

## Chapter 2 - The Blue Room

Miss "W" said, "I was terribly fatigued, working as a waitress ... and lost the last bus. ... The next I registered ... I looked down and watched myself walk round the bend of Beaumont Street into Walton Street. ... The bit of me that 'counts' was up on a level with Worcester College chapel."

(Robert Crookall, *Case-Book of Astral Projection*)<sup>1</sup>

I close my eyes and cross the room to the table. On the table lies a large piece of meat. With my left arm I reach out and feel the meat. It is warm, textured, rubbery and slightly sticky with blood. I pick the meat up. It is heavy and pulls my arm towards the ground. With my eyes still closed I reach out with my right arm. I can feel nothing there: the piece of meat has vanished and so has the table. My right hand moves about freely in empty space where the table and meat were present only a moment before. I allow my right arm to fall by my side and reach out again with my left arm. Now the meat and table have returned. Once again I palpitate textured flesh between my fingers; once again I encounter an area in the world that resists my grasp. I open my eyes. A piece of meat oozes gently onto the white table in front of me. I look at my left hand. It is pink and opaque; it obscures the objects behind it. Within the visual form of my left hand I experience the sensations of my left hand. These are initially very diffuse, but by concentrating I can focus on the feeling in each finger. When I wiggle the fingers of my left hand I see a pink form wiggling in space in front of me. Now I gaze at my right hand. My right hand is transparent: it does not obscure the objects behind it. I experience my right hand within a diffuse hand shaped zone in front of me. By concentrating, I can feel the sensations in each finger. When I wiggle the fingers of my right hand I do not see anything happening in the world in front of me, but I can still feel my fingers wiggling.

My left arm is visible between my shoulder and my left hand. My right arm becomes invisible about ten centimetres from my shoulder. The visible part of my right arm emerges from my shoulder and terminates in a stump. The transparent part of my right arm extends from the stump to my transparent hand.

The most extraordinary feature of phantoms is their reality to the amputee. Their vivid sensory qualities and precise location in space - especially at first - make the limbs seem so lifelike that a patient may try to step off a bed onto a phantom foot or lift a cup with a phantom hand. The phantom, in fact, may seem more substantial than an actual limb, particularly if it hurts.

(Ronald Melzack, 'Phantom Limbs')<sup>2</sup>

When people lose a real physical limb they often continue to experience a vivid phantom.<sup>3</sup> In many cases patients are able to move their phantom limb in the same way that they could before the amputation, although the phantom is no longer capable of interacting with objects. Phantom limbs are often painful and many attempts have been made to remove them, including cutting nerves within the stump and spinal cord and removing the parts of the cortex that receive input from the missing limb. None of these techniques has been entirely successful, which suggests that phantom limbs are linked to brain activation distributed across a number of different areas. According to Ronald Melzack, these are likely to include the somatosensory cortex, thalamus, reticular formation, limbic system and the parietal lobe along with other cortical regions linked to the recognition of the self.<sup>4</sup>

We experience phantom limbs when groups of neurons are firing in our brains. However, if phantoms “may feel more substantial than an actual limb”, then it seems very

likely that the limbs that we experience every day are *also* phantoms generated inside our brains. When we lose a limb, our mind does not *create* a phantom because it cannot accept the loss - we just *continue to experience the presence of our limb in the same way that we did before*. The mind does not spread itself out over real limbs, and then ‘push’ out shadowy phantoms from mutilated stumps: our limb experiences are already phantoms that lose their ability to interact with physical objects when amputation deprives us of appropriate feedback from real arms and legs. However, it is not just our limbs that are phantoms, but our body, neck and head as well. Feet, hands, chest, back, nose, scalp and eyes are all fed in as pulsing sense data and ‘pushed’ out into the three-dimensional phantom body that we inhabit in our day to day lives.

Mr. Chapple of Halstead, said: "I was in the Exeter hospital ... and was talking to my neighbour when he just collapsed and died. The shock gave me a heart attack, and screens were put round both of our beds. The sister and nurse came to see me, and I was floating in the air above myself, and could see all that was happening - the doctor arrived and spoke to the sister; she went away and brought back an injection, which she gave me. As soon as I received it, I knew no more, and when I awoke next morning, I remembered all that had happened, and the sister confirmed what I had seen.

"The next night, at 3 a.m., I had another attack. The same thing happened; once again I found myself floating just under the ceiling and looking down on myself on the bed. I felt no pain and was just idly curious ... The night-sister attended me and I told her to hold me down as I was floating in the air. I suppose, to humour me, she did so, but called a nurse to hold me while she went away to get an injection. The same thing happened as in the first time - as soon as I received the injection, I knew no more."

(Robert Crookall, *Case-Book of Astral Projection*)<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert Crookall, *Case-Book of Astral Projection, 545-746* (New Jersey: Citadel Press, 1980), p. 63. I have taken out Crookall's additions in square brackets.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Melzack, 'Phantom Limbs', *Scientific American*, April 1992; p. 90.

<sup>3</sup> Approximately twenty percent of people born with missing limbs also experience phantoms. See R. Melzack, R. Israel, R. Lacroix and G. Schultz, 'Phantom Limbs in people with congenital limb deficiency or amputation in early childhood', *Brain* 120 (9), 1997, pp. 1603-20.

<sup>4</sup> Ronald Melzack, 'Phantom Limbs', *Scientific American*, April 1992; p. 90.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Crookall, *Case-Book of Astral Projection, 545-746* (New Jersey: Citadel Press, 1980), p. 34. I have taken out Crookall's additions in square brackets.