All the Mystery, and Fear, and Terror, that Love Can Hold: Part 3

Part lyrical essay, part pulp fiction, Noam Toran's new column is a serial narrative annotated by images and GIFs, that speaks of the problematic imprinting of Western mythologies and imaginaries onto the desert landscape. Drawing from the cultural, ecological, and imperial conditions of the American Southwest where he was born, Toran intersects personal and family experiences with longer and larger histories, hopping across time periods and genres, from 16th century Spanish expeditions to the paranoid atmospheres of the 1970s, and from science fiction to horror-comedy.

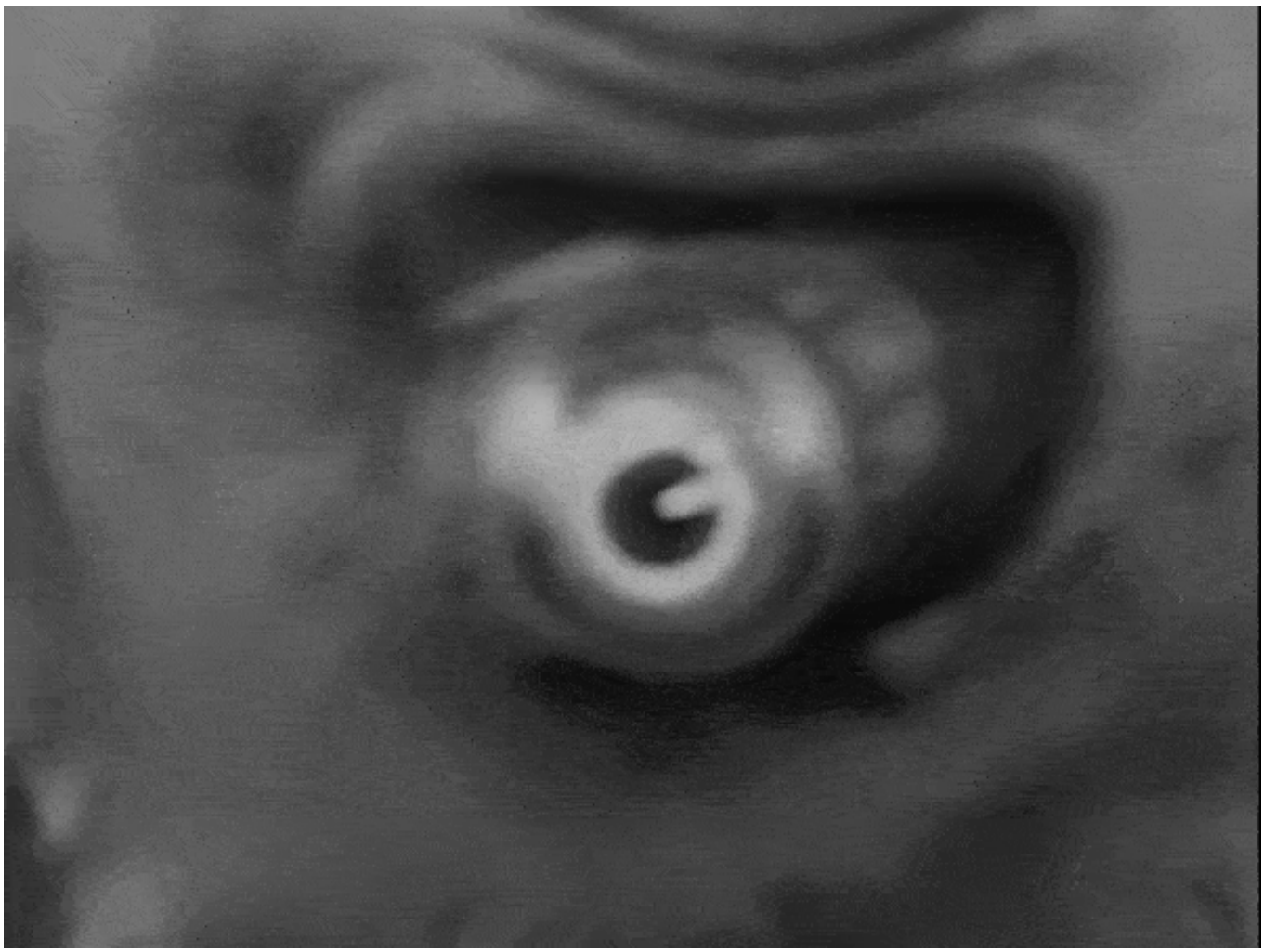
Column / Noam Toran April 16, 2023

"The traces of the dinosaurs howl in our memories."
- Jean Baudrillard

They Didn't Want to Kill, but They Didn't Want to Die!

Driving back home late at night from Alamogordo (on one of our paranoid excursions to see *The Parallax View*, of all films, that definitely didn't help), our car inexplicably lost all power. The radio went mute, the lights flickered and then cut off, as did the engine, and we coasted for a few feet before stopping. After a few failed attempts by my father to turn over the motor, we got out, pushed the car to the side of the road and, not seeing any lights in either direction and no chance of rescue, we all lit up and leaned on the warm bonnet, looking up at the awesome expanse above us. The Milky Way was so bright that night that it cast our shadows on the ground, and the air around us seemed charged with an abnormal energy. It didn't feel right, and we looked at each other with concern, sensing that we were at the mercy of something; an invisible force, or creature. A thick wave of humidity passed over the land, so strong that sweat literally poured out of us. Our cigarettes became moist, foul tasting, and we had to wipe the perspiration from our eyes just to be able to see. Then seemingly out of nowhere, a brilliant red lightning bolt, the color of Darth Vader's lightsaber, struck the ground within maybe fifty feet from us. The impact displaced a mass of sand and rocks which then rained down, causing us to scream, to hold one another, to shelter in each other's arms. When the shower had subsided, the dust and sweat had joined into a thin veneer of mud which coated our entire bodies. We staggered, like ambulating clay pots, towards the point of explosion, and looked down into the deep angry hollow left in the ground.

Alien EYE.gif



Laying at the center of the impact bowl was something small, half buried and still smoldering in the sand. My mom, without hesitating, broke free from us and made her way straight down to It, as if the thing called to her. Don't touch It! We cried, but it was too late, she reached for It and pulled It out. It was an exquisite three-foot long fulgurite, with wrinkly fingers extending in all directions, purple and glowing like a sci-fi prop. Turning back towards us, Mom held It up over her head triumphantly, then dropped It and cursed. She clutched at her palm, which we saw was now dripping blood. It cut me, she said. It cut me like It was hiding a little knife.

As we tended to her wound, Olivia Newton John suddenly started singing her heart out, scaring us half to death. The radio from the car had turned on again, as had the lights and the engine. We got in and drove as fast as we could towards home. We weren’t on the road ten minutes when a massive convoy came barrelling towards us: A dozen military trucks, driven by hazmatted creatures who, seemingly in slow-motion as they passed, stared accusatorily at us, this sweaty, muddy, bloody, terrified family driving alone at night. To our astonishment they kept on driving, as did we, towards what we fantasized was the safety of our apartment.

angryredplanet.gif **[1]**



The parched traveler stumbles along the dry riverbed, about 10 miles southeast of where he should be. Already a day in without water, and having barely survived the night, he finds a football-sized barrel cactus, unsheathes his knife, and, too thirsty to care, grabs the head with his bare hand to steady himself as he cuts through it. A hissing emerges from the scalped plant, then something wet and plump and slithery flies out from the moist innards and sucks onto the parched traveler's astonished face, crushing it inward. The spiteful cactus monster penetrates further into the face, the neck, the torso, drinking the parched traveler dry, gulp gulp gulp, until all that's left is a flabby skin sack carrying bones.

atomictest01.gif **[2]**



It began with a mild itching. Mom was putting dishes away, and every now and then she would stop to scratch her forehead, just between her eyebrows. The next day the scratching was more pronounced, more rhythmic. An angry red spot was there, an irritated little bindi. Two days later it had evolved into a protuberant mound with white spots, and she was clawing at it day and night. Growing desperate, she tried to pop it like a zit, and then, when that failed, she strangled it with a piece of dental floss. Finally we held her down while my father sliced it open with a scalpel. A magnificent spray of puss shot out, hitting my father square in the face, and dripping down his glasses. Mom let out a tremendous exhale of relief. I leaned in to look at the wound, only to see it was looking right back at me: The incision had revealed a small cornea, and pupil, and iris. A parietal eye was taking us in, moving in sync with my mom’s regular eyes, the scalpel cut now delineating a pair of eyelids that blinked rapidly. Mom threw us off of her, ran to the hallway mirror to inspect herself, and after a few turns of the head, seemed entirely satisfied with the results of the surgery. She then sauntered past us to the kitchen, where she grabbed a carton of eggs from the top of the fridge and started cracking them into her mouth one by one.

fearfulowl.gif ***[3]***



All columns **[4]**

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