

## **WILL RYMAN: YOUR EXTRUDED FUTURE**

*“He that is not with me is against me.”*

-Luke 11:23

*SEAL Team 6 was plugged in, turned on, hooked up to a power source, and itching to slip the circuitry of good citizenship. SEAL Team 6 was twenty-three links in a taut chain – coiled and electric – who were clearly not in the habit of failing up, failing better, ever failing – or, to judge from their enviable track record, participating in discourses of failure of any kind. SEAL Team 6, you might say, appeared dynastic in the levels of competence they routinely displayed; twenty-three men who had ditched the cozy land of lawns for the chance to tap into the grey-green night-vision field, to skywalk through dimensional realms outside causality and constraint. Cleaners and gleaners, trading eyes for eyes – intact, complete, rayed with well-being. Was it true that they loved their job? If by love, you mean an elaborate adoration with no requiting object – then, yes. Trough of sorrow? There was no trough of sorrow.*

### **MR. YOUNIVERSE**

Ryman simply couldn't wrap his head around this new language of being noticed, the way you were encouraged by just about everyone in your affinity networks to spread your contagious glow. *“We live in loops,”* they'd insist, drawing oblongs in the air with their hands, enfolding him, making his glow their glow – adding relevant feedback as the need, or occasion arose. He understood that all experience was fast approaching the near-vicarious and that, on your own lucrative path toward self-actualization, you alone chose the level you wanted to live at, the press and flow of it, the distance and degree. But wasn't the general idea to avoid the oversaturation of markets and people caused by the oversaturation of markets and people? A tautology, he suspected, whose circularity implicated practically everyone, while escaping exactly no one.

Ryman recognized this refugee state of mind, all too well – the flight from thought across borders of logic and sense-making; he didn't connect with its politics of abject surrender to the herd, the consequent loss of dimensionality in the fold. He was a shaper of forms which in turn informed the shaping of the new forms to come, twisting his repressed intensifications into your frayed psyche like a bone-screw – in methodical increments, that is – developing his formal syntax gradually over time from a position of retrospective clarity: from piece to piece, slab to slab, particle to wave. If you were looking for a loop, he thought, this one might do. Still, he felt the stress between public and private pulling him in opposite directions, the pressure to assume the bunker mentality in order to know the bunker mentality.

#### **MOVE FAST & BREAK THINGS / ENTER SANDMAN on auto-repeat**

Mute but wired – *that about described the vibe in the belly of the Black Hawk, minutes to midnight on the Afghan border, one last time running redacted tactics through their heads, dialing down into the seriously granular, the all or nothing at all of it – Operation Neptune Spear: The Smash & Grab of bin Laden. Was SEAL Team 6 squared away? Did they reap? Every last rustling bush or whistling bramble was channeled into their infrared glow and charged with mortal reckoning. One by one, you saw them turn – mantis-like – their profiles slowly disappearing into a lower order, an entire medieval repertoire of instinct and unchecked inclination – faces that projected the pulse of consequence over the slightest movement, the minutest detail. Faces that now asked the stunningly obvious question: Food or fuel? Kill or capture? In the chopper's near-silence, the entire metamorphosis registered as a faint displacement of air.*

## COAL!

It was the third fossil fuel, literally multi-faceted and hard as a rock – not sexy by any stretch of the imagination, but over the years a proven, reliable workhorse. Quiet and industrious, timeless and yet somehow dispossessed of time, its presence was nearly invisible and likely beneath your notice, unless you happened to work in a mine in Manchester or Eastern Kentucky or Inner Mongolia. The World Health Organization classified it as a “dirty fuel”, China produced more than half the world’s supply of it, and at last count, it was the source of 46% of the total power generated in the United States, alone. Rarely did it moonlight as a sculptural material, but when cast and then extruded from your average atelier’s mold, the resulting mass, Ryman was pleased to learn, appeared as condensed and solid-seeming as a thick brick of chocolate; so tightly compressed, in fact, that he wondered for a moment whether it was actually mined *in the earth* – as if the planet herself was some kind of gigantic industrial kiln – rather than *from the earth*.

The poor man’s bronze, he was drawn to the way it carried the apparent, stabilizing heft of marble, firmly grounding it to any tectonic site; while its intrinsic formlessness and infinite elasticity as a building material (once crushed and ground up into powder) gave him limitless flexibility when moving from situation to symbol, accommodating even Ryman’s most extreme dilations in aspect ratio, his jones for the disorienting, funhouse scale-shift. Through cruel geologic circumstance (immense peat bog, layer upon layer of sediment, countless millennia, gravity), it happened to come in one, all-seasonal color – matte black – though from a certain angle, Ryman clocked silver tracers glinting off its sheared planes as if wrapped in a fine sharkskin suit. Other than this subtle gradation in shade, it remained resolutely, implacably pitch-black.

It could easily be traced back at least as far as the Neolithic era, was commonly referred to as “black stones” during the Bronze Age, and the troubling history of its carbon footprint continued

to betray inconvenient truths about its legacy even to this day, but whether Ryman had tasked himself with memorializing a moment or a movement, didn't change the fact that his job description still read: "*Conjure ceaseless atmosphere of bated breath*"; and so the chance to drape any of his structural silhouettes in a smooth, darkling uniformity, enlivening the dramatic tableaux in a penumbra of archaic, undead energy – animating, but smothering it, too – naturally tended to get his full, rapt attention. Thus was the cosmic power of this gothic mistmare we call coal, revealed. And besides, stalking the perfect material fusion of form & concept in a state of low-grade vigilance, searching for exploitable disjunctions in their temporal collision, was the only way Ryman knew how to expose the petro-political intrigues – the *extra-judicial renditions*, and *anticipatory self-defenses*, and the "*Who moved my WMDs?*" of it all – inevitably swept under the rug by the media's constant insurgency of over-disclosure.

### **THAT EXTRAVAGANT SURPLUS OF SAND**

You were on your own dark crater in this century of the self, that much was clear to him; caught between a billion points of light loitering incidentally in your direction – just blinking and winking and waiting and generally soliciting any form of acknowledgement, whatsoever – and the digiphrenic home planet itself, neck-deep in the throes of its own accelerated automatism, disgorging one surrealist tableaux after another from its molten depths at light-speed, because . . . well, because lacking the barest semblance of impulse control, Ryman was forced to conclude, that's what the bulimic home planet did best. Fault lines widened along the unnerved surface of plausibly rolling along: Were you in or out? Running or retiring? Binging or purging? Uploading or downloading?

In time, the desert would reveal itself to be the fossil of water, both infinitely multiple and simultaneously unified, the cradle of every picked-through gorge and the sum-total of its

contents – the first femur, flushed from the shadows, waiting, offering protection and threat. But not today. Today, the question on everyone’s mind was: *Had Elvis left the building?* The RQ170 Predator drone – that great unmanned aerodynamic Ouija board in the sky – was hovering over bin Laden’s one-acre compound at about 15,000 feet, transmitting some grainy but actionable intel. If the bearded yardbird taking lap after pensive lap on the roof was, in fact, the Ace of Spades, then the remote feed had reduced him to a white-robed wedding figurine, about as shrunken and inconsequential an afterthought in the withered flesh, as he was in the minds and memory of the American public, long habituated to “no end in sight” new normals of total war and attendant mass complacency.

### **MOTH SMOKE**

It occurred to Ryman not for the first time, that as today’s images began to gain Formula One level speed, they slowly gathered the weight of blessed rumor, pretty much feeling free to pop up with something like stunning regularity just to disturb his groove. So many relentlessly ingratiating Whack-a-Moles on Groundhog Day, eyes beaming with perfect candor to greet the first dawn, newly sanctified and possessed of not a single care in the world – inciting his need while perpetuating his non-fulfillment; stoking his terror while placating his fright – blithely chasing the tail-end of their own briefly enflamed trajectories as they rapid-cycled through multiple, highly-differentiated platforms and distribution networks, ad infinitum.

So many bright & risen angels yet to be caught with singed wings in perilous free-fall, thought Ryman, randomly plucked from lives of obscurity and radical calm, whose soon to be constant, 24/7 carpet-bombing in the media would quickly surpass any terminal threshold of saturation, slackening their once brisk pace and ultimately transforming each image’s “content” – what made it worth scrutiny in the first place – back into the generalized, impoverished flatness of its

original photographic substrate: another orphaned epitaph formerly flush with symbolic inertia – *formerly gorgeous & burning* – now marooned indefinitely in some astral elsewhere, its faded heat-signature lately advertising an easy, ongoing acquaintanceship with impermanence.

Could you then collect the remaining shrapnel, he wondered aloud, rearranging the errant shards into a coherent, meaningful whole whereby plausible cause and effect held sway, or were this week's anointed images (the mushroom clouds and raised black fists; a Man-On-Wire or perhaps an occasional, spectacular nipple-slip) fated to suffer narrative problems in someone else's version of the truth; one more lone tile, uncoupled from historical context, set adrift in a larger mosaic of information which had only recently cast its abstract net over the entirety of the earth, gridding it out in blankets of static and snow? One lone, slumming tile immersed in the continuity, unmoored from the singularity of its origin story, domino-dancing alongside all the other tiles, endlessly circling the drain somewhere on the banality spectrum between the desert and the ditch?

### **THE MORE YOU SWEAT IN BATTLE, THE LESS YOU BLEED IN WAR**

*It had been nine years, seven months, and twenty days since 9/11, and JSOC's finest had finally come to Pakistan to collect the C.I.A.'s connected dot, X'ing him out permanently. So it was fair to say, then, that SEAL Team 6 was way past the point of chalk-talks, pre-game huddles or anything that even remotely smacked of a reassuring group hug. In a mission whose "theater of war" would last all of 38 minutes, the unit was already basking in the glorious aftermath of its own assured conquest, of erasing the distracting spot and returning the world to its triumphal, poreless sheen. Contrary to President Obama's glib reassurance to the world two weeks later on CNN, that as Americans, "we don't spike the football," Seal Team 6 was always and forever post-swagger – never not gone before they got there.*

*Obama's strangely inappropriate affirmation of fair play and good sportsmanship, couched in the unfortunate metaphor of sport, then applied to the state-sanctioned killing of another human being – though chilling in its own right – already possessed an equally unsettling precedent in his first televised address from the White House. A mere day after the targeted assassination's successful "execution", Obama casually strode up to his lectern (oddly placed at the end of a celebratory red carpet) to bluntly state: "Good evening. Tonight I can report to the American people and to the world that the United States conducted an operation that killed Osama bin Laden, the leader of al Qaeda." – quickly dispensing with any euphemisms that might soften the rhetoric of Old Testament revenge.*

### **TURN-KEY TYRANNY / STAY FROSTY!**

Ryman's mask of amiability had proven more than useful over the years, its genial façade goading more than one well-meaning interviewer into smoothly broaching the question he knew they would ask anyway. Couldn't help but ask. The question that occasioned every interview to begin with. The question he saw them invariably try out on their tongues as soon as they walked through his studio door. Namely, "*Where do you get your ideas?*" As if ideas were Easter eggs deliberately hidden beneath the bed, placed lovingly in cupboards with the door left slightly ajar. As if ideas were accidental auguries dunked in festive pastels, waiting to be stumbled upon on bent knee if only he could zero in on their coordinates. When asked and answered, it was the kind of question that rendered Ryman's motivations intimate, proximate. Laid bare the felony weight of rocks & ripples he was holding– the depth and reach of his inner reverberation, its potential for outer amplification in the world.

So why did he experience the inevitable query as a vague theft of person? He was sympathetic to their cause and his own role in it, but knew such questions had the tendency to templatize the

entirety of his practice, bundle it for out-of-the-box ease of use and ready-to-wear consumption, reduce and essentialize it in a manner that put him at risk of becoming the victim of his own perceived categorical imperatives. Of sculpture's abiding imperatives since the first figure made its descent from the pedestal. Of other people's ideas of how sculpture provided a spatial, bodily interface with the world. The consequences, for better or worse, of all of the above.

Setting aside for the moment his vague suspicion that the rules of engagement had been revised, revamped, possibly thrown out altogether, how did one describe to a perfect stranger, then, the never-ending *Contest of Civilizations* strobing from screen to screen, pod to pad, mind to memory, let alone his own unfashionable enthusiasm for the visiting team's peculiar quality of hurt – his possibly unsavory fascination with a certain blank, impotent rage seemingly guided by the hormonal confusion of puberty? A communal “platform,” if that word's not too strenuous, too comprehensive, whose oft-declared alpha & omega (an End Time battle rattle if ever there was one) allegedly dated back to the original *Dawn of the Monkeys and Their Monoliths*, and took the conveniently amorphous form of a malevolent whirlwind of plasma glimpsed spectacularly in a lucid dream, a lust for the empty swirl of viscera soon to be streaming on your device like acid rain.

While in the opposite corner, of equal interest to Ryman and no less innocent – wearing silky, star-spangled trunks and tilting the scales just shy of 200, flabby pounds – a bloated Cruiserweight unhealthily fixated on chains of command and obsessed with filling accountability voids for the sake of filling accountability voids, blowing hot winds of xenophobic indifference and magisterial disdain wherever Jihadlish, the bi-lingo dialect of choice, happened to be spoken; upon whatever dusty oasis the C130 cargo transport happened to land that week. A pugilist not at rest, but giddy and hyper and stuck on the metaphor – notoriously known for having counted coup on bin Laden's bullet-ridden body with the words: “For God and Country:

Geronimo, Geronimo, Geronimo,” evidently failing to see the irony in coopting the name of a 19<sup>th</sup> Century Apache Chief who had met a similar, grisly end.

In this life, Ryman had seen, you served the server or *you got served*. So the question then became not *where* did he get his ideas or even *how*, but in what manner he stilled himself for their eventual reception. Receptivity informed his originality. Receptivity *was* originality.

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### **SWIPE LEFT**

On December 19<sup>th</sup>, 2012, less than two years after the death of Osama bin Laden, *Zero Dark Thirty*, an action thriller directed by Kathryn Bigelow, would premiere in Los Angeles. Billed as “the story of history’s greatest manhunt for the world’s most dangerous man,” the film would go on to gross approximately \$139 million worldwide, garnering five Academy Award nominations and eventually going on to share the Oscar for Best Sound Editing with *Skyfall*, a Bond film. Electronic Arts would promote *Zero Dark Thirty* in its video game *Medal of Honor: Warfighter* by offering downloadable maps of locations depicted in the film.

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