



Source: Brian Whitaker, 'Defiant Hezbollah claims victory', *Guardian in The Age online*, 24/09/06.

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It has been suggested that when something is not seen, it does not exist. Scientists and theologians may argue this point at length, but the man with whom this story is concerned, a politician of considerable rank, experienced this phenomenon directly, profoundly, tragically.

He lived in a part of the world that was divided into two equal halves by a wide, deep canal bordered by high levies. Despite being linked by a heritage that reached back well before the canal was constructed, the two sides lived in parallel and tolerated each other with bristling civility. One half, the Left Land, known for its rich soil, was under the rule of a suspicious, untrusting man about whom little is now known.

The other half, the Right Land was founded on poorer soil and was ruled by our politician. A man of ignoble birth in a poor land, he had worked hard to attain his position and harder still to create for his people a modern city that only increased in prosperity. With this success to his name, a contented populous and years of uncontested rule, the politician had grown fat with self-importance. The people themselves were so concerned with their respective industries—each working at a profit—that there was little need for change. Instead, they went about their daily routines; from house to train, from train to tunnel, from tunnel to escalator, from escalator to office and then all the way back again until eventually each was tucked up to the chin under crisp white sheets, asleep.

To the outsider watching this daily choreography, this land would have looked like a patchwork of clever infrastructure, well-lit, well-designed, well-executed: a landscape of clean, economical lines and solid, reliable masses working on the horizontal and the vertical. And amongst it, crowds of heads bobbing up and down, traversing the spaces that had been thoughtfully marked out for them. Bodies were obscured by trains, by bus shelters, by dense overcoats, railings, partitions and walls, but that was okay because the heads remained, and the heads were all they needed. Perhaps a few citizens of this land noticed what was happening to them, but by then it was probably far too late.

Certainly by the time the politician was alerted to the problem, the population was very far-gone. People were beginning to disappear, from the feet up.

The first to go was a male accountant working in the dead centre of the city, who woke up one day to find that he had no lower half of his body. According to reports, he had been busy the day before and hadn't noticed the absence of his feet. The accountant was gone within the week. But thereafter the phenomenon was indiscriminate, affecting everyone irrespective of age, gender or medical history. Within the first month, five hundred citizens were lost, within the first six months, whole blocks of the city were deserted. With each victim

the symptoms were the same; first the feet went, then the torso, then the neck and finally the head, the mouth twisted and screaming until eventually it too disappeared.

By the following spring, the city was at crisis point. The politician, on the recommendation of his advisors, devised a revolutionary technology in the form of an armoured suit for the preservation of his body, the most precious commodity of the state. He wore it at all times and with only his head visible above its silver collar, he would make his daily addresses to his dwindling constituency from the steps of city hall.

But no amount of impassioned speeches would help. With the suit too expensive for mass production, and no other cure available, the politician watched helplessly as one by one the citizens of his city disappeared till even his advisors were gone. Eventually the politician found that he was alone, in an echoing city of edges, planes and angles.

The politician sat gloomily for months in his offices, staring across the canal to the Left Land beyond. He watched as its citizens moved from house to train, train to escalator, escalator to buildings and back again, their heads bobbing up and down amongst the giant infrastructure. At last, galvanised by a sense of foreboding, he started to work. Using the bones of the city he helped build, he began to make thousands of suits of armour. Day and night for years on end he laboured, until the city had been dismantled and in its place, was a silent headless army, as though waiting at attention to be discharged.

One day, when he could work no more, the politician, now old and broken from years of hard labour, piled his thousands of armoured suits onto a barge and set sail across the canal towards the Left Land. When he had reached the half way point he waved a white flag which, unfortunately, only served to arouse the suspicions of the ruler of the Left Land. Suspicion turned to fear as the ruler was blinded by the sun bouncing off all the armour arrayed behind the politician.

Maps were hastily drawn, artillery was raised, and the citizens of the Left Land were told to wait indoors, crouching, until further notice. As the barge drew nearer, thousands of soldiers all aimed at the head of the old politician. And when the boat rocked underneath him with the incoming tide, the old man stumbled under the weight of his heavy armour. The ruler of the Left Land panicked and commanded his troops to shoot into the water where the politician lay flailing. His head bobbed above the water line for just a moment until it too sank from view into the muddy waters of the canal.

*Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Kate McCartney.*