



All the Mystery, and Fear, and Terror, that Love Can Hold: Part 1

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 June 13, 2022

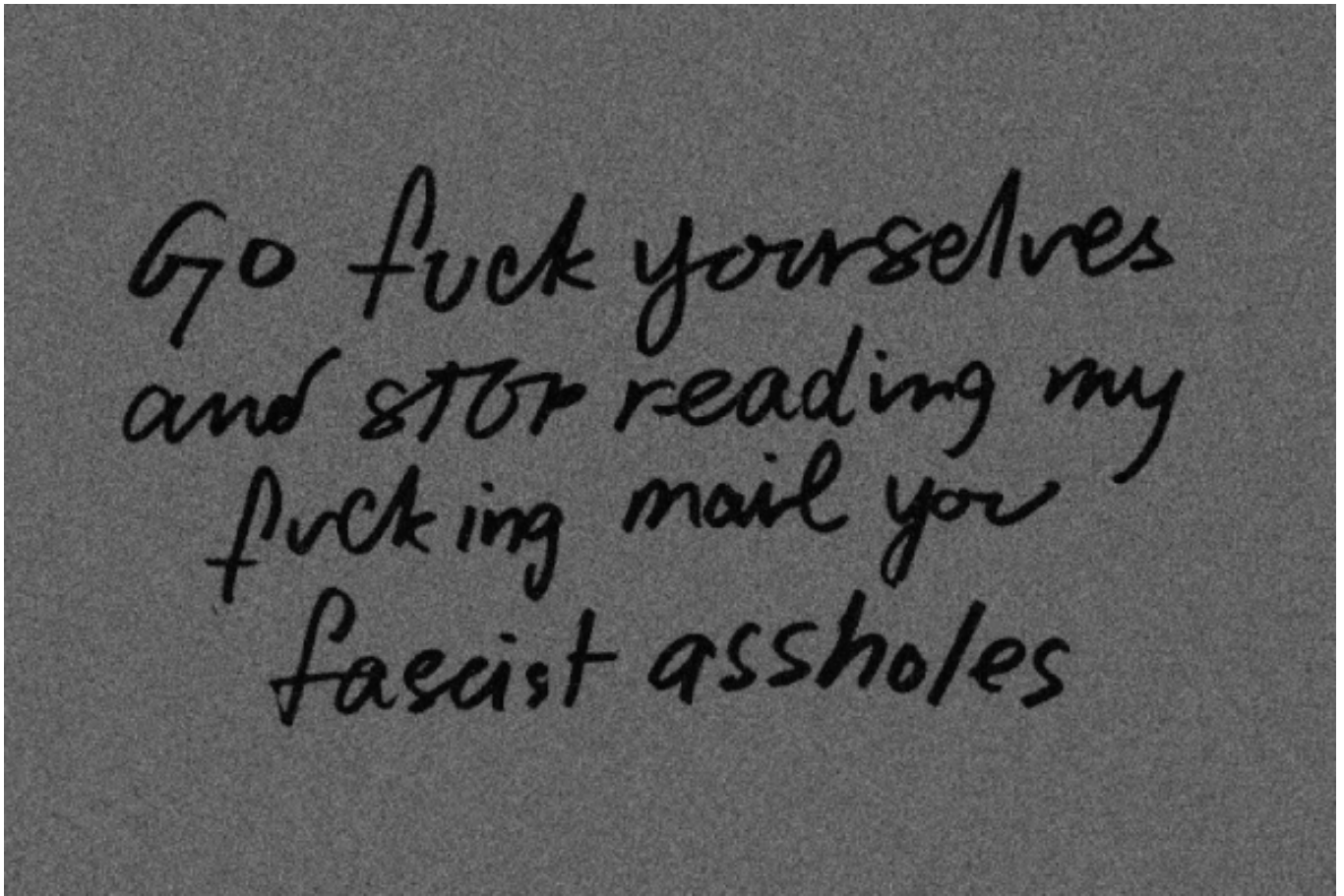
*This is just a dirty little village in the middle of nowhere.
Nothing that happens here is really important.
Now get out. – from High Noon (1952)*

welcome to las cruces.gif



My parents first suspected that their mail was being read when an attempt to re-gum a correspondence from my grandmother in Vilnius seemed to prove too difficult for whoever was doing the covert job. Apparently, the glue in Lithuania has a viscosity even the FBI can't contend with, my father joked. My mother was not amused. In response, she drove to Albuquerque and mailed a letter to herself, which read:

[Go Fuck Yourselves 01 smaller.gif](#) **[1]**



Las Cruces, New Mexico is not a small town and it's not a big town. It sits at the feet of the toothy, igneous Organ mountains, in the Rio Grande rift valley, and has the celebrated river running north to south on its western side, irrigating the neighboring farms on its way to serving as a border between the US and Mexico. On windy September days you can be overwhelmed by the sweet smell of chile as it's being harvested. The desert landscape is arid, rough, and occupied by resilient and callous creatures - humans, animals, and plants alike.

[V2 Rocket at white sands.gif](#) [2]



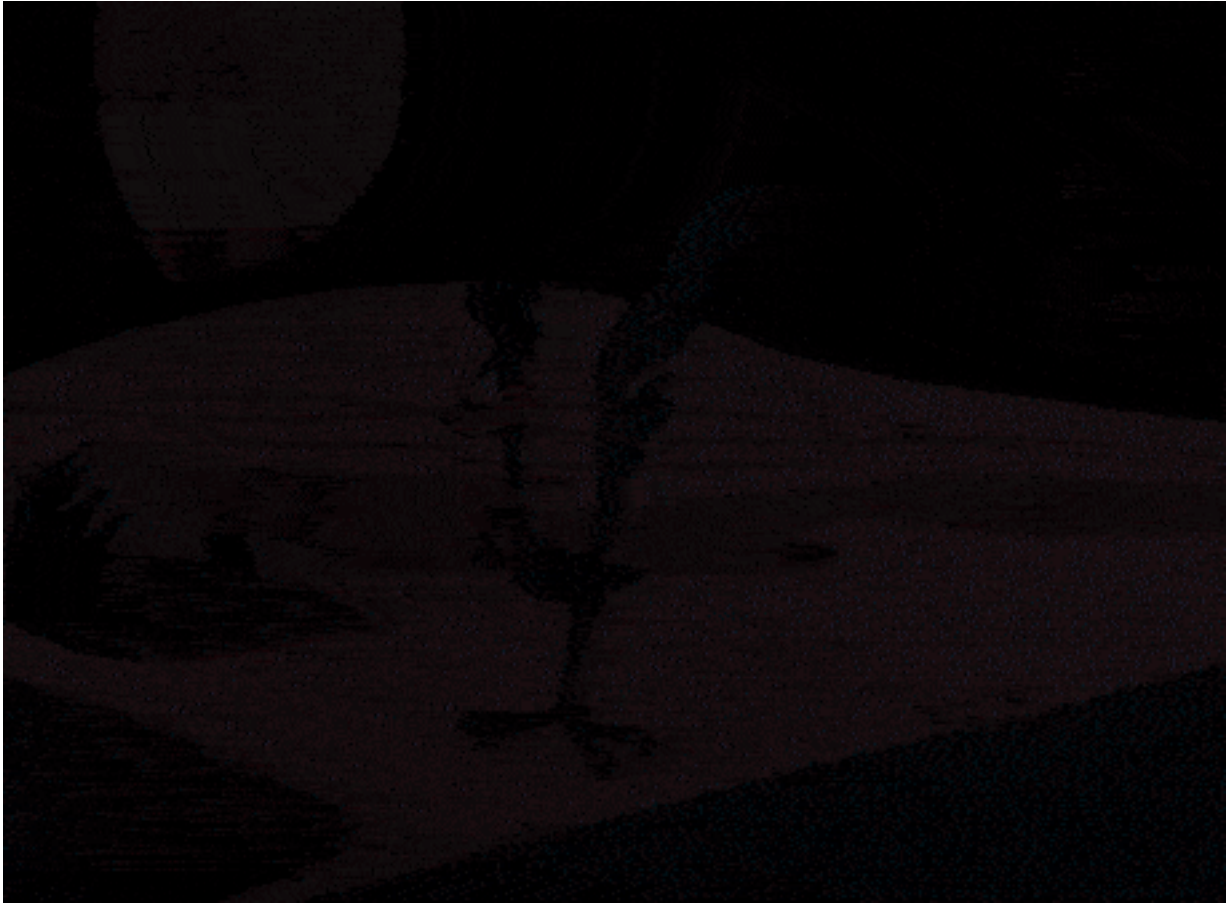
In the 1970s, the town had two main employers: the State University, and the White Sands Missile Range (a third player arrived in the 1990s - Walmart). The social and political discords between the two institutions were not palpable when my family first arrived, in 1977. The town was by all accounts pretty sleepy, with pockets of southwestern charm, but also painfully disjointed in the typical way that only a really bad post-war urban renewal project could produce. My parents admitted later that their naivety to the forces that ran the town should have been killed off almost immediately, but they desperately needed to 'make it work,' and so kept telling themselves it was all coincidental, or bad luck, until maybe it wasn't. It didn't help that the desert seemed totally ambivalent to honoring the consecrated borders between civilization and wilderness. Sand and dust storms, tempests of sagebrush pollen, waves of tumbleweeds, plagues of wasps and vermin swept through Las Cruces seasonally. My mother said she should have listened to her instinct when they drove into town for the first time, which was to just keep driving.

[highnoon02.gif](#) [3]



The region offers very good year-round viewing and pursuit of the red-tailed hawk, Gambel's quail, golden eagle, rock squirrel, desert mule deer, black bear, elk, oryx, javelin, cougar and coyote. Also watch for the black-throated sparrow, ladder-backed woodpecker, verdin, black-tailed gnatcatcher, lesser nighthawk, Scott's oriole, cactus wren, desert cottontail, and collared and tree lizard in the spring and summer. Please ensure you have a valid hunting license and comply with the state game and fish department requirements associated with that license. Hunting licenses can generally be purchased at any retail outlet that deals in hunting and fishing equipment, such as sporting goods stores. (From a New Mexico Game and Fish pamphlet, 1979)

[road runner and coyote fishing.gif](#) [4]



Two janitors are dragging a large black bag across the desert floor. As she approaches, they begin singing a Pedro Infante song, she can't remember which one. Then they point to the array of satellites on the far west side of the compound. They move synchronously upward, pointing towards a single point, maybe a single star. When she looks back the janitors are gone but the song remains. She remembers it now, it's "No Volveré". The black bag is still there. She pries it open, and sees the decapitated heads of the Rosenbergs, stitched onto the bodies of dogs. A lion's mane of electrodes and wires fan out from their lifeless faces. A failed experiment.

[ethel rosenberg.gif](#) [5]



My parents, Lithuanian and Hungarian Jews with thick hair and accents, and recent appointees to the University faculty as European literature and cinema adjuncts, became instant celebrities within the ragtag circle of academics, poets, and filmmakers that adopted them upon our arrival. They were de facto bohemians: exotic, worldly, possibly communists. None of this was really true. Dad adored the attention, cultivated the persona, and quickly procured a permanent position. Mom, far superior as a thinker and teacher but misanthropic, tried to play along, but was unceremoniously let go after her first year.

The jet flew so low that it left a combusted wake of desert flora and fauna three miles long, before tilting awkwardly upward, exposing its belly. The air itself then disassembled the jet, returning it, for a split second, into a collection of parts organized along a floating assembly line.

[Operation Sageburner.gif](#) [6]



The Seed is Planted, Terror Grows

At some point I realized that my parents didn't want to return to our apartment. They extended afternoons and evenings out past the point of fun. Double-bill film screenings followed by midnight milkshakes at the Dairy Queen, followed by a long drive, the windows down, the radio on, my father looking intermittently in the rear view mirror. Then at some point I'd be shaken into a half-conscious state, be assisted out of the car and up the fire escape, through my bedroom window and into bed. I'd wake up the next morning with my jeans still on, a ticket stub still in the back pocket.

The Department of Defense has conducted a risk assessment that includes prioritizing ranges based on mission criticality, determining their vulnerabilities to foreign encroachment, and assessing the degree to which foreign encroachment could pose a threat to the mission of the ranges. Training ranges are challenged by many forms of so-called encroachment that inhibit training and testing, such as urban growth, competition for radio frequencies and airspace, noise and air pollution, endangered species, anti-military and environmental protests, and other security threats.

[It Came From Outer Space.gif](#) [7]



Bury Your Secrets Deep

We set our alarms for 4 am, which should give us plenty of time. Skip is already waiting at the end of our street when I get there. Gangly, blond, Skip. A skater. We do a quick inventory check: foldable camping stools, flashlights, binoculars, first aid kit, snake bite kit, compass, strike-anywhere matches, handkerchiefs, knives, sunglasses, toilet paper, water, a loaf of sliced white bread, baloney, and mustard. We start walking through the darkness. A right on Fox Road, left on Tres Yuccas, right on Macarthur, then straight up north until the gravel turns to dirt and we continue on into the desert. We find the arroyo running northeast and follow it. Three miles in I have to piss and do so on a fire-orange mesquite bush, its brilliant color signaling the sun's ascent over the Organ pass. Six miles in we pass by the family of scorched and dismembered anthropomorphic dummies, lying side by side in a shallow grave, their sun-bleached jumpsuits shredded at the edges like a child's pirate costume. We keep moving, stopping only to drink. Two hours later we arrive at the ten-foot tall barb-wired fence, which stretches unendingly in either direction. We have 20 minutes to spare, so to celebrate we take turns masturbating. We then set out the stools, grab our binoculars, and wait.

Skip sees it first and points in its direction. A bright spherical light a few thousand feet up in the sky, perhaps five miles east of our location, framed by beautiful pink clouds of dawn. The light remains in place for a while, hovering, shimmering, oscillating, before rushing westward toward us with frightening velocity. Another light surfaces from the ground, travels perfectly vertically and collides with the sphere.

For a few seconds the world's chromatic spectrum is inverted.

Red sky, blue desert, black sun.

Skip and I grin at each other, exposing dark green teeth.



We pack our bags and follow the arroyo back into town, in time for the first period of school.

[Class of Nuke-em high.gif](#) [8]



Sections of this story were originally published in the catalog of the We Never Sleep exhibition at Schirn Frankfurt (2021). Special thanks to Alexandra Midal, Keith Jones, Peter Goodman, the Toran and ten Bhömer families, Leah Abir and the Tohu family. Dedicated to Orville 'Bud' Wanzer (1930-1919).

[All columns](#) [9]

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