rainy sea

by Keith Mitnick

prologue

rainy sea is the story of a man who travels back to the island where he grew up for the first time in many years to look for his two sisters, one of whom has suffered a nervous breakdown, and the other who has disappeared completely. As he encounters the various sites, buildings and landscapes that defined his childhood, he is overwhelmed by a recurring
sense that not only is the setting different from the way he remembers it, but that the island itself had been constructed to make it difficult to recall anything that happened there.
As his inability to reconcile his own past with the island's geography surmounts, he visits the house where he grew up in where he discovers his mother's long missing secret suitcase

What if someone were to write a history of unnoticed things? It would be comprised of everything no one has bothered to think about and the actions of people no one has cared to remember. Unlike the historical figures and events that have managed to appear, the trail of the unnoticed would lead into unexplored areas of otherwise known circumstances. Like the raised contours used to map topography in an atlas for the blind, the history of the unnoticed would allow us to sense what we have not seen and to experience ourselves not seeing it.

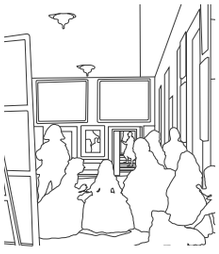
And what if this history was written from the perspective of a man whose participation in the circumstances presented required him to erase his involvement in them? The author's invisibility would need to be constructed to convey his point of view without compromising his un-see-ability. Such a narrator would lack all defining coordinates: no singular achievements, job titles, medical deficiencies, education, criminal record, hair color, unemployment checks, records of divorce, failures, or triumphs. He couldn't really speak as himself either, as his manner of doing so would reveal too much. He would need to communicate like a mannequin on the lap of an unseen ventriloquist.

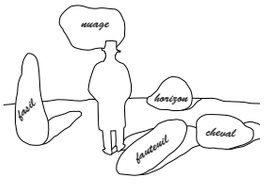
I was born with two hearts: one that pumps blood through my body and the other that meddles heedlessly in the affairs of my life. I have felt myself doubled and divided, like an actor playing multiple roles simultaneously or two people inhabiting a single body. Growing up, the walls of my room were covered with images of people being drawn and quartered. I was fascinated by the paradoxical expression of agonized calm on the faces of the soon-to-be dismembered victims the moment before the horses to which they were tied ran off in opposite directions.

For as long as I can remember, I have been fascinated by double-meanings, reverse logic, and things disguised to appear other than they are, like party walls that make two buildings out of one and twin cities that allow the same place to exist in two locations at once. I'm fascinated by duplicity in human behavior as well, like funny people who never laugh, and angry people who smile all the time to hide how pissed off they really feel. I love watching tv interviews with famous actors who play characters smarter than themselves in their films. Listening to them speak as themselves is like hearing a dumber version of the people they play in the movies.

I collect images in which the logic of communication is put at odds with what it is used to communicate, like rational diagrams of irrational acts and photographs that make real things

look fake. Among my favorites are ones that take ordinary things like clouds, sofas, people, and pets, and arrange them in unusual ways, like Velasquez's Las Meninas, a painting of the Spanish royal family, whose subject was supposed to be the King and the Queen but ended up being Velasquez; or Magritte's Apparition, an image in which names, shapes, and positions have been scrambled to show how spatial relations define things. In Apparition a "cloud" hangs appropriately in the sky and the "horizon" is predictably horizontal, but a floppy "horse" and a freestanding "rifle" are randomly suspended in the foreground, making sense as words but not as things. In Las Meninas, the King and Queen were reflected in a tiny mirror in the middle of the canvas while Velasquez, off to the side, is nevertheless the center of the painting.

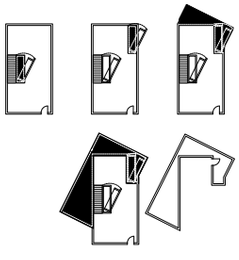




As a child, I had a collection of pictures called "impossible views" that included a time lapse photo of a young girl looking in opposite directions simultaneously and a blurred picture that put two faces on a condemned man writhing in an electric chair without indicating which was which. My all-time favorite in this group was one of my Uncle Norman, wasted at a family wedding, trying to not look wasted by acting conspicuously normal, which was far more interesting than any image I had of him sober.

Unnoticeable things are not necessarily harder to see but, because they slip past the usual logic with which we look for things, they are difficult to account for. Secret tunnels and camouflaged ships are not unnoticeable, they are hidden. Nameless colors, amorphous spaces, and generic buildings are instead hard to identify.

In the same way that a person with a drinking problem believes they need one more drink to get up the courage to quit drinking forever or a workaholic tells herself that she will stop working once she accomplishes everything she needs to accomplish, I looked for clarity in my own confused life by collecting distorted representations of the lives of others. It bothered me that other people's view of the world might make more sense to them than mine did to me. Since I couldn't change my own, I looked for ways to discredit theirs.



Though my preoccupation with conflicted images was for a time all-consuming, my interests soon switched from pictures to actual space—like the gardens in Paris designed to look like paintings of empty fields, with grass you could look at but not walk on. My favorites included a full-scale apartment building in Manhattan whose greedy owner had built each apartment at ¾ scale in order to fit twelve units in a building sized for nine and the hidden rooms devised by Russian peasants at the turn of the century to hide things from the police, who would regularly search their homes. Because the rooms hid things from sight, they came to symbolize an "invisible realm" where people could do things without worrying about their consequences. Even after the police raids decreased, the desire for more invisible realm increased and the hidden rooms that had once been concealed within people's homes began to appear on their outsides as well until, eventually, hidden room properties were extended to entire

buildings.

The day I read about the Ise Shrine in Japan, where two versions of the same building were constructed on opposite sides of a single site, was the day I decided to become an architect. On one half the structure was put together and on the other it was taken apart. I read all about the shrine's history and how the ritual was repeated every twenty years, but all that really mattered to me was that the same thing existed in two places.

I like it when different types of spatial logic interfere with one another in ways that shouldn't make sense but do—like a child's drawing of a tiny house surrounded by giant flowers with a see-thru mommy and a headless daddy floating off the page, or an exhibit I saw recently at a museum that had Thomas Edison's Last Breath, obtained by Edison's son on his father's deathbed, displayed in a glass test tube next to the black limousine that jfk was assassinated in. The invisible air in the test tube and the bullet holes in the car made the circumstances of the two deaths equally tangible, though the bullet hole was real, and the test tube breath was not.

For a long time I believed that discrepancies between the logic of real and imaginary things were accidental, but more recently I've come to think that we pretend to believe in things that we don't in order to get what we want without having to admit that we want it—like the black performers who were forced to "impersonate" themselves onstage by wearing blackface in "all-white" theaters or the brown paper bags that make it legal to get drunk in public by hiding the alcohol in a way that lets everyone know what it is. This technique of blocking things out without eliminating them from view is particularly strange when, like the culture of hidden rooms, people behave as though their logic makes sense.

I used to wear a glow-in-the-dark skeleton suit every day until it either wore out or my mother destroyed it because she got tired of seeing it. I loved what it did to my appearance and would stare at myself for hours in the mirror making my body appear and disappear with a flip of the light switch. I wore the suit so much that people couldn't recognize me without it. Even those who didn't like me went along with the new identity, as though it made my weirdness more comprehensible to them. Beneath the skeleton suit I wore a second suit that was invisible and "bomb proof," and protected me from what was happening in my life. At first I would take it on and off and leave it behind when I was alone, but eventually it became a permanent part of my body.

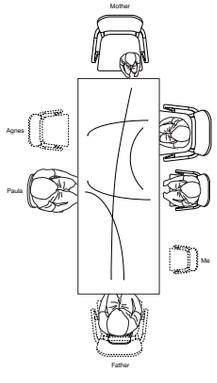
My suits allowed me to tune in and tune out of reality like stations on the radio, until my sense of what was going on corresponded to my ability to cope with it. If I needed to be invisible, I would become the skeleton, and if I wanted to reach out to someone, I would show him that the blacked out areas of my body were as much "me" as the image sewn upon it. When I felt anxious, afraid, or overwhelmed, I retreated into the heavy padding of the second suit that made the bad things happening up close feel muffled and far away. After a while, my inability to tell the difference between real things and my distorted views of them made me wonder if I had acquired something of a "reality" problem from too much time in the suits. I filtered my experience of the outside world through the logic of the rules I had created to

protect myself from it, even when they made absolutely no sense—like the stitching on the black parts of my skeleton suit that contradicted its message of invisibility.

I saw two photographs in the newspaper of a schoolhouse in Pennsylvania where five Amish children had been murdered. The first showed the building boarded up and surrounded by police and the second showed the place where the building had stood the morning after the Amish tore it down in the night. The image of the freshly plowed earth created an eerie erasure-effect that abstracted the event in the very place where it had occurred. In a similar way, but with opposite intentions, the administrators at Kent State University built a large featureless building on the spot where the National Guard had killed four unarmed protestors in 1970. The presence of the building not only prevented people from commemorating what had happened, but made it difficult to even visualize.

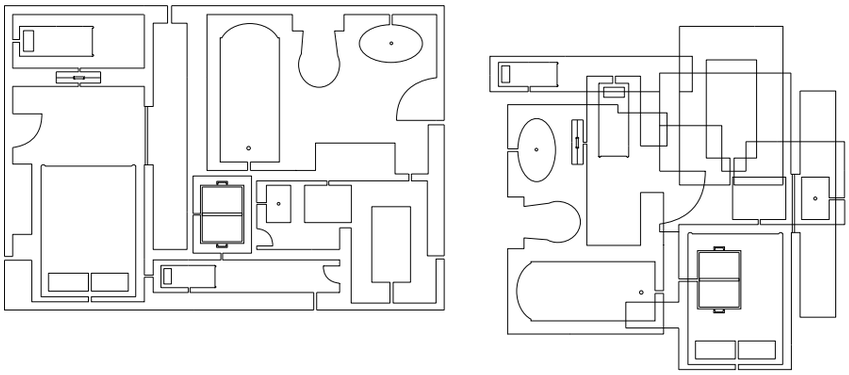
I used to imagine myself suspended in the air, dropping from an airplane, and slipping from a tightrope. My falling fantasies sent rushes of adrenaline into my head and released my brain from my body like a lost balloon on a windy day. As my dependence on the sensation increased, so too did my ability to intersperse real impressions with those created in my head to the point where my inner life was more vivid than the world around me. I'm no longer the fake-sensation addict that I once was, though I sometimes use my old techniques to increase my enjoyment of whatever I'm doing, like when I watch movies of Italian bike races from the fifties on my stationary bike. Pedaling in place, I move along with the pack of long-dead cyclists fighting their way up Italian hillsides. When the pack accelerates, my muscles contract, and when we cross the finish line at the end of a long descent, I raise up my arms in victory with tears in my eyes. In a similar way, I used to stare at the scary blue woman's face in a Toulouse Lautrec poster hanging over the toilet in our bathroom every time I urinated. Even now I can't unzip my pants without seeing her horrific expression before me.

Growing up, I felt as though I noticed less than twenty percent of the world around me, but rather than trying to increase the twenty percent, I was obsessed with having missed the other eighty. Over time, I realized that my sense of diminished awareness was as much a consequence of the things I observed as the way I observed them. In the same way that the dark parts of my skeleton suit were colored black to represent their invisibility, the material form of the blankness I perceived all around me allowed entire buildings to disappear. But, like billboards with the words "nothing here" written on them, they needed to be seen before I understood not to see—and once I did, I had to forget that I had.



In J.G. Ballard's story "The Overloaded Man," the main character spends his time alone in a modern apartment complex learning to "switch off" the significance of everything he sees by reducing it in his mind to abstract geometric forms without names or functions. At first he limits himself to tvs and toasters, then to entire rooms and buildings before, at the climax of the story, he "dismantles" his nagging wife "mentally" into a non-entity by systematically "forgetting" each of her limbs with his hands until she collapses onto the floor.

On the first pages of Invisible Man, by Ralph Ellison, the narrator states, "I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who



haunted Edgar Allen Poe; nor am I one of you Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me."

My sisters and I used to sit around the table impersonating one another and switching in and out of the roles of our mother and father. When we did this, we would change positions at the table: mother on one end, father on the other, and each of us in our usual spots. At first we would simply mimic one another's speech and gestures, but after a while the game grew more complex and the funniest parts came from assuming the perspective of one of us from the table setting of the other, as though the positions themselves conveyed the nature of the person occupying them.

In the same way that the people painted in the middle of Las Meninas were not the most significant part of the painting, I was perplexed by the fact that I existed at the center of everything I perceived in a world where I barely existed, and though I dressed myself up in the skeleton suit to show others the different people I was inside, my life was more like a cloud in the shape of a rifle, or a horizon buried in the ground.

As children, my sisters and I each had some identifiable problem with vision. I wore bifocal glasses that quadrupled my view and my sister Agnes had an eye patch that cut hers in half. Paula had astigmatism in her left eye that caused her sight to double and blur. The eye doctor told me that one of my eyes was lazy: it didn't want to do its job, drifted inward, and left its partner to do all of the work. I liked the idea that there was confusion within my effort to see and politics among my parts. I had to wear thick glasses that made a horizontal line across my eyes where the seams of the differing lenses met. It was strange to me that the intersection of transparent things would produce visible edges. My glasses were frequently dirty, though I seldom noticed it until I was reminded by others to clean them.

In Patricia Highsmith's short story "Black House," an abandoned house in a small town symbolizes the different fantasies that make the boredom of people's lives bearable. By providing a real location for their delusions, the black house creates a middle-zone in which their stories have the possibility of being true, despite the fact that everyone knows they are not. When an out-of-towner threatens to destroy the in-between-ness of the house by walking into it, the men kill him to protect the psychological structures of their lives.

In "The Swimmer," by John Cheever, a broken down protagonist constructs a conceptual

river out of the many swimming pools separating his house from others in the neighborhood by eliminating the space between them in his mind. As he "swims" from one pool to another he travels back in time to the source of his breakdown.

In Raymond Carver's story "Cathedral," a blind man teaches a seeing man to observe a Cathedral, as though for the first time, by getting him to draw the building he sees on television. As the seeing man's hand sketches, the blind man places his hand over top, moving the pencil to show what he himself had never seen.

My mother was the captain of a ferryboat that crossed back and forth between the island and nearby city. She worked long hours that required us to ride along on the boat whenever we wanted to spend time with her. My favorite part of these trips involved our conversations about river navigation. I was fascinated to discover that the negotiation of local waterways had nothing to do with what one saw with their eyes and everything to do with their knowledge of the unseen shape of the river bottom below. My mother was like that too. The way she appeared on the surface was different from the person I sensed her to be deep down.

My father was a librarian who was more interested in books than life. I'm sure no matter where he was, he was reading, and he piled books around him throughout our house as though trying to wall himself away from the rest of us. I used to try to get his attention by telling him things about my life as though I was a character in one of his favorite books. I would switch in and out of different voices and disguised my need for his attention in the perspective of different literary characters. "It's so bright in here," I would shout as the Invisible Man, "why can't you see me???"

Our house stood between the edges of a forest and the river on the north end of Rainy Sea. Its windows were arranged in a way that, looking out, one had the impression of being in a large unmoving ship aimed permanently upstream. In my memory, the house is comprised of a series of fragmented hallways and incomplete rooms, each separated by inaccessible pockets of empty space and furnished in half-measures that made it difficult to know how to use the room despite the obvious purposes it was intended to serve. Thinking back, I have trouble reconciling what I know about the location of the house with what I remember seeing out of its windows. It is never clear to me if the house has shaped my memories or if my memories have simply constructed a sympathetic landscape in which to appear.

Among the few pieces of advice my father ever gave me was "make yourself invisible and follow the rules." My mother's philosophy was the opposite—she thought rules were for other people and that we should do whatever we wanted. I would have preferred the voice of a single all-knowing authority to the mutually exclusive set of life-lessons I received from them, regardless of what it told me, or so I believed. Our house corroborated the madness of our conflicted parenting perfectly, comprised as it was of a series of maze-like rooms that repeated and divided, concealed some areas and falsified the limits of others. It had everything a house is supposed to have, but in the wrong number and arrangement—like a backwards face with two noses and an eye.

Along with my growing paranoia about things being other than they appeared was an increasing sense that people couldn't be trusted. It dumbfounded me to see them behaving one way at one moment and differently in the next. Nothing scared me more than the possibility of mistaking unfounded beliefs for truth and yet, to my eyes, most people either

couldn't tell the difference or just didn't care. I became obsessed with a need to establish rules for a verifiable reality. I carried a plumb bob and a tape measure in my pocket and recorded my measurements in a small notebook. I needed to know if straight things were really straight, or if they just appeared to be in relation to the crooked things that surrounded them. I also tracked the inconsistencies of the people around me: the lies they told, if they did what they promised or contradicted something they said. I measured, mapped, and diagrammed everything, though the more I examined the world, the more perplexed I became.

A biology teacher in junior high school told us stories about his students in the early seventies who were constantly high on drugs. He described a terrified young girl on lsd screaming in horror at her hallucinations of a tangled mass of giant snakes that were eating her alive. The teacher's off-hand comment that the hallucinations were "as real to this girl as anything else she experienced because she believed they were real" devastated me. If wrong beliefs could make unreal things appear true, I wondered how I could tell the difference between legitimate facts and fake ones. It didn't help the hallucinating girl any when my teacher informed her that, contrary to her delusions, snakes were not slimy and wet as she had hallucinated them but were, in fact, very dry to the touch.

My mother and father were as different from one another as two people could be, except for their mutual attraction to opposites. If my sisters and I inherited anything from them, it wasn't their best or their worst or even some mixture of their features—it was the tension that the temporary blending of oppositions produced. Our mother loved us but ran away and our father stayed with us but disappeared into forgetfulness. Because my parents had molded me in conflicting ways, I had difficulty aligning the person I understood myself to be with the people they told me I was. I longed to break free of the double standards that defined me at the same time that I depended upon a malleable view to feel in control.

In my fifth grade art class we were asked to make self-portraits, but instead of making a drawing of how I thought I looked, I exaggerated all of the things about my appearance that I didn't like—my big nose, little eyes, bad skin, frizzy hair, and skinny face, as though portraying my ugly self would make me appreciate how I really looked. I took the drawing to school the next day, expecting everyone to be confused, but was devastated instead when the teacher praised the likeness I had captured. I ran off screaming in tears as she bragged about what a talented artist I was.

As a teenager I spent many sleepless nights in a miniature version of our home that I built in a tree. I emptied each room of everything but its space: a bedroom without a bed, a kitchen without counters, and a bathroom that made you feel clean without having to wash. I painted the perimeter of each volume on the tree house floor, one over the other at ¼ scale, like pieces in a model set, and imagined a perfect life for myself as I looked back at the real house.

When I think of architecture, I imagine conflicted relationships, irrational representations, and impossible places. I see poorly built copies of other buildings, like the impersonation of smart people by dumb actors, and views from one world to another that, like the wedding photo of my Uncle Norman, make their differences more distinct by trying to conceal them. I wonder about symbolic abstractions with tangible locations like black houses and missing schools, and confusion between last breaths and bullet holes, where it's hard to tell a real void from a fake one. I imagine blurry dream-like walks through repetitive corridors to fake