Telegraph Road

Johnathan Griffin

On a hot July afternoon, I am sitting in the shade outside a cabin on a hillside near Joshua Tree watching cars moving along Twentynine Palms Highway, about a mile away. The sky is clear, but over the horizon a strip of grey haze has gathered, unusual for this time of year. As the haze consolidates into a cloud, the cloud grows a tail, which leads down to a spot in the landscape perhaps three or four miles in the distance. At its tip, I can just about see, is a point of shimmering yellow light. A house is on fire.

A few minutes pass, and the fire continues to burn, and the smoke continues to rise. Finally, in the distance, a siren. Another half a minute, perhaps more, and the flashing red light of a fire engine, moving very slowly as it seems, travels from right to left along the highway below me.

Another minute or so. The fire engine turns right off the interstate, and continues up the road – even more slowly now – towards the fire. I track these two points of light, one fixed, the other blinking and moving as if charting a line on a graph, until the fire engine turns again; the equation has changed. Eventually the two points meet. It has been ten or fifteen minutes since I first noticed that cloud, which still hangs over the horizon.

What chaos is unspooling at the location of that glittering yellow dot? Whose home is being consumed by crackling flames, whose electrics malfunctioned or whose gas cooker exploded? What possessions are being reduced to charred embers? Is anyone inside?

The firemen must have done their job because the light has dwindled, and now it has gone. The flashing light of the emergency vehicle is still visible though. I go inside the cabin and pick up my notebook.

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I'm in traffic on Glendale Boulevard, in Los Angeles, and a notification appears on my phone. A Trackingshot broadcast is about to begin. I open the app, and a few moments later, a man in a camouflage cowboy hat is talking about the first time he saw a fireball streaking through the night sky.

Behind him, vintage flying saucer magazines hang on the wall. The man sells them in his shop, and he also writes science fiction, he says, but he seems to be no fantasist. His move from the city out to the desert, he reveals, was motivated by his passion for astronomy – "for the sky, and what falls out of it." The green fireball he saw eighteen years ago, while drinking wine with friends around a fire in the desert, was an exceptionally large meteor. It is unusual for anyone to see more than one in a lifetime, he says. He has seen a dozen.

With one eye on the too-close bumper of the car in front of me, with the other I keep up with the transmission. The phrase 'remote viewing' springs, ironically,

to mind. I jot it down in my notebook, knowing that one day in the future I'll try to remember this moment. The screen of my phone is a tiny portal cracked open not only into a remote place, but into someone's recollection of a vision glimpsed in another time, the celestial subject of the vision itself being so far distant and so fast moving that, at the instant it was perceived on earth, it consisted of little more than a fleeting blur. What the fireball was remains anyone's guess.

In the desert, meteors are easier to see than in other places because of the exceptionally clear night skies, and their fallen remnants are easier to find because the hard ground often goes undisturbed for centuries. Stillness and slowness allow light and sound to travel unimpeded.

The man relates that he invested in a metal detector and a magnetic shovel, and he regularly scours the desert floor for meteorites. Mostly, he says, he finds bottle tops and bullets, and sometimes parts of the munitions that the military shoots into the sky over the nearby Marine base. Indeed, some of the most spectacular fireballs are man-made: flash-bombs, flares and missiles ascending into the sky, or – on one occasion, in Oregon – a flaming section of a Russian rocket as it tore through the earth's atmosphere.

The transmission ends. At the wheel of my car, my remote viewing session continues. I know that the man is still sitting in that room, probably now talking to the artists who two minutes ago were behind the camera, and are perhaps now packing up their equipment, chatting about how the interview went. I know this place they are in. I could drive there now in a couple of hours. Although by then they'd be gone.

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I lost my glasses in the desert. This actually happened – this is not an allegory, although it could be.

It happened recently in Wonder Valley, a remote area to the east of Twentynine Palms, where I was staying alone in a cabin originally built in the 1960s as a jackrabbit homestead. There was no electricity, and no running water. The valley is more or less flat, until dark mountains pile up on all sides, a few miles in the distance.

After an afternoon of wandering around the vicinity of the cabin, I realised that my glasses had fallen out of my pocket. My prescription sunglasses meant I could still see – for now, at least, until darkness fell – but they gave the world a deadened, low-contrast appearance, like a dream sequence in a movie. For this reason, perhaps, I did not panic, but started to search, slowly, in the approximate areas where I just walked. Time was on my side, I reasoned. I had nothing else to do.

I soon found that I could track my own footsteps. (My solitude made this activity all the more uncanny.) Whereas previously I had been gazing mostly towards the horizon, now I looked intently at the ground. Grit, gravel, sagebrush, creosote, tiny cacti, yellow desert sunflowers. A darting white lizard. A black beetle. These were the things I saw. No glasses.

If I had to describe the colour of these glasses, I would have to say they are sandy. Their camouflage against the desert floor, I realised, would be absolute.

From beyond a low ridge of mountains to the northwest of my cabin I could hear, all day, the heavy thuds of artillery fire. Located on the Twentynine Palms Marine base, a simulated town the size of Downtown San Diego had been built to resemble the urban chaos of a war-torn Afghan city. The shelling was particularly bad, and close-sounding, the day I lost my glasses.

Creosote bushes are amongst the oldest organisms on the planet, I recalled as I searched. As a bush grows older, its central branches die and it opens out into a ring. There is a creosote ring in the Southern Mojave that is estimated to be nearly twelve thousand years old.

I don't know how long I was looking before I found my glasses. They just appeared, a notification of their presence, surrounded by nothing. In the sky overhead, two fighter jets ripped through the blue sky in tight formation, a victory pass that no one saw but me.

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The next day I was walking with the artist Andrea Zittel across her property, A-Z West, in Joshua Tree. We talked about how the formlessness of the desert landscape is given meaning by the limitations of architecture, how the dimensions of buildings invite the closeness of bodies, how windows make pictures that allow us to perceive, more vividly, the world outside.

I had recently visited Doug Aitken's sculpture *Mirage*, a house situated near Palm Springs that is clad entirely in mirrors. In the many stunning photographs of *Mirage* I had seen online, the work is pristine, entirely devoid of human presence. The photographers' reflections are never visible. In reality, even on a weekday afternoon, the site is crawling with visitors, most of whom have smartphones and are taking pictures of themselves reflected in the house's walls and ceilings. The landscape is so much more graspable when collapsed and delimited by a mirror; in the 18th Century, British artists used to paint from darkened mirrors – 'Claude Glasses' – to emulate the picturesque landscape compositions of masters such as Claude Lorrain.

Zittel uses architecture, rather than mirrors, to make sense of the desert. She understands the landscape of the High Desert as divided into five-acre sections, parcels that were given away to settlers after the Small Tracts Act of 1936. Her work is shaped by standards and deviations; she tells me that a normal-sized room, for her, is twelve by sixteen feet. A new outdoor sculpture she has made at A-Z West, consisting of black-painted walls and enclosures, is scaled to fall just short of the size that would require planning permission.

Out in the distance, past where three years earlier I had seen smoke rising from a burning house, smoke rose again. On the Twentynine Palms base, the Marines were practicing their maneouvers in a fake town made from shipping containers.

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There were other broadcasts. Fourteen in all – one a day for two weeks. Of course I didn't catch them all. One day, I was sitting in the library where I am writing now, and I saw the Trackingshot notification appear. On my phone, I watched a slow pan of this familar desert landscape while a male voice read from a book, or a script, or a transcript – it was unclear. "Ladies and gentlemen, this broadcast comes to you from the city." Not this city, at any rate, I think; somewhere else, somewhere far away and somewhere that possibly never existed. Again, I jot notes. "We have smelled the wind in the street that changes weather." "Here, in the city, the wall of the time cracks."

The reader begins to describe a crowd-packed plaza, where kites circle in the sky overhead. The landscape that I see, however, is utterly empty of people, save the tiny cars that move down the highway in the distance. The desert is uniquely primed for narrative to affix itself to its seemingly porous surface. Especially in the area around Joshua Tree, certain narrative tropes tenaciously persist, some of which recurred in the Trackingshot broadcasts and some of which recur in my writing here. This is the way of things. Since humans have settled in this landscape, they have understood it through the prism of stories that frame it and refract it.

What emerged during the course of the two week period of Trackingshot broadcasts was the sense of a group of people trying to get the measure of an immeasurable place. The process embraced diverse approaches – documentary, expressionistic, appropriationist, performative, fantastic, empirical – but what the fleeting broadcasts shared was their natural and effortless propensity to transform themselves into myths, almost as soon as they were cast into the wind.

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