans toward me, while I am lying on the mantelpiece, I can clearly make out the folds of the eyes, nostrils, lips, and two small outgrowths on either side of the skull that must be ears. There's no question, I'm growing a new head.

My zombie now has a small head above its neck, well shaped, with a button nose and great big eyes, still closed—the head of a baby. It continues to grow. I am impatient.

The eyes remain shut. But the zombie's head is now that of an adult. He looks like my twin brother.

My zombie can almost do without me completely now. He can leave me in the bedroom, comfortably installed on the pillow, and go into the living room without too much trouble. Whereas at first I had to guide him by remote control, as it were, counting his steps after he had passed through the doorway in order to be able to bring him back to the bedroom without bumping into something, my zombie is now able to manage all by himself. Perhaps he counts his steps himself, in his head. Or maybe he's simply gotten used to the room, feels it in his muscles. It doesn't really matter.

I am roused from my reverie by an unusual humming sound. At first I think it's a truck, idling in the street outside. I listen more attentively, with a vague sense of apprehension. But the street is quiet, and the noise is too soft for an engine.

I am alone in the bedroom. My zombie is busy in the kitchen. I call him back, as a precaution. I notice that the noise fades away, then ceases altogether when my zombie enters the bedroom.

I send the zombie back to the kitchen. The sound starts up again, but now I recognize it. It's the sound of the refrigerator, to which my zombie is paying careful attention.

I hardly imagined that the head that has sprouted on his shoulders could begin to function so quickly.

I take a good look at his face. The eyes are closed, the features lifeless, without the least suggestion of intelligence. That reassures me somewhat. I make him pinch his cheek. I can't get used to it: his right hand rises, while I'm looking at his left hand; the right hand pinches his cheek, and I feel the pain right there. I take advantage of the fact that his right hand is still raised to make him pinch my own cheek. These maneuvers, when we're facing each other, are always tricky. I have to mimic, in my head, a movement that my zombie will then actually make. I'm always surprised to see his hand slowly approach, and then land on my cheek. First I feel in his hand the contact with my skin; then, on my skin, I feel his cold hand trying to get hold of a layer of flesh, which it only clumsily succeeds in grasping.

There's no question, these sensations of pain are distinct: one in the cheek of my zombie, the other in mine.

It is therefore only in our ears that we coincide: I hear what he hears as if I heard it myself from my pillow. Other sensations, such as pain, remain in his body. Textures he touches I feel in his hands, not mine. Even so, I cannot prevent myself from imagining that my head has its own body, an invisible, phantom body having no solidity or weight or any of the other properties associated with a physical body; but when my zombie touches a table, for example, I sense the texture of the wood in his hand, not in these imaginary hands that I imagine myself to have.

Similarly, when my zombie eats—now that he has a head with a mouth I am obliged to feed him—I sense the food go down his throat, and I register their flavors in his mouth. I don't usually think about it. I concentrate on my own mouth. Still, I have to go through the motions of chewing in my own mouth so that my zombie can reproduce them in his. I know, I feel, that my mouth is empty. And yet I hear in my mouth the sounds of a mouth full of food, chewing noises, the noises of foods that aren't there being crushed between my teeth.

I wonder sometimes at night what he thinks about in that brand new head of his. I go on making him lie down next to me on the bed. It's more comfortable for him that way. He seems to fall asleep the moment I put him to bed, and I take advantage of these hours of solitude to think. From time to time I sense that my zombie is searching for another position. I turn him over and he seems to fall back to sleep right away.

Eventually I fall asleep myself, in the early hours of the morning.

I open my eyes and see two images. At first I think it's because I'm tired. I see the ceiling from two different angles. The images overlap, as if each one were struggling to impose itself on the other. I cover my eyes with my hand, which is to say that my zombie covers his eyes with his hand and I cover mine with a transparent hand. Then I try to get up, to make my zombie get up. I immediately feel dizzy. Suddenly I see two more incoherent images: my zombie reaching out with his arm, as though to keep himself from falling over, and at the same time my head resting on the bed. I close my eyes, the

dizziness goes away. The last images come back to my mind—with one incongruous detail I hadn't noticed at first. Now it all makes sense. My zombie's eyes are open.

I open—I mean, we open our eyes again. We look at each other. The sensation of dizziness returns at once. There is an incessant oscillation between two images: my zombie looking at me, unsteady on his feet, and my own head lying on the pillow.

I close my eyes. What to do? If I open my eyes, my zombie opens his as well. The clashing images prevent me from seeing anything clearly. For all intents and purposes, then, we are both blind.

I sense my zombie standing at the foot of the bed, waiting. He's hungry. Obviously he's always been blind; that doesn't bother him. I send him to the kitchen to make breakfast for himself while I decide what to do.

From experience I know the number of steps needed to reach the doorway leading out from the bedroom. A quarter turn to the right and I cross the living room, following the wall with my hand. I realize that it's much easier to get my bearings in the apartment when I close the eyes in my head.

Everything is much easier, in fact. With my eyes closed, I feel as though I've regained my rightful place in my zombie's body: walking with my own feet, feeling my way along with my own hands, and above all eating food in my own mouth. After all these days of being separated from myself, I find it quite agreeable.

I'm no longer reminded of the head in the bedroom. From now on I'll eat breakfast with my eyes closed, that's all there is to it. In the dark.

Suddenly, it dawns on me: all I have to do is get rid of my head—for example, by tucking it away in a closet, in complete darkness, where it will see nothing, where it

won't bother me. Where it will even let me look at the world, now that my eyes are open once more. I come back into the bedroom and find the head lying on the pillow. Probably it knows what I have in mind, but it doesn't object; at least it doesn't say anything. Still feeling my way along, I put it on a pile of clothes in the closet and carefully close the door.

Then I open my eyes. The morning light streams into the bedroom through the shutters. It will be a fine fall day, filled with sun. The head in the closet can brood all it likes. I shall end up forgetting about it.

2. "I Am in My Body"

The proposition that I am in my body has been taken to be obviously true by phenomenologists, and by Merleau-Ponty in particular. For this very reason, because I am in my body and not anywhere else, my body is never an object for me. A thing, such as a cube that I hold in my hand, is capable of being contemplated in all of its aspects. I rotate a die before my eyes and count the different faces: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6. There is no doubt that I have seen all of them. I may take a closer look, examining one of its faces with a magnifying glass; or I may hold the object further away in order to take in its overall appearance. The analysis of a thing may be infinite, but it has no limit. A thing can be entirely objectified, whereas my body cannot be. The reason for this is simply that I cannot observe my body from outside: I cannot rotate it in front of me, or walk around it, in order to consider it in its totality. My body therefore can never be regarded as a

thing: “In so far as it stands before me and presents its systematic variations to the observer, the external object lends itself to a cursory mental examination of its elements and it may, at least by way of preliminary approximation, be defined in terms of the law of their variation. But *I am not in front of my body, I am in it, or rather I am it. . . . [O]ur body is not an object. . . .”*[1]

The fact of being in my body implies a certain inadequacy, or lack of completeness, in its constitution, a gap that is altogether different from the incompletion encountered in observing of a thing.

There are some things, it is true, that we cannot walk around—and this for logical reasons, not only because they are too large. Consider a rainbow, for example. For a rainbow to appear in front of me, the sun must be in back of me. If I were to try to go around a rainbow, it would vanish. Or take the wind. We cannot get behind the wind. In relation to such natural phenomena, which are perhaps not wholly objectifiable, the body nevertheless manages to preserve its own identity. My body accompanies me, so to speak. One can almost imagine, at least if one is not a physicist, passing beneath a rainbow and looking at it against the light, covering the eyes with one hand to protect them from the sun.

But can one imagine being separated from one’s body, leaving it and moving around it? Certain narcotics—morphine, for example—seem to give the impression of rising toward the ceiling and observing one’s own body from above. And yet if one can see one’s own body, it must be because one still possesses something like eyes. Vision operates from a certain vantage point, located in this case at the level of the ceiling; a

---

[1] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception,* trans. Colin Smith (New York: Humanities Press, 1962), 150, 153. The emphasis is mine.

point of view that is mobile, free to wander around the room. Inescapably, however, vision takes place in a pair of eyes—transparent and insubstantial eyes, a minimal form of embodiment that nonetheless constitutes a body, a new body, with which one contemplates the body that one has left. If the body stretched out on the bed is in fact reduced to a mere thing, this means that one has assumed another body, provided oneself with other eyes through which the abandoned body can be objectified.

The simplest way to observe my body in this manner, from the outside, would be to use a mirror. I could build myself a little room whose walls are entirely made of mirrors, not unlike a fun house at an amusement park, in which I would be reflected. I could look at myself from the front, from the side, and from the back, but only in succession, looking in turn in each of the mirrors, one after the other. And yet the very succession of these images, their spacing, leaves gaps in the objectification of my body. By not seeing a part of the movement by which I pass from one image to the other, I fail to perceive the connectedness of these images as aspects of my body. Since I catch only successive, separate glimpses of my body, I fail to apprehend its physical continuity. I fail to grasp the unity that makes an object an object, which I immediately grasp in looking at something from the outside. A circular mirror would present to view only a single image; what is more, it would present a deformed image. There is no getting around it: I am not in front of my body, I am in my body; and so my body cannot become an object for me. It is this phenomenon of embodiment in natural life, Merleau-Ponty contends, this state of being in a body that distinguishes my body from a thing.

The problem is that Merleau-Ponty's head was firmly attached to his shoulders; mine is tucked away in a closet. If I cannot imagine not having a body, still less can I

imagine having a body of another kind, or one that possesses other characteristics. And yet one can imagine, under certain conditions, occupying a discontinuous body consisting of a number of distinct parts. The narrator of Olaf Stapledon's novel *Star Maker* (1937), for example, is embodied as a flock of birds, a multitude whose movements respond to one another.

Let us imagine, then, that I hold my head in my hands, facing me, separated from the rest of my body. I gently massage it and it looks at me: my head seems to be objectified by my touching it, while the rest of my body seems to be objectified by my looking at it. I can now circle around my own body, or make it revolve before my eyes, like a mannequin. Is this to say that my body—my body with its two parts, one that I touch with my hands and another that I inspect by sight—has been changed into an object? Certainly not. What is it, then, that prohibits it from being objectified? Does objectification fail in this case because I am still "in my body"? But exactly in what sense, then, and more to the point, *where* am I in my body if it is composed of a head and trunk that are separate?

In order to grasp what is essential about this state of affairs, about the condition of being in my body, we must consider the range of possible human embodiments with a view to isolating those features that are common to any particular instance. In this way we may hope to be able to answer what seems to me to be the most fundamental question of all: in what sense can *I* be said to be in my body?

Translated by M. B. DeBevoise