

Interview

by stephen hastings-king

The ethnographer turns on a recorder. The story began before but that is lost, like it never happened.

We were always many things, many streams that were separated from each other by walls of silence. The silences were fragile but consistent so no-one was inclined to walk through them. We organized cookouts in one stream while we exported weapon systems to anyone who could buy them in another and in a third wondered about global instabilities. We were in one stream what we were afraid of in another.

When the crisis came we could not say what was happening. But we sensed it. People started taking photographs with a Super-8 look so that an encounter with horses along a purple sand beach yesterday looked like a memory that had been there for as long as we remember. The present acquired a strange thickness and we drifted away from it.

Surveillance systems continuously monitored every one and every where. They photographed the land. They monitored our language. They knew where we went, what we bought and what we watched.

We lived in a world of things. Things were solid; things were real. But the crisis was invisible. It affected what underpinned the visible. It escaped the cameras and algorithms.

In the state bureaucracies, they knew something was happening but they could not find it. They said they had to do something.

In the sunset time-space of the ethnographer and the narrator, the lights from passing cars spread over the tree trunks like they are reflecting off a mirror ball.

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The recording continues: The war they declared had no definite shape. No beginning, no end. No objective, no motion. Then the insanity came.

I remember watching insectoid drones fly overhead, tracking us. Each time I saw one select a target I could almost hear it struggle to make up its mechanical mind: Should I? Should I?

On television came images from everywhere of confrontations between police and the people. Footage surfaced of a cop they called the Eye Hunter. You could see him through the American tear gas discharging a weapon at a crowd. Another, standing next to him, acted as a spotter. He said: Well done, sir. You've blinded another.

Then people started disappearing. They would be taken in the night and sent into honeycombs of entryways and get lost in back rooms. When the outcry came, these people were eliminated; shot in the head and dismembered and left in suitcases along desert roads. They blamed this on an imaginary enemy. But no-one was fooled.

There is an extended silence. Then the recording device is switched off.

