All the Mystery, and Fear, and Terror, that Love Can Hold: Part 2

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 November 2, 2022

We will stage history like others stage plays.
— from *Aguirre, Wrath of God*

and

The jukebox was playing a Mexican polka.
— from *Ceremony*, by Leslie Marmon Silko

PigglyWiggly commercial.gif



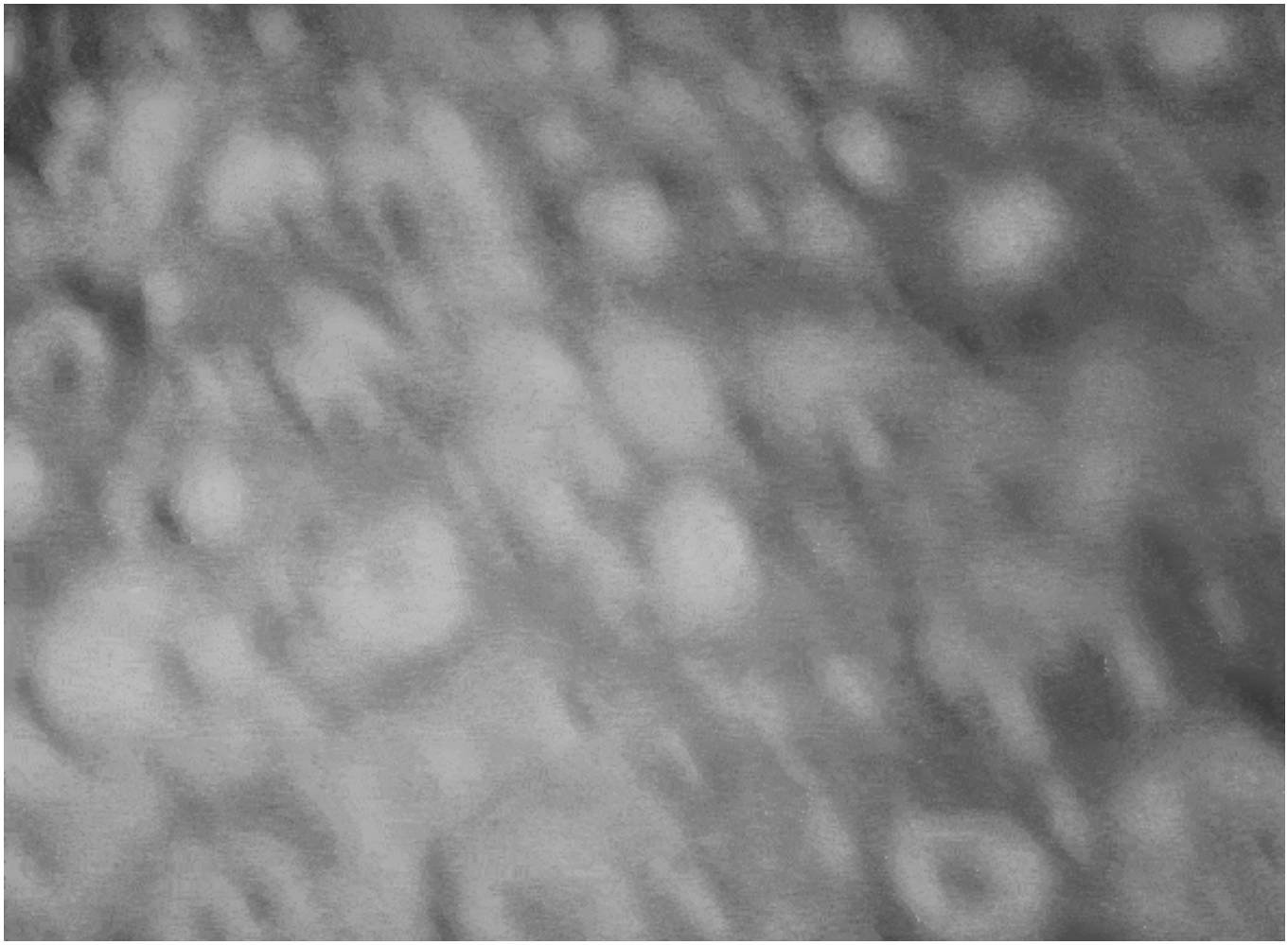
I was preoccupied with flipping through comic books at the checkout, so didn't hear the conversation that preceded the incident. What I did hear was the sound of my mother’s palm striking the cashier-girl’s face, and the slew of expletives (half English, half Lithuanian) which she supplemented it with. We were not-so-calmly escorted from the Piggly Wiggly, minus groceries, and out into the parking lot, where mom continued her onslaught, spitting cursed blood and summoning ancient demons and evil eyes to descend upon the pitiful store and wipe it off the face of the earth.

Nothing Is As It Seems

If a person wanted to get to the moon, there is a way; it all depended on whether you knew the directions... on whether you knew the story of how others before you had gone.
— from *Ceremony*, by Leslie Marmon Silko

A woman (her name is Frau Luna) is sitting naked on a large paper crescent moon, her high-heeled feet dangling above a few token stars. She seems at ease, even smiling. Clearly blind to her fate. Her mood changes when she hears a hideous hissing sound, followed by an immense rush of heat. This can’t be good. She tries to jump off the paper moon but it’s too late. She is propelled 40,000 feet into the air in a matter of seconds. Am I going to the real moon? Where’s my coat?

frau im mond crash.gif **[1]**



Phillip Kaufman’s remake of *The Body Snatchers* came out and my parents crammed me and three of my friends into the car and drove to El Paso for a matinée screening. It scared the hell out of all of us, in different ways and for different reasons. The film’s atmosphere didn't evaporate when we left the theater. On the contrary, the dread and claustrophobia seemed to spore and splatter itself across the highway back to Cruces, in the gouged out looks of pedestrians that crossed in front of the car, even permeating the viscous leftovers in our fridge. It didn't help that my father looked like Donald Sutherland.

invasion of the body snatchers.gif **[2]**



The sky turned black from them, and we watched in awe and horror behind mesh screens as they draped a spectral shadow onto the land. An unearthly white noise, a choir of radios tuned to a dead frequency, accompanied the alien blizzard, blanketing us for two hours before disappearing. When it was finally safe to emerge, we walked around like extras on a post-apocalyptic film set. Everything had been stripped clean. Vegetable gardens and manicured lawns left naked to the root. Missing cat posters eaten from off lampposts. Windshield wipers and tires gnawed off of parked cars. Wet laundry that had been hanging to dry gone, save a few ragged patches still pinched to the clotheslines. Garbage cans overturned and devoured. The skeletonized remains of stray dogs.

Seduced, then Abandoned!

One weekend, as an escape, we drove up to the Robledo Mountains for a picnic. My parents got high and we all stumbled around, it was fun. Then we found fossils: dinosaur footprints and imprints from ancient marine animals, residuals of a primeval time and place. My father started to trip out, and my mom followed. Drugged as they were, the Palaeozoic Sea rose from the foothills and threatened to swallow them. I watched them like one watches actors in a play. They finally sobered up, and we ate the food and drove back home in silence.

Caveman vs TRex.gif **[3]**



The alien, from its invisible flying saucer high above, adjusting something like its cornea onto this parcel of land, does not see one thing at one time but everything at once and from every point in time.

It sees schools of ammonite filtering plankton into their mouths, it sees the family having its picnic, sees the radioactive dust from the first atomic detonation settle onto the desert floor, sees the dust rise up from a Mogollon family on an excursion, sees the earth's crust burst and puss lava, sees it drown, sees it ice up, sees it dry up, sees the gypsum, and silver, and gold, and salt being formed, sees it being extracted, sees graves being filled and graves being emptied, sees nothing here.

It sees into my brain.
This sandwich is dusty, I think.

The Day the Earth Stood Still.gif **[4]**



My mother returned home one day (from where? She wouldn't tell) visibly distraught, wet-faced. She then screamed at my father for having brought us here, this middle-of-nowhere place, for his stupid self-interests, his imagined ambitions. I joined in, called him a really bad word for the first time. It was exhilarating. Over-excited, I ran outside and kicked at a stumpy, toothless cactus until it burst.

The following week they purchased a gun and a box of ammunition, and preemptively scolded me for even thinking about ever trying to find it, and the horrible repercussions if I did. I of course became obsessed with finding it, which was disappointingly easy: Yet another example of the stupidity of adults and the worlds they make. The minute they were gone from the house I would take it out, from its little duct-taped sanctuary inside the toilet cistern, and just hold it. The gun's heaviness scared me, the weight alone testifying to a very real violence which now seemed unassailable, predestined.

The expedition, 300 strong, arrived, dusty and malnourished, but (by God's grace) having lost only 18 souls along the way, to the southernmost point of the Jornada del Muerto, some 50 leagues from where they had set out a few months prior. Before them lay a particularly forsaken expanse of desert: blackened, crumbled and craggy with earthen protrusions as sharp as glass, the consequences of ancient volcanic eruptions. Across it, a journey of eight faith-testing days, lay, possibly, cities of gold. The expedition leader led the party in prayer, then motioned to his vassal with a faint flick of his wrist, as if to say, this is as good a spot as any. The vassal then faced north, and recited (by heart and with a strong voice, in Spanish or Latin, it was a tremendous source of pride to him) the following:

On the part of the King and Queen, we their servants notify and make known to you, as best we can, that the Lord our God, living and eternal, created the heaven and the earth, and one man and one woman, of whom you and we, and all the men of the world, were and are all descendants, and all

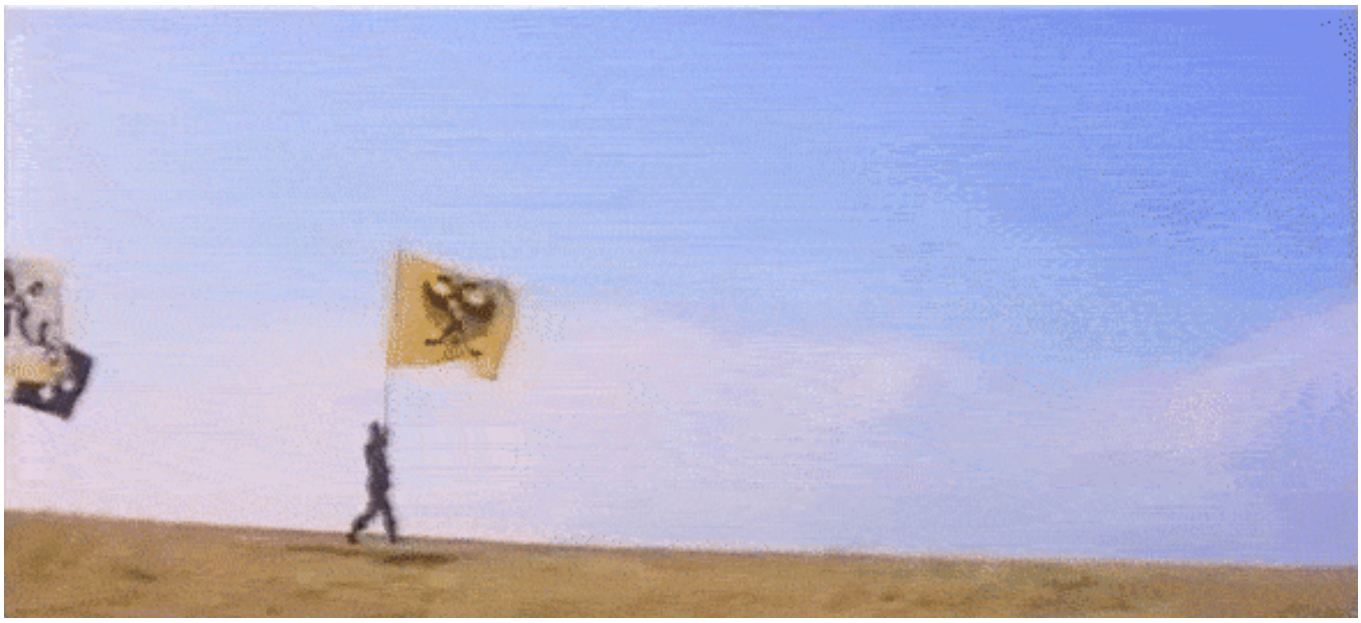
those who come after us.

Of all these nations God our Lord gave charge to one man, called St. Peter, that he should be lord and superior of all the men in the world, that all should obey him, and that he should be the head of the whole human race, wherever men should live, and under whatever law, sect, or belief they should be; and he gave him the world for his kingdom and jurisdiction.
One of these pontiffs, who succeeded St. Peter as lord of the world in the dignity and seat which I have before mentioned, made donation of these isles and Terra-firma to the aforesaid King and Queen, with all that there are in these territories.

Wherefore, as best we can, we ask and require you that you consider what we have said to you, and that you take the time that shall be necessary to understand and deliberate upon it, and that you acknowledge the Church as the ruler and superior of the whole world,
But if you do not do this, and maliciously make delay in it, I certify to you that, with the help of God, we shall powerfully enter into your country, and shall make war against you in all ways and manners that we can; we shall take you, and your wives, and your children, and shall make slaves of them, and as such shall sell and dispose of them as their highnesses may command; and we shall take away your goods, and shall do you all the mischief and damage that we can, and we protest that the deaths and losses which shall accrue from this are your fault, and not that of their highness, or ours.

Upon hearing these words, the lizards stuck out their tongues in defiance, the ants carried on marching in protest, and the coyotes, which were unseen but which counted in the hundreds, drooled in solidarity onto the burnt earth beneath them.

The Royal Hunt for the Sun.gif **[5]**



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All columns [6]

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