

I is another.

A man is locked-in inside the body he formerly took for granted. Once, with this body, he would have felt a cool breeze prickling pink along his cheeks in winter. Without thinking, he could have let the soles of his feet mould to the shifting surface of a sun-warmed pebble beach in summer. In autumn, as he trod Paris's pavements, the ambient sound of fallen leaves underfoot would have joined other unremarkable outside urban noises—sirens, car horns, the urgent cries of strangers. Every morning he sipped hot chocolate and licked the sweet milk-moustache from his upper lip as he had done since childhood.

Before, inside the body he moved with, the body he smelt, tasted and touched with, the body he desired with, became angry or felt relieved with, the body he loved with, the man lived his life to a metric rhythm. Each experience had its own time signature. He grew. He learned to walk and then to run. Perhaps he learned to whistle. He moved from adolescence into adulthood. He ate boeuf en gelée and apricot pie. He drank late-vintage Gewurztraminer. He laughed. He married and fathered children. He read Zola and Chateaubriand. He raised his voice. He worked. He went to the theatre. He changed jobs. He separated from his wife. He visited his children. He whispered. Another lover warmed him while he slept.

After, locked-in, able to blink and turn his head slightly but not to taste or touch, not to laugh, never to speak, the metronome's pendulous upper weight seemed to catch. And life's time signature stalled with it. Now, there were two tempi only: one for the body, another for the mind. One for the physical, the public I, another for the I that is thought, the I of memory and imagination.

This does not mean nothing.

Patroller ants are the first to leave the nest. They take the lie of the land and search for a source of food that is uncontested by another ant colony. If they find one, they leave a chemical trail from it back to the nest. The patrollers' return signals to the forager ants that it's safe for them to leave. The direction from which the patrollers re-enter the nest, signals the direction in which the foragers should travel out. The foragers pick up the chemical trail and follow it to the food source. Each ant collects a crumb, returns with it to the nest where it deposits it and goes out again. Antennae to the ground, the forager follows the patrollers' chemical trail, collects another crumb, returns with it to the nest deposits it, and leaves the nest again.

Each round trip can take up to twenty minutes. On an average day, presented with an average food source, laden foragers will re-enter the nest at intervals of ten seconds, which is equivalent to the memory span of an individual ant. If they enter the nest more frequently, this indicates that the food supply is large and more ants will leave the nest to assist; less frequently and this indicates a food supply that is less rewarding.

If the patroller ants fail to return to the nest, some forager ants may eventually leave in search of food, despite the possibility of danger. In this case, the foragers will use the previous day's trail as a guide to yesterday's food source. An ant's memory span is ten seconds, but a colony's is longer. An individual ant lives for twelve months but a colony can live up to twenty years. And as a colony ages, its behaviour changes and matures. It learns from experience.

Like the muscle memory that enables a body to 'remember' how to walk, how to breath, how to form words with the lips and the tongue against the palette and the teeth, a colony's body memory allows it to operate without a leader, without a hierarchy that dictates its behaviour. Instead, the colony responds to patterns—the safe and timely return of patroller ants, the rate at which forager ants re-enter the nest—that alter according to the environment.

The pattern is the message.

Jean-Dominique Bauby suffered a massive stroke that left him with locked-in syndrome. The stroke upset his brain-stem which, in a healthy body, translates the flow of messages sent by the brain, down the spine and throughout the nervous system. When the brain-stem ceases to function, the mind and body become irredeemably separated from one another. The mind continues to think and remember but the brain can no longer inspire the body to action. The mind can desire, it can imagine a future, but these are desires, and this is a future, which the body will never enact.

Unlike most other sufferers of locked-in syndrome who are completely paralysed, Bauby retained some movement in his neck as well as the use of his left eye. Under instruction from a speech therapist, he learned to communicate with the outside world by blinking. A willing visitor, doctor, nurse or publishing assistant—a willing *reader*—would recite the alphabet according to the frequency of letters as they occur in French (E S A R I N T U L O M D P C F B V H G J Q Z Y X K W) and Bauby would blink at the letter he required. Slowly, from this alphabetic pattern a message would emerge.

We learn to speak before we learn to write. And every time we speak we reveal something of ourselves: by our accent, our intonation, our formal use of language or the many ways we improvise with it. Change the way you speak to the world and the world changes the way it responds to you. The rhythms of spoken language—with its personal topography, its individual quirks, its muddled syntaxes—often change in the translation from the tongue to the page. The voice we write with is rarely the voice we speak with.

The breakdown (collapse) of Bauby's body resulted in a breakdown (deconstruction) of language for him. He continued to think in words, and to describe his thoughts, memories and desires in sentences. But he articulated these descriptions to others via individual letters. He built each image, for his participant-reader, from the ground

up. Speech lost its carefree rhythms, its off-the-cuff remarks, most of its jokes. It became laborious, an effort to make the eyes water. An average word took five minutes to dictate. Each word—each letter—had to be precise and purposeful. Bauby's 'speech', no longer spoken, had become elemental.

I

'i' is an element. A dot and a dash. One letter that contains a universe.

'i' is a colony.

'i' is a living mind and a remembered self.

'i' is the eye that lets out what is locked-in.

'i' is a translation.

'i' is another.

Sources

The above essay draws upon a number of sources. The titles of the first two sections are taken from Arthur Rimbaud's Voyant letters: the first from his letter to Paul Demeny dated 15 May, 1871; the second from his letter to Georges Izambard dated 13 May, 1871. The title of the third section is taken from a talk given by ant biologist Deborah M. Gordon, available at www.ted.com/talks/deborah_gordon_digs_ants.html. This discussion about ants is based upon Gordon's research into harvester ant colonies, in particular her recent book *Ant Encounters: Interaction Networks and Colony Behavior*, Princeton University Press (2010) and a conversation between her and Russ Roberts for the Library of Economics and Liberty (available at www.econtalk.org/archives/2007/08/gordon_on_ants.html). The title of the fourth section is taken from Jeremy Bakker's wonderful series of photographs, *i*. The discussion of Jean-Dominique Bauby was inspired by his book *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly*.

Finally, and most importantly, this essay emerged from a series of conversations I had with Jeremy Bakker. In his letter to Georges Izambard, Rimbaud states: 'It is wrong to say: I think. One ought to say: I am thought.' This essay was thought through those conversations.

Anna MacDonald writes about spatial poetics and the topographical imagination. She has published numerous essays on W.G. Sebald, Gaston Bachelard, and contemporary artists including Susan Norrie, Cindy Sherman, and Jenny Holzer. Her short stories have appeared in international anthologies and she is currently writing a novel. Anna is a Research Associate at Monash University and bookseller at Melbourne's Paperback Bookshop.