

Phantom

by Marc Lowe

I am in the hallway, but I don't sense it. That is to say: I don't feel my body. I am like a phantom, a limbless entity floating, flailing. And now there's my head. I watch it go by on the video monitor (where they are watching me). It does not see me, does not look at me. Its eyes are concentrating on the path of its trajectory. It needs its eyes to guide itself, otherwise it will forget that it exists. This is what the doctor has told me. He has labeled it "a loss of proprioception," which means that the body does not have the means to perceive itself, or something like that. Phantom limb, phantom body. The doctor does not understand how this condition might have arisen. He has never seen such an anomalous "sickness" in any of his patients before, only read about it in a medical journal. Who is this doctor? And what can he do to help? He seems to be grasping at illusory straws. No advice for me. No clue what to do. No help at all. The body—*my* body—can hardly keep from falling over itself. Without the eyes, it is helpless. Put a blindfold over these eyes and the body crumbles to the floor like a sack of squid. These hands, puddy-like; these feet, two unfeeling lumps of flesh. Limbs that have no control over themselves; a torso that is hollow. Am I a straw man? What is the point of living in this state of limbo?

The body walks, unsteady, unaware of its own existence. It can only recognize itself when it peers into a mirror, views itself on a plasma screen. I am in the hallway, this much is clear. My eyes...my eyes focus on every movement, every step in *their* direction. They are behind the glass; I see them (my vision, perhaps in compensation for my lack of sensation, is superior). They think I don't know, or don't care. The glass is tinted black, but beyond the glare I can see the outline of bodies. There goes my head on the monitor again, swaying on a gelatinous neck that only exists as an image, a reflection, an afterthought. It only has eyes for itself. The body moves forward, awkward, unaware of its awkwardness (the eyes are aware, but they are too concentrated on their effort to

move the body to judge). What would happen if the body were to fall into the glass? Would the glass shatter first, or would the body?

The doctor does not know what to do. He shakes his head, opens his mouth, closes it. He is perplexed, dumbfounded by this enigma before him. He can only refer to his notes, which are as useless as this body without eyes. We talk in the cramped office. He performs various tests, all of which I fail. He has me close my eyes, watches me tumble to the floor, takes more notes. I don't feel a thing. The exercise is useless. Intrinsically. And yet we continue like this for months and months. Why should I care? I am just an empty vessel, an afterimage of what I once was (or was I once?). By all rights I should kill myself. What keeps me alive? Hope? No. What, then. Pride? Fear? Perhaps. Could the eyes ever will the body to suicide? It would take a great deal of effort, without a doubt. But would death be preferable, or simply comparable, to this state of disembodiedness? Would it bring me peace and stillness, or simply more struggle, more senseless discomfort? Plato, writing as Socrates, believed that death was *a priori* preferable to living, because, by his way of thinking, it would either be like a deep, undisturbed slumber, or like a party where one would be able to converse with great historical figures who had died. Did either Plato or Socrates have any idea, though, of what it's like to have a lack of proprioception? to live inside a body without awareness of itself? Could this not be the fate of all who die, once the consciousness leaves its shell? How is a man to know whether the world ends with a bang or with a whimper? The doctor doesn't have any clue, that's for sure. He doesn't know what to do with me, other than to capture me on video and to observe. They all observe, just as that head of mine observes the simulacrum of itself, the only proof that it *is*.

I take a step, and then a step, the eyes leading, trailblazing. I am in the hallway, approaching the blackened glass; I see myself in the monitor. To call this non-entity "I" is misleading, but it is the only way that this narrator can justify his own existence (so please allow him this freedom). The body swaggers and sways, as if drunk, approaching the men who hide behind the glass with their useless

notepads, their spastic pencils, their searching eyes (there are no eyes here). In a moment everything goes dark; the body has disappeared. Have I entered the black glass, or is this another realm entirely? The doctor's voice rings out in a tone I have not heard before. Panic. A stain on the floor I cannot see but intuit. The jumbled voices of the others, sound of pencil tips scratching away, pressing into their presumed pads of paper. Then a phantom silence. My head is on the monitor, looking, staring, trying to locate something it has lost, perhaps forever.

