



iDeath

Headless

Where you are, we must do the best we can. It is so far to travel, and we have nothing here to travel, except watermelon sugar. I hope this works out.

I live in a shack near iDEATH. I can see iDEATH out the window. It is beautiful. I can also see it with my eyes closed and touch it. Right now it is cold and turns like something in the hand of a child. I do not know what that thing could be.

There is a delicate balance in iDEATH. It suits us.

- **Richard Brautigan** in **Watermelon Sugar**

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## City of Glass

There is nothing left for it now. Zetaville is dying and I need to talk to you about it. You may not appreciate this letter I send you in your condition but that is no excuse, I need to put down here what is on my mind. When you see this jail you are now sitting in, when you see the generous school of architecture that you have left behind, the parallels are uncanny. There is only one difference really. The inmates are the professors and it is you, the Dean, who sits behind smoked glass in front of a bank of surveillance cameras. It was you for a while who appeared to run the whole show. Dean, Chief Administrator, General, you sat down on the first floor deck, glass-screened and all-eyed to monitor entry and exit, as all good wardens do. But

from that position it was never easy to determine what was happening in the school. In fact you soon realised the great difficulty you had in understanding us students. And at times, as the University of Zetaville in Texas imploded, as the war on terrorism shifted territories and countries, even the professors could not eventually fathom out how we students thought.

The school of architecture in Zetaville is modelled on a prison but it could also be a hospital, library, or something similar, say a human resource or conference centre. So designed, this Panopticon enabled you, the Dean, as far as possible, to survey and monitor all parts of the interior from a single point. As we were told, this model originally emerged out of the circular prison in Victorian England with cells and rooms distributed around a central surveillance station or area. Proposed by the social thinker Jeremy Bentham in 1791, the idea I guess was that the warden, guards or inspectors could see each of the prisoners at all times, without necessarily being seen themselves. What could be better for a school? But we soon learnt there was another meaning of the word 'Panopticon': a room or a chamber for the exhibition of novelties or horror. This would come.

The University of Texas as Zetaville was special for its school of architecture where everything appeared

visible yet remained strangely hidden. So confused had education become to us students that we saw it oscillate between management and learning. You were the fifth Dean, the fifth controller, in the last 8 years. It was an extraordinary time and amidst a constantly destabilising period for us students the attempt at civil proceedings, at individual generosity was at times admirable. But the collective result in terms of any advance in education methods and new pedagogies was devastatingly rigid and simple. It didn't take long for the vigilantes to note this.

Students, graduates, secretaries, instructors, administration staff, adjuncts, model makers, computer operators and professors all, had they ever looked at their own building, their own environment, would have realised. Had they looked around and noticed the shape and plan of the building they drove to, day in day out, they would have realised. But all that was to come too. We students were being phased out. Many of us walked around wounded or then just asleep. True we passed our exams and designed the buildings you, Dean and professors liked to talk about, but this was shadow-play. We would just as well destroy you in game-play on the screen than sit and listen to more platitudes about life out there in Dallas or Houston.

And there were others you began to ignore. Those you suspected about to become terrorists, but terrorists of a different sort! To you, losers, slackers, some of these students, even my own friends, just drifted back, unchallenged, took the easy, known routes. But inside their clock was ticking, the detonator ready. Even then, some of my friends began to talk about never coming back to the school in Zetaville. They already mourned a life that offered them nothing.

Perhaps you saw this decline as normal and part of the professional fall out. We students felt we had a poor choice in life. A CAD monkey, as we called it, or a Taxi Driver. But you didn't even twitch when we expressed this. We tried to bait you with the cliché of the taxi-divers in New York or Dallas. Many of them well-educated, many from South Asia, the Middle East, Eastern Europe or, like me, from the Pacific Rim. Many have degrees in philosophy or architecture, many are doctors who are not allowed to practice, not allowed to re-train. Some are language graduates and designers.

It was true, and you knew it more than most, that more than half of all architectural students decide not to pursue their careers in architecture. Advertising, computer programming, web design,

golf course design, ski-instructors, film and fashion have all seduced some of my friends. After all, the paradox was obvious to us all. The diverse basis of our education provided one of the best groundings for other disciplines, other skills, even taxi-driving or hospital portering. So rapidly could my friends commoditize their talents into services outside and beyond architecture there was little surprise they were so seduced. Meanwhile there was no possibility to alter the way architecture worked and re-defined the student's future. Zetaville was doomed.

The main central staircase had certainly a sweep about it. You must have noticed it so many times from your city of glass. It invited student, teacher or visitor to enter the body of a whale. You could imagine yourself on board ship, entering a vast shopping mall, or then preparing to dismount from the body of a helicopter perched on this aircraft carrier. The white railings, either side, a nautical touch, protected those straying a little too far but it was hardly suicide-proof. At certain points, many must have noticed, the surveillance was reversed. We students could virtually survey every professor coming in and out of their cells. Where, in the 19th century the guards and warden would have control over the inmates, at Zetaville the students were now able to watch the inmates, those

professors and instructors, as they retreated to their cells. And the Dean, well you were the Dean, you occupied a glass office we students referred to as the goldfish bowl.

## **Printer friendly**

During the recent massacre in Virginia Tech in the US, the gunman Cho Seung-Hui, sent a video manifesto and a portfolio of photos to NBC. In fact he had time in between the first outburst and the second outburst to go home, take the package and mail it. Midway through what was described as a murderous rampage, the gunman went to the post office and cool as you like, mailed NBC the package. It is possible to view a larger image of the gunman, or shooter as they are called, from a frame grab taken from the video aired by NBC News on Wednesday. The package, printer friendly, contained photos and videos of the young 23 year old man brandishing guns. The media decided this was a snarling, profanity-laced tirade about rich

American brats and their hedonistic needs delivered in a harsh monotone. I wasn't so sure.

This was the same harsh monotone that I had heard you use for some years as you addressed us students at the school. I could see the mimed words coming out of your mouth too, scripted by the future: "You had a hundred billion chances and ways to have avoided today. But you decided to spill my blood. You forced me into a corner and gave me only one option. The decision was yours. Now you have blood on your hands that will never wash off." I often wondered why you never came out with a confession like that. Had you tired of your own voice, of the monotone that dismissed students as dissenters whilst you faked it all along appearing to listen, appearing to care? Not that you would have saved yourself with a rambling, incoherent 1000-word video manifesto. I never heard you get past a couple of sentences before your head dropped and your legs splayed like a Siberian crane coming into land in a cornfield. And no photographs of you aiming handguns at the camera would have helped.

We were stupid, all of us. We didn't see the signs. We watched you sit in your city of glass and thought you were there for the taking. And everyone did, just take. You'd got the job on merit certainly, but even you said

how surprised you were. Threw your hat into the ring just as a joke, you told your friends and laughed aloud over your chicken fried steak with white sauce at the Country Diner next to the arms shop. Surely you never imagined, as the committee interviewed one after the other of the candidates, you would suddenly be in charge of a school of architecture? But there you were, untouchable, in your goldfish bowl.

Young and old professors and teachers made their deals with you. Many openly flouted rules to remain in the status quo and you bought it. Others transgressed committee rules and university rules. You lassoed the old professors, those misogynists who couldn't get it up anymore. Lechery and innuendo increased. A lot of horse-trading went on, or so we students were told, and equal opportunities, remember that phrase, went out of the window. Some of us students were even invited onto the committees only to be rudely treated and cursed. Ethnic minorities, the other class, and gender consideration, how you played them all until no one knew which way you were facing.

Yet there you sat looking out from the goldfish bowl. Watching us watching you! Whether the CCTV installed in the foyer was for your own benefit, we didn't quite realise. No one noticed how you were the only one who could blind it. By then you'd convinced

yourself that a group of us, student vigilantes you called us, would sooner or later turn up and begin shooting. When it happened no one guessed.

## **Albert Mon Amour**

A teaching prison for hangmen! You think I am jesting. The school of architecture has gallows, trap doors, condemned cells all painted white. A school can execute its own dreams of institutionalism and professionalism. Back then in Victorian London those who successfully applied to be added to the Home Office list of executioners attended a one week course at Pentonville. There they were taught how to calculate and set the drop, pinion the prisoner and carry out an execution with speed and efficiency using a dummy in place of the prisoner.

I began reading about Albert Pierrepont, one of the most famous executioners, who went on to describe his training in some detail in his autobiography. I

could not help think of us architecture students. We learnt about Pentonville, London in the project for a prison design that we were set. Surprisingly it was the prison engineer who was responsible for training new recruits, new students, showing them round and demonstrating the equipment. On the second morning of this training, apparently Albert met “Old Bill” the dummy used in place of a prisoner. Albert practised hooding and noosing “Old Bill”. On and on he would perfect his swift hooding and then the noosing. A slight pause and the moment lost: a fine execution damaged. Getting the eyelet of the noose in the right place was part of the system of humane hanging: “draw on the white cap, adjust the noose, whip out the safety pin, push the lever, drop.” This process was repeated over and over again until Albert became proficient and fast. Why is it I think of you when I think back to this?

Then Albert’s next stage just like us students: to learn to calculate the correct drop. Official Home Office tables existed for this. Rule books, charters and regulations: the student executioner’s user’s manual on how to set the drop. This used bundles to represent the differing weights of prisoner, all refined by adjusting the length of the chain, though in accordance with Victorian efficiency, the British rope

was a standard length. A form of early modelling that has now been taken over just as in our own discipline by the computer. Some like Albert, more talented than others, were then taught how to implement double executions. This involved a certain multi-tasking: getting the prisoner in Condemned Cell 1 all ready and onto the drop before the prisoner in Condemned Cell 2 was even led out. Complications could of course arise and a sort of multiple-choice exam was given on what to do with a prisoner who had earlier attempted suicide by cutting their throat, or one who turned away at the last moment. Not uncommon, like the multiple choice exams we had as architecture students, the options were not great. After one week only, Albert was given a final test consisting of a full dummy execution and upon successful completion graduated as Executioner.

Death Row is different isn’t it, Dean, though there must be similarities. Or at least that is what we are told. The executioners who come to this jail some fifty metres from where you sit now will stay at The Star Inn, on Texas Interstate 40. This is a hotel designed in a circular manner with a small glass cubicle from which each guest can be seen entering or leaving. In our design of the prison, we students added this hotel,

plus a spa, a gym and an execution chamber designed on the goldfish bowl model. We were thinking ahead.

## **Hail General!**

I address you as the one-time Chief Administrator of the school of architecture at Zetaville. I imagined you as the titular head of this school. I too missed all the signs. When you changed your car from the Saab automatic to the gigantic SUV, the other faculty laughed. We students just thought it was a dumb move on your behalf. In fact: just another of your many dumb moves. Then when you traded that in and began to come to school in a Hummer, a yellow one at that, the moves got dumber yet we still did not suspect. And you know what, the other kids from the other departments all thought you so cool. A Dean driving a Hummer, they cooed.

I have to say now I wish you'd written a defence. About why you did it, why you just turned? At least you could have given us some hint of the carnage about to hit the school? Were you repeatedly abused and picked on when you were young? Were you taunted, mocked? Or were you otherwise hurt? And there are rumours of serious failures with both your wife and family? Albert had his problems too in 'amour' but he persevered to become the best executioner in Britain for a time. I wonder if you had used the words of the Virginia Tech gunman, would it have made any difference? These words though would not stand for you. You would have re-scripted them for your own life that's for sure: "You have vandalized my heart, raped my soul and torched my conscience."

I don't know but the vigilantes amongst us, and you were right, we did exist, we thought of you as a small boy. Sometimes as a big bird but mostly as a small boy. Despite your size, we could still see you in short trousers. But if you saw those whose life you were extinguishing as pathetic, then you have to ask yourself now in all quiet, waiting for the Chaplain to come: have you really inspired generations of the weak and defenceless against indifferent students like us? Did you not see it closing in around you? Or is this

why you did it, to prevent one of us students doing it first?

Often, using that childish banter that we got used to, your professors would chat to each other along the corridors of this prison. Social encounters along the concrete corridors turned into pre-meetings. These were conspiratorial, whispered try-outs of more dangerous agendas and tactics. Students passed and voices hushed but the loathing was barely concealed. Nothing was ever innocent in our *panopticon* as the professors you loved or loathed, those you supported, those you didn't, those you feared, those you mocked, all learnt to know who to be seen speaking to and who not. Huddles occurred only to be broken up if there was a chance of being overheard. It reminded us of those lawyers and brokers, men and women with power-shoulders travelling ferries to work across rivers where the walk was circular, repetitive, and eventually all patterns recognisable. Days passed in between teaching and learning this way until many of us realised we were being deprived of an education.

Sometimes, but it was never harmless, lecherous faculty would mourn the lack of women or 'skirt'. They would snigger at the token female who ached past them trying not to be abused. In your predominantly male faculty, we would hear our instructors or senior

professors discussing the relative talent, stupidity or unsuitability of some of the new students, especially, and this was never missed, those from Asia or the Pacific Rim. How could we let these bozos into Zetaville? It's time, their collective wail said, to blow them out of the water. Doesn't the Homeland Security have anything to do with these losers?

Your encouragement of the racism at Zetaville was quietly unsubtle and spittingly venomous. To call the likes of me with parents from Pnom Penh unsuitable offers a strange conundrum. Often it was these same professors of yours sitting on committees who actually chose students like me to be allowed into Zetaville. As if you were doing us all a favour. Welcome to the real world, our world, our armed-response front garden world of Texas, they said. Pacific Chasing, they called it, and we all know how easy it was for you to say something in jest only for it to remain ambiguous. It was always easy for you to be able to say 'no I never said that'. But imagine, you the Dean, responsible for this.

Faced with 25 new young students from Japan, China, Pakistan, Vietnam, Taiwan, India, others from Wyoming, Montana, Paris, Texas and Waco, you presided over a dysfunctional faculty trying to instruct us in the delights of a Modern Architecture long past.

Like teaching a room full of glazed hams, one of your colleagues said. Like standing up in front of a series of unmoving and unmoved faces! That was it. That was the day I overheard one of your professors having a particularly bad day refer to all this as teaching 'glazed hams'. He meant us, the students, we were the glazed hams. We were worthless, nothing, scum. That was the day I began to understand what was at work here. From that moment onwards Zetaville School of Architecture became for us vigilantes, the University of Glazed Hams. This got under my skin so much that I even begin looking for a jar of glaze in the salvage foods store in the nearby dead mall. What I was going to do with it, I was not quite sure. I hadn't got the Semtex yet.

## Pnom Penh

I am now convinced you thought I would turn against you, against the school, and open fire. For according to you, in the reports to the university, I, Nguyen, surely had reason: Vietnamese dry-cleaning parents: dislodged and dislocated, living in Irving, Texas near Dallas. And when the massacre occurred, of course no one suspected you. It was immediately thought that to explain one of the biggest tragedies in Texan history, the lone gunman had to be also dislodged and dislocated, the son of Vietnamese dry-cleaning parents living in Irving near Dallas. For who else would do such a thing? Remember what Cho said: “Your Mercedes wasn’t enough, you brats. Your golden necklaces weren’t enough, you snobs. Your trust fund

wasn’t enough. Your vodka and cognac wasn’t enough. All your debaucheries weren’t enough. Those weren’t enough to fulfil your hedonistic needs. You had everything.”

Your Hummer wasn’t enough either. You, the Dean had everything too. The waterside duplex in downtown Dallas: entry and membership of the societies that mattered to you but wouldn’t really have accepted you. And membership of the museums that slighted and slaughtered the education we were supposed to receive. We did, it’s true, later find some rare pictures of you smiling whereas others used in the media would show you disturbed, uncomfortable, frowning and snarling. Others later said you, too, filmed yourself from your city of glass, brandishing two weapons at a time, one in each hand. At home the police later found your secret cameras. They caught you wearing that khaki-coloured military-style vest, and those fingerless gloves as you put the finishing touches to your glass cell.

The black T-shirt, others thought, was a coded nod to all those architects and professors who hang around in various stages of personal crisis as they make their way back to black. You finished this off with a black baseball cap. We had our martyrs, you had yours. It is worth remembering. Prisons actually go back longer

than schools of architecture. Millbank was the first modern prison in London in 1816. It had separate cells for 860 prisoners and began a widespread programme of prison building to deal with the increase in prisoner numbers caused by the ending of capital punishment.

But I guess you don't need my information, you've got plenty of time to study all this now on Death Row. Still for what it's worth I might as well repeat it. Pentonville prison, the well-known one, was used for the detention of convicts sentenced to imprisonment, or those awaiting transportation. Completed in 1842 and designed according to Bentham's "panopticon", it consisted of a central hall, with five radiating wings, all visible to staff positioned at the centre. How do I know all this? Because the project on our own school of architecture forced us to re-design it as a prison, so thoroughly ruined had it become as a school. So a neat, all-seeing, all-eyeing surveillance idea known as Pentonville became the model for British prisons. It also became a model for your office, for your city of glass, for the goldfish bowl.

No one noticed the increasing number of surveillance cameras being put around the school and the bank of monitors that went up in your office. No one suspected you at all. You had the administrator's trick of only sharing your idea with one other person.

And as you played your staff off against each other, you could always say you didn't know. You always answered us back with 'I don't know.' Or then 'I don't remember.' And as you looked out in numb comfort from behind the two-way glass, we students saw nothing except a dark glass screen and a shadowy figure moving behind. That much we could see.

At first we thought it was the Dean doing what Deans do, busying themselves with papers. But that was all wrong too. We have since found a photograph of you in a student jury where you are talking about a student's work with the insidious disinterest you showed for any serious ideas. You seemed to be condemning the student for a poetic attempt to lift himself out of the gloom of the corporate architecture all around. For some reason to show the dismay you thought about the student's work, you put your fingers to your temple. You mimicked. You fired. Did you ever realise that that student shot himself some months later?

## The Land of Ya Yas

And then you began using those car stickers. Stupid, but none of us suspected. It started with that ubiquitous 'theory-free zone' sticker. Everyone laughed, or rather snickered, but so few realized you really meant it except us, the vigilantes. Then you followed it up with a curious one: 'School is Dead'. We wondered whether you had those specially printed, or whether these were just one-off out of the special computer you had ordered for your glass cage office. The irony was not missed. And though the older faculty suspected this as a bit of horse-play for the benefit of the younger students; you know, a weak attempt to get students on your side, the worrying signs were glossed over. You were, many said, making

the best of a bad job. And that, with a six-figure salary, many added with side sniggers like inedible salads, couldn't be that bad!

There was little chance of course the campus authorities could trace any of the irregularities in the school. You'd made sure of that. But you were not the only one amongst the university's faculty members accused of stalking young females. A colleague of yours, even an acquaintance it was announced later, was taken to a psychiatric hospital on a magistrate's orders because of fears he might become suicidal. He was one of many undisclosed faculty members released with orders to undergo outpatient treatment. And you thought it was only us, the vigilantes who were a threat to this university.

As is usual with such events, the police found a rapidly growing list of warning signs that appeared well before you opened fire. The printer-friendly circles you mixed in, your fellow-Dean meetings, your private retreats with full service made you more eccentric. Some of your fellow Deans admitted later that they had even thought of planting such writings into those students you suspected of a sullen, vacant-eyed demeanour. You, yourself, even wrote out the charges from the media reports, using the same sentences from previous shoot-outs to throw us all

off the scent. That was the time you arranged that a young Vietnamese friend of mine, Tommy, was accused of writing twisted, violence-filled rants.

Around the same time, one of Tommy's professors informally shared some concerns about his work and writings, but no official report was filed. I remember at one of the Forums you held with a handful of us students, you announced that Tommy had so disturbed professors and other students that he had to be removed from one of the studios. He was urged to get counselling and you made it look as though you were Tommy's saviour. How did we miss all this? Why didn't we act on our hunches and remove you before you did more damage?

There were even complaints from our female members, some in our vigilante group, others on the fringe. Many were scared to voice anything as the darkness descended on Zetaville. Two of them complained to the campus police that they had received calls and computer messages from someone they thought one of their professors. Though they considered the messages alarming, even threatening, they were persuaded not to do anything. It was made clear that their grades would suffer if they took the action further. Were you responsible for that too?

After the second stalking complaint, the university obtained a temporary detention order and somehow Tommy was implicated in this too. Your suspicions meant that Tommy was taken away; another of your professors reported he was unstable, found asleep in class and might be suicidal. So much for the land of race car ya-yas and furry dice! You began to believe others and this allowed your own behaviour to go undetected. Later that year, a magistrate ordered Tommy to undergo an evaluation at a private psychiatric hospital in Dallas. The magistrate signed the order along with you after a Faculty evaluation found probable cause that Tommy was not only a danger to himself but to others.

We, the vigilantes, were outraged in our meetings but could find no way to address this. So no one pressed charges. Another opportunity was missed to pre-empt your carnage. Later, it was with some distress that we realised these two girls were victims of the rampage. And Tommy went under the flyover in Dallas where the porn and pawn shops were and shot himself.

## Southern Man

I thought I too, despite being Vietnamese, knew what being an administrator meant, and what directing a school of architecture meant until I met you. Indeed there was a chance some years ago that as a student I could have seen myself aim for such a position. But if we students were surprised at how absent you were, we all found reasons to explain your absence. That glaze on your eyes whenever you lost words. That nervous tic that shot the blame to someone else anytime you were questioned. If we imagined only we noticed how detached you were, we put it down to your Southern ways. We dismissed it by thinking of Neil Young's song Southern Man: "you better lose your mind, don't forget what the good book said."

In fact now when I think of you in the glass cell down the road at one of the safest prisons in Texas, I often come back to that song, and get the vinyl out along with the good book. I, Nguyen, smile. My parents still work at their dry cleaners in Irving Texas, and you, The Dean of Zetaville school of architecture are going down for the madness you thought someone else invented, and someone else would perpetrate. And now, strangely, all this relaxes me at a point in my life when, my student years over, nothing about you or your Ya-Ya country seems to relax me. You see, I was one of your Pacific Rim students that most of your faculty abused, slandered and ignored. I was one of those you thought admired Eric and Dylan, the teenage killers in the Columbine High massacre. I was, you see, also like the gunman at Virginia Tech: printer friendly.

How did we not notice how redundant you had become to our education? And why didn't we realise how the school was running on empty because of you and then without you? Did this begin your own blowback? Is that the language you started to use? According to the police this was when you began reading those SAS manuals, and the novels and stories that were coming out of Afghanistan and Iraq. We of course missed all that, but then how were we to know? You were relatively safe inside your goldfish

bowl. Digital monitoring, you called it and passed a motion in a meeting to install more cameras. Slowly holed up in your goldfish bowl, the more control you had over the destiny of the school the more delinquent you became.

I, for one, missed that crucial moment when you changed your dress from the casual banker look. You had that investment corporate-friendly dress, blue shirt, ugly tie, scuffed shoes and along with your non-plussed face you matched that Texan awkwardness. You quietly moved to the suggestion of military fatigues. You did it slowly I admit, but still it passed as part of the acclimatization. When Tommy Franks came to lecture at the university, only later the police registered you were first in line to attend the private reception offered The General in the Senior Faculty Club. And I am still unsure why none of us suspected when you actually began to wear that pair of cargo fatigues with those bulging pockets. Did we really think this was the hip Dean about to lead the students of architecture out of the corporate hell of the Lone Star State and into the desert of opportunism and radical utopias?

That was of course never on your mind. Even on that trip to Marfa when you took out a small pistol and showed your shooting skills with cans of Doctor

Pepper, how on earth did we miss all that? And frankly, when you appeared so comatized sometimes, both to us students and also to others in the Faculty, we must have put it down to the fatigue of your administrative life, and the energy you wanted but could not put into things. There was so much artifice floating around at the time that even your oddities passed muster.

I suspect you ordered the ammunition on the internet, but no one saw you bring the Kalashnikov into the school. That was clever. And sometimes I think even now you had every right to feel persecuted. Your faculty, when not passively aggressive, was totally dysfunctional, as you admitted so many times under your breath. But your guile appeared so guileless that eventually no one at Zetaville knew who was playing whom, who was scamming whom. And it was not long before it was common knowledge that you had lost interest in just about everyone, all students and all professors. Sure you picked up the pay cheque but there was no one home. And architecture itself of course had left the building. No one was teaching anymore. The professors had become mimic men and went through the motions. I remember as a student representative being invited to faculty meetings. They were painfully inefficient and dulled with childish behaviour and serious pain.

You had, as Jacques Derrida had said but not meaning it quite like this, done your homework. The Jambiya, along with the Kalashnikov AK-47 was the essential fashion accessory for any Yemeni male from 14 years old upwards. You ordered the books and began reading. The dagger was always worn in an ornamented wooden or leather sheath tucked into the front of the belt. Decidedly phallic it claimed. Then there was Double Eagle known for its cutting edge airsoft designs. You probably loved the language. Everything just everything was adjustable on this baby: the hop up, the sites, the red dot and more. The feel of it, well, awesome! The power, weight of it, was enough to blow anyone out of the water. Great for close combat and far range but then you took it further.

What started off as an airsoft gun meant for play became real. We all thought you were working in the Digital Fabrication studio when in fact you were altering a toy gun for real. Tough it was. Abuse it could take. And all for 49 US dollars now fitted with a cross hair laser sight. You even sported an Airsoft Tactical Backpack which none of us noticed. Inside; your damn fine assault rifle all ready to go. The internet advertised it with the phrase: everyone wants to be the bad guy - at least for a day! Seems like they got

it right. Forget the air pump shotgun, something to liven up the barbecue, this was “the Best of the Best.” It’s goin’ to be a damn fine day, and you’d be heard whistling as you headed for the ranch at the weekend after the chicken fried steak at the country diner.

## School is dead

What stage did it turn? What stage did the planning turn from the hopeless curriculum and our failing education to the planning of your extracurricular life? When did you decide to pulp those you disagreed with? Did you get the machine gun from that place on Division Street? That arms shop where they never ask for identity, and the one lots of boot boys hang around? You must have fit right in with your desert fatigues, and those scuffed camel boots. Your disguise was almost complete.

I must admit it did become comical as you addressed students and faculty as if in the desert camp in Basra. And what was the point of that stupid stick and the maps you began to put up indicating

how students could be re-organised and re-calibrated. Was this a result of your Tommy Franks' experience or did you really equate running a school of architecture with a military operation? You even used the word 'recalibrated' and, with a pause in your gum chewing, waited for some sign of recognition from the Faculty. Knowing you shared with most of them a dismissive attitude of all students, especially our vigilante group, you must have been shocked when no one responded. That was when the nature of your dismissive behaviour at faculty meetings often suggested an irritability which you knew not how to handle. Once you let out under your breath: "Well, what the hell do ya'all want from me? Am I just the warden?" In fact, you had become The Warden, but not of the students.

I am sure you felt justified in feeling so abject. And underneath, you apparently told the prison chaplain if media reports are correct, you saw all this as part of a greater malaise in American universities. It needed correcting, and correcting fast. What did the Chaplain say to that? Or was it a one-off frustration? It's hard to know why you became so nervous. Again were we students to blame where others just began to play you for what they could get? I, Nguyen, saw embodied in you a greater indifference which sadly spread to the entire student body.

And the education system at Zetaville? Well, what should we say of that? Almost within the first months of your residency in the goldfish bowl, the school divided off once again into those professors who wished to give you enough rope so that you'd hang yourself. And then the other side; those professors who cared neither for your administrative bungling and ineptitude, but neither cared for much dissent. There was, just as the wars your country was fighting, no exit strategy. Hence, and you have admitted since, the school at Zetaville matched the fiasco of your US troops abroad. Zetaville, Texas went into free-fall remarkably quickly. You were putting out the fire then, but you were doing it with petrol. Was that when you decided to put that car sticker on your SUV - the one before the Hummer - 'School is Dead'?

You invited the fire that's for sure. I expect sitting there off Interstate 40 in the concrete prison house, you will disagree with me but that's hardly the point now is it? There was so much under the table at Zetaville that even the administrators and lawyers when they were called in could not work out the chaos from the crime. I guess you are starting to analyse it a little more yourself, when you take yourself away from reading the Dalai Lama's book on 'Happiness' which

one of the prison warders gave you. How did you not realise?

From the outset, your replies to any letters were so slipshod, so wanton in any life, that one wondered if they were part of a correspondent English course. Occasionally you had the necessary business language to fend off a question, but if one wanted a bit of life, then surely there was more in a real goldfish bowl than was coming out of that machine you had so proudly set up in the office. Most of the other faculty, teachers young and old, when they were not being obsequious to you realised you hardly ever replied to any letters or notes. They soon turned that to their advantage. That you refused to keep records, or any serious records of meetings, worked both ways too. Eventually nothing could be proved and decisions slipped by without anyone taking responsibility for them, without anyone actually remembering how they had been taken.

All students noticed this. Suggestions for ideas were often met with a vague glassy-eyed expression and a stray throw-away line. One of your favourites became a joke amongst us students: what's the fee structure in all this? A few students thought you should have dollars sewn into your fatigues, so concerned you were about everything including quality costing.

Architecture as a discipline, and any serious study in education was lost in all this. It was lost within the first months you took over, within the first months of clearing out the offices and encamping as if you wished you might have once been a Desert Rat. Education had become management.

## Without Marx or Jesus

Before one can pass to the opposite of what one thinks, it is necessary to have some idea of how and what one thinks. This has been one of the most difficult tasks in Zetaville. So obviously a difficulty for most of the students, we began to spend some time thinking why. We began reading. Someone brought in a book called *Without Marx or Jesus*. In it Mary McCarthy introduced the author Jean-Francois Revel and his penchant for adopting the negative of seemingly unassailable propositions: "This would not be such a bad school for educating not mere mental contortionists versed in paradox but free minds."

But we could never find the free minds at Zetaville and McCarthy's point became obvious: "There is

always the possibility that the exact opposite of what you think (or think you think) may be true.” What really worried us, as we began to look around for the free minds, was the subtle and unsubtle art of bullying in practise around the school. This became just as evident when the cameras in your surveillance drama saw those same tears well up in the students’ eyes, when clenched mouths left nothing to be generous about, when professors and instructors turned on other professors and instructors because they thought the exact opposite of what the other thought. They felt some students had no right studying. In 10 weeks some students, the professors felt, showed so much skill, talent and charisma in avoiding work, especially the possibility of thinking for themselves.

Apart from us, the vigilantes whom the fading professors despised, these instructors thought they had failed if they could not get the students to think the opposite of what they thought. In other universities we had heard of the cruelty, the humiliations acted out on students. We’d heard of the student suicides though these rarely reached the newsletters in Yale, Harvard, Cambridge, Berkeley or Texas. Even in Zetaville we had seen students emerging from rooms in a state which would alarm any parent. These unfortunate ones would usually run

the gauntlet of the school, along the corridors, past the white railing, down the flight of stairs and on out holding emotions in, and then explode out in the Texan air. Some exploded too far. Others have written about it. I, Nguyen, have seen some of your students gulp so much air that I think they will explode. I have seen the pain of being told that what they think is opposite to what they should think. I have seen some of my fellow students gulp in air as if back there where they come from there is no air, only orphans to a dead language called Architecture.

Try to teach each other we thought. Try to think and help each other we thought at that moment; help them, listen to them because the hurt is so fresh. The jigsaw solution. Do not let the hurt settle until it is unmovable, irreversible. Yet how you squirmed when you faced those that thought differently! Unable to accept compassion, your fanaticism and obsession had to be translated into those children under your care. You pretend that this is life; that we students better get used to sleepless nights, get used to work because we will get no mercy. And all the time you too, teachers, professors and educators believed that life went on, that life was all this, that life sucked but it must, absolutely must, go on. If the words of Samuel Beckett are any help to the students still there who

know exactly what I am talking about, then learn to fail, and fail better by all means, but do so on your terms, not the university's, not the professor's, and certainly not the Dean's.

## **A key to the back door**

If only you'd had the outpatient treatment. If only the Provost had signed an order to conduct further examination. For surely that medical examination would have found your affect to be flat. You would of course have denied suicidal ideations, as they put it in these reports. And certainly you would not have acknowledged any symptoms of a thought disorder. In fact, like Cho, you would have fooled the authorities into thinking your insight and judgment normal. One of the psychiatrists attending to your case might have noted that you presented an imminent danger to yourself as a result of your delusional behaviour but this would have not been part of the tick-box assessment and you'd have walked out. And all

because someone did not check the box that would indicate a danger to others! You would have been secretly ordered to comply with all recommended treatments on an outpatient basis, but everything would have been kept suitably quiet. You would have been free to come and go out of the outpatient clinic in Dallas, and they would have even given you a key to the back door. All the time you would have been continually ensconced in Zetaville as the Dean.

Is that why now you pour over the previous histories of shoot-outs at US universities? The decision was yours. And it is you that has blood on your hands that will never wash off. But you didn't have to do it. You could have left. You could have quietly resigned, fled into the deeper parts of Texas and become the rancher you'd always dreamt of. Now, as the prison chaplain says to you, you are no longer running. You did it eventually for no one. You confused the Christ in your heart with the Christ in your mind. You loved to crucify yourself. You have, like Cho, induced cancer into your own head. The terror is the heart that rips the awkward soul.

The Chaplain asks you to pray with him when he finds you saying these words in your cell. You vandalised the minds of the students you took out. But, as the Chaplain keeps pointing out to you, you

will not die like Jesus Christ. You will not inspire generations of the weak, or a multitude of defenceless people. You must at least now sympathise with Cho, the abused Pacific Rim chaser: "Do you know what it feels like to be spit on your face and have trash shoved down your throat? Do you know what it feels like to dig your own grave? Do you know what it feels like to have your throat slashed from ear to ear? Do you know what it feels like to be torched alive? Do you know what it feels like to be humiliated and be impaled upon a cross and left to bleed to death for your amusement?"

It is then, as the 18 wheelers pass by now on the Interstate not far from your cell, you no longer wonder why some people are frightened to put a bumper sticker on their car expressing support for the other candidate or the other world. We no longer wonder why in other parts of the University of Texas people have their front lawns driven over because they had a garden sticker supporting the other candidate, the candidate that thinks opposite to you. Huge ruts left in the grass, huge gashes across the landscape in a land where sprinklers come on automatically, where gates are remote controlled, where huge suburban utility vehicles crowd the driveways of a Republican enclave. And the guns point one way only.

We don't want to roll over and play dead too early, the Texan accountant said to you, but you mistook that for a particularly creative approach to economics and funding. You then took all this seriously, and not for the first time considered putting a gas of petrol under the revenue office in Austin, Texas and lighting it. It's inflammable; even speech and thinking can get you in the wrong place, put you in the wrong parts of the prison house of language. The joke was delicate but direct and you began planning for this.

Students were no longer allowed the spur of opposition without it becoming a blaze. Extremes were the result of everything so suburbanised. Zetaville is a desert, one student said, why would anyone want to come here, unless someone else was paying? It was obvious the situation had infected all institutes. For how long one was not sure. But we had the feeling that people were walking around the prison never saying anything they really believed in. Yes, Sinatra was mean, the radio commentator was saying, vile even yes, but it's all in his words. Life is in his words, not his person.

In the land where you can't change lanes, I have to hold my head more gently to one side these days. The pain of the world's tragic events does not lift so easily. Sensitivity is often too heavy, and you wished

to crush even the softness inside us that called for intimacy. And I, Nguyen, can do nothing to alleviate this. I go on listening night after night on the radio how the world turns, that America – if I can speak of it in such a breath – will just for once slow its speech and leave off its aggression, its colloquial language, its hubris and its self-righteousness. For once I wish that we learn something from your tragedy, that teachers, professors, educators all, schoolchildren and graduates would just not say that they are going to 'blow someone out of the water' for the simple mistake of turning too wide into the mall and offending all *the race car ya yas*.

## Automatic sprinklers

Why has it been like living in a monastery here in Texas; why did the university remind me, Nguyen from Pnom Penh, of a prison? Is it unreasonable of me or a clever piece of posturing? Those stray words, that cleverness at language and sloganeering that I could never master. That invention in another language as fast as an advertising executive or a cow hand which I could never master? Teaching during a time of great uncertainty may not be different from any other time. Even from a time when the answers were given, when things appeared more stable, less questionable. We do not have those luxuries however. We shift within the hour. Attention deficit disorder is not a personal affliction, it is a cultural one, a political one; it might

become a global one. J.G. Ballard may be right; it is not the future that excites us, it is how to avoid the soul being suburbanised.

As you sat there in the panopticon, paranoid and so edgy, a sort of gallows-humour took over. When nothing else was left, no dissent, no protest, no outrage, you thought us, the Pacific Rim vigilantes would turn on you. You then seemed to have panicked and decided to act first. It is no longer possible to go through with eyes closed, technically sound, I said to you once during a meeting with students, dreaming of a nostalgic architectural poetry. I have to think that one over, was your reply. You, the Dean had to think that one over! And you added, as if in jest, my ADD doesn't allow me to take such things in so quickly. Think it over! Five years later and you never did return to think it over. Instead, like a private army, you continued mobilising.

Meanwhile the tamed students of Zetaville continued to enter the world and the university was happy with their progress. They become one of those statistics that say all is well. But when you see the photographs they send back you know something different. Something they don't know. But then they will never know. These students entered the secret world. The real world supplanted by information

has become another 'real world'. They are adrift but making their way. They never wanted to be the type of architects you trained them to be. They are hooded now out there on the streets of Dallas.

## **What's the cheaper option?**

I suspect you thought of the next car sticker after the dollar option. There it was plastered at the back of your Hummer: *What's the cheaper option?* You began to use that line: 'what's the cheaper option' whenever you had to decide on something. That was the easy part, because you knew the old administrator's trick. Wait long enough, let others intervene, let them dig a hole, and watch everyone get out of it except the one gullible enough to remain within the hole. There was a glint in your eyes when you saw that happening. The administration must have loved that when you shared it with your fellow Deans at the Faculty Club over a beer with a lime twist. And to think, as you joked with them, you were doing this in a hall named

after Martin Luther King. You mocked, and everyone followed: they had got used to the trendy Dean coming in fatigues and white Oxford button-down shirt. Teaching, visitors, everything you had to negotiate began to be structured according to the cheap option. Just where was the other money going, we thought, if everyone was being applauded for coming up with cheap options?

But the whiff was noticeable. Everyone, and not only the students, began to pick up on the smell given off. Was it when someone, no doubt one of our student vigilante group, had scrawled 'death' after the question 'what's the cheaper option?' Was it after this you suddenly saw the reality and began to put your plan into action? And how, when it all became so clear, were you so single-minded that you got everyone of the vigilante group with single shots, and at one go? All except me, Nguyen son of Vietnamese Dry Cleaning parents!

Clever it was to call a student forum with, what you said to your kitchen cabinet of toadying professors, the ringleaders. "I'll show them, I'll fuckin' show them," you must have said with a rare loss of control in your language, and the professors all laughed. "Yeah, Dean baby," one of them said, you go and show them, nuke 'em, wipe 'em out." You bristled then, plunged

your hands into your fatigues and actually brought out a grenade. They all went "whoaaa, slow down there Dean baby." It was convincing, extremely real. Only they didn't know it was a model, an after-shave bottle that you'd picked up in T.J Max.

It was not that individuals lost interest in you. That interest had gone from the very beginning. No, it was the invidious system at Zetaville that plunged you into meltdown. You really had no option and though you might be reading the Dalai Lama or that play by Max Frisch, the Fire Raisers, there was a stage when you started bringing in the drums of petrol too. And it wasn't that no one noticed when you brought in the second AK and began talking to students about the merits of the Kalashnikov automatic rifle. By then, you'd metaphorically levelled the world at Zetaville anyway. It had flat-lined. If you were not going to nuke'em with after shave grenades you were going to nuke-em with dull, dull teaching programmes that offered architecture of the cheaper option. You even went as far as thinking this was the professional future in the 21st century. It was so catastrophic that even the Mexican cleaners started to fear for their employment in this, the strictest university in the

State that was employing way over the number of illegals it should have.

‘School is dead’ the Mexican cleaners went around saying, ‘what means?’ They thought it a secret code. In fact they were right. It was. But everyone started to look the other way. Special committees were set up to monitor the other special committees and behind your back, behind everyone’s back, a third committee was set up to snigger and check the CCTV footage for unusual behaviour. Everyone was suspected and sycophancy expanded.

## **An execution facility**

I started to like the stories of Albert. Back in the 19th century they had a way of treating those who didn’t only think the opposite but did the opposite of what society wanted. The gallows at Pentonville was called an execution facility; originally a purpose built shed in one of the prison’s exercise yards and the trap doors were usually installed over a 12 feet deep brick lined pit. This facilitated drops of up to 10 feet. Impressed, all thought out carefully, we students began to plan the prison of our lives.

As vigilantes and Pacific Rim hoodies it became more and more difficult for us to listen to the US President speak about his convictions in Iraq. Like you, we couldn’t take him seriously. The criticism his

administration received began to remind us of similar actions taken at the school. So much was deflected, so much voiced yet strangely unvoiced. The feeling of fraternity and aggression seemed to carry on from those college 'frats' into businesses, into firms, into political bodies, into hedge funds and universities throughout the US. Whenever I heard the President speak we all thought of the song by Cake and we proceeded to play it as we designed the prison-of-our-lives: This is the land of race car ya yas/ This is the land where you can't change lanes/ This is the land where two furry dice hang / in the back windows of cars/ like huge testicles.

We began studying in more depth. In the 1920s, according to information freely available about these prisons known after the Pentonville model, to save the prisoner having to walk the 25 yards to the gallows, a new execution facility was provided within the prison. This comprised a stack of three rooms in the middle of one of the wings, the internet entry told us. The topmost room contained the beam from which up to three 4" link chains could be suspended, for attachment of the rope(s) which hung down through floor hatches. The first floor room, painted that pale green that became one of those colours that was transferred to schools and hospitals and became the

institutional colour, contained the lever and trap doors. The bottom, ground floor room was the "pit" – just like in the theatre and perhaps anatomical and architecture schools - into which the prisoner dropped.

It felt like that at Zetaville. We were dropped from a great height. But that was when we realised there was no safety net over the central well in Zetaville. We had to wonder why. Albert, we all called him *Albert Mon Amour* now as if he was our studio consultant, described the trap in 1931 as having 2 leaves, each some 8 feet 6 inches long by 2 feet 6 inches wide, with rubber backed spring clips to catch them when they were released. The detail is numbing; it was just seven yards from the condemned cells to the gallows. We wanted that detail. If we were to model the gallows in the school of architecture then we needed that detail, we too needed to do our homework.

I suppose it was because we were busy on our own plans for the school that we failed to notice the ammunition you began to store in your office, neatly on the shelves, in place of those architecture books you might usually have put there. You'd long given up on books, you'd admitted. Your language shifted in meetings until it operated as a kind of Special Forces attack vocabulary. Course suggestions were changed,

new words brought in as if this could re-invigorate the program. In fact, was it your idea to re-design the school as a prison to cope with the overflowing numbers of prisoners in the US today? If they want boot camp, you said during one faculty meeting, we'll give them boot camp.

I don't know why I continued going to the faculty meetings as I knew my job as a student representative was doomed. The only thing I guess was that I wanted to see it out, to see if the situation was going to meet its own end. You spoke jokingly once about the end of history, the end of architecture, as you professors knew it, and then you refused to take any discussion about it. Your white shirts got wider at the collar, and gave you a kind of wild raffish air, as if you were beginning to buy into the right-wing revolutionary figure, that instead of letting students participate in their education, you would set up the new vigilante group.

"Any sign of trouble, and we know what to do," you said. "Students don't know what they want. They're too fuckin' stupid. We know what they need. We know what Dallas needs, what Houston needs and we know what San Antonio needs. This is the fuckin' Alamo all over again." The vote for a new training group called The Zetaville Corps surprisingly passed

unanimously. But by then, nothing was surprising. The only professors who attended faculty meetings were your own who preserved the positions they had come to enjoy. They attended to monitor your proceedings and your behaviour in order for their own errant behaviour to be allowed to go unchecked. It was a subtle, screaming contract of loyalty and disloyalty. 'Everyone for themselves' was the motto, and you suggested this for The Zetaville Corps.

"We can make car stickers, too," you said. The conclusion after all this that Zetaville no longer actually needed students was one you got to before the rest of the school. And it was a simple step to remove the student vigilante group first for, as you said, get rid of the dissenters, the low-life architecture student scum and the rest will fall in line. Fall in line, of course they did. "Your little outburst will close the fuckin' school," one of the students said before collapsing in a pool of blood, "have you got what you wanted?"

## Letter to a Dean on Death Row

We students, the scum you called us, once wrote you an open letter. Had you so little to say that you never responded? That silence became you and paid your pensions, kept your insurance in order. Your investment portfolios were strengthened by wars which you could not, dare not oppose? Did you understand why we even wrote to you? We wanted to share with you some observations. And you were always one who was asking for 'feedback', another word you liked so much. And what happened when we gave you some feedback? Most of you froze. We were perhaps naïve in thinking you would be interested in some of us wanting to contribute to your school and your curriculum. Was it so obvious why you would

not take any suggestions in a positive manner? We became suspicious. Those of your faculty who knew us would realise churlishness or negativity were not part of our temperament. We all knew how easy it was to disappear after the semester ends, remain quiet and uninvolved.

We tried to tell you about the low student morale in Zetaville. Intellectual exchange had become lamentable, and there was a clear dispirited air. In fact many of us had never really encountered an intellectual exchange. But we knew what you were thinking. Why on earth would one need an intellectual exchange in a discipline and profession like architecture, so heavily controlled by taste and the symbolic power that administrators like you promote?

But you were wrong. You imagined this merely emanating from a small group of socially alienated, privileged students like me who dream of being activists but are merely playing at being educated. This malaise, this deep undercurrent of dismay cannot be attributed to a small group of the disenchanteds. You misunderstood the way students as a body pass on their own expectations, disappointments and strategies to accept or resist the education and the profession. I remember one of our group expressing such sadness as she was on her way back to Thailand.

The dream was over. In previous years, she told us, I have seen this car park full in the last two weeks of the term. Last night, at 2 in the morning, there were 3 or 4 cars and a few people in the school. There were more campus police and security staff checking whether we had dogs here, were lighting a joint or sleeping. The whole place was deserted.

I can only be left now with the conclusion that anyone with a serious interest in the nature of education was your enemy. Allow me now, long after the media interest has disappeared, some comments as you contemplate your success sitting there, waiting for the prison food and the next visit from the prison chaplain. You wiped out my five friends. There were six of us, so it is left to me to speak. Reports have it that the execution facility, the chamber where they strap you down and administer the electric current is being renovated. Either, reports have it, a new space needs to be found or then you will be on Death Row longer than you ever imagined. There is such a backlog that prisoners have started to hang furry dice in their cells and form rock groups, for whilst the war on terror appears to be elsewhere, nothing moves anymore within this country.

You may have seen those small books in a series published by Basic Books out of New York on the art

of mentoring. I hasten to add that I would not dream of mentoring you in anything but I do wish to follow this model as I take this letter to the end. One recently I read was called *Letter to a Young Activist* by Todd Gitlin. I wish one of your professors could have used that as a course book when teaching architecture at your school. It might at least have introduced students to their own thinking. But you got there before us and wiped that out. So allow me to imitate a gesture of arrogance and send you some words in the form of a Letter to a Dean on Death Row. For it is this aspect of haste and brevity, attention deficit some may say, that we all associate with your person.

We admit now that we should have noticed the signs, the fatigues and the automatic rifles. But there was a social awkwardness and other-world about you which continued without really ever being noticed. You could have slipped into women's clothing and led a faculty meeting and no one would really have cared or even batted an eye-lid. Everything went in and through you, but you were a hologram. Nothing stuck and responsibility and accountability could be and was deflected. The more you ran The Zetaville Training Corps, the more the idea of you as the new Tommy Franks was in turns both laughable and serious. No one knew where to go by the year 2010

in this century, so why not your vision as opposed to anyone else's?

As you brought in the cans of petrol, as you started wearing those dark shades and rushed out just as you were asked a question or saw someone coming, you again had that something unmistakable about you of a huge crane arriving from Siberia and putting down wings. But you never put them down long enough for anything of depth to emerge before you were off again. And unlike the great bird that we see so majestically on the Nature Channel, in the fields of Western Finland, we saw no calm, no tranquillity to match in your own attempts to land and take off. Do forgive me the metaphor, for I had wished to see in someone leading a school of architecture, the qualities that I associate with such a graceful, nomadic, soaring great bird. In fact, we spoke about this in our vigilante group. So forgive me not, even though you are now sitting in that cell, we insist on comparing you to the Siberian crane.

We were just formulating our own program of resistance when you acted. We were of course more than a touch disappointed that you showed no interest in our proposals or in the openness of teaching. You cared not for discussion or publications. You showed even less interest in the various attempts to explore

the boundaries of teaching. When did it all become such an embarrassment to you? Shouldn't we have been the ones to store up the ammunition, to buy the AKs and consider wiping out a dysfunctional, irresponsible faculty that had just about got on its knees and couldn't get up?

Did you really mean it when we handed you a paper, a paper of 2 sides, dealing with a proposal about a forthcoming program that you really didn't understand this sort of thing? Should we have brought in Doctor Seuss or Harold Pinter for you? Was it really the title and study around the 'architectural genome' that horrified you? Surely your suggestion that you didn't understand this was joshing with us? Surely you didn't mean it when you said you had difficulty in reading two sides of paper, 30 lines a page, 10 words a line, maximum 300 words a page thus 600 words. At least we have to give you the benefit of doubt there, for imagine the implications?

## Revenge on the acne

Have you ever got back to us or anyone on anything remotely connected with ideas about teaching architecture? What was it that began this end of history in your brain and suddenly lit a fire and began that trail that led to the prison cell outside Dallas? It didn't stop there of course. Were you really sincere when you said you had difficulty with such things that it would take you some time to get back to us? That we appreciated but did you ever get back to us? So you were waiting for us to get the AKs and start shooting? Remember Concordia in the 1980s, Columbine, Dunblane and the rest? And all the time you were there in your fatigues thinking it was time

the professors turned the table and took revenge on the acne and aspic.

You know we had the feeling that every time we entered your goldfish bowl, you were shocked. Did everyone else feel like this? Why didn't we talk about it before it was too late? But you turned, sheer embarrassment, cold thunder look and diverted eyes. It was as if we had caught someone else in the Chief Administrator's room. Not you, not the Warden, not the Dean, but someone else. This was an impostor. You were an impostor, waiting to be discovered. The look on your face betrayed a feeling of "what am I doing here"? Or was it something worse, something absurd and so pointless as to indicate our own pointlessness to you? Why am I meeting these losers, you thought?

It must be ironic now considering where you are, but we thought we had come into the Warden's room in a prison and suddenly found someone rifling through the papers that happened to be lying around. That someone happened to be you: the General, the Chief Administrator, The Warden, The Rector, The Top Man, The Dean of the School of Architecture at Zetaville.

Did you ever read the two pages? If you had you would have found them simply an expose of the arrogance of even teaching a studio to students like

us. The Architectural Genome was a hoax. In fact we wanted to turn the school into a prison as a social service. It was to be a generous act. Close the schools and make them prisons; solve the overcrowding and shortage of cells. The building was perfect for that. That was all that was on those two sides. And you didn't even get that far!

Strangely perhaps it has all been a hoax to you; perhaps we were a hoax to you. Invented and illicit, you are now not even sure we exist. You proved you could misread just about everything going on in the school, especially your own rather detached, sprawled version of it out on the desert plains of Zetaville, West Central Texas. You felt threatened, that was certain. If you proposed a program called Invisible Cities, or Invisible Architecture, you would have us attend it but no one would be there. And this would be an achievement.

Ponder this please as you sit in the prison cell. You were fond of the word 'technology' and the word 'design'. You liked very much the use of things like 'innovative strategies'. Another favourite of yours was the 'workshop'. We now wonder if some of the students were right, especially the ones you eradicated. I even remember you bringing in the phrase at a student forum, the 'eradication of risk'.

A clever strategy, you thought this would ensure students were not allowed to fail. This you put into insidious practice by ensuring students were not allowed to veer away or study anything 'off curriculum' which you and your Zetaville Training Corps would set up. Cunning, do you still think of this strategy when you are in the prison workshop and they sit you at the laser cutter and ask you to make yet another intricate lampshade for the prison kitchen?

The students, five of them who are dead now, thought it didn't matter what you set up and where, what programs you spoke about or not, and whether it was a laser cutting prototyping machine or a wood turning lathe. Were they right? We'll not know. You were just about to dialogue with them, as you called it when, in the words of the prison psychiatrist, you flipped and blew everyone away. Funny that isn't it, there's that phrase again. Revenge on the acne? Just such a simple, stupid bit of jargon to explain what you did. Blew everyone away!

## A coffee break

The school is indeed closed now. It is not even locked open, which is why you must have found it extremely awkward that some students saw a resemblance between the school of architecture, as it was designed in the 1970s, and the precedent model of the prison, known from British history as Pentonville. We students were right. From the first moment we entered the large all-seeing central I'm watching-you-you're-watching-me space of your school we imagined a prison. So it wasn't really difficult for us to turn our project into a film about these resemblances. And we now understand entirely why you walked out after merely five minutes of the film. Too close to the bone perhaps.

But then we remembered your knack of virtually walking out of everything you were not controlling and chairing after five minutes. No time to land those large wings, before you were up and away again. They call this 'sticking your head in the door'. It is, if I am not mistaken, one of the first tricks learnt by any administrator. The trick is simple and effective. It has the habit of registering presence whilst absent. It works by recognition and showing yourself for the minimum time. It is a way of saying 'yes, I was at the meeting' when in fact you were never really at the meetings at all. It allows administrators like you to attend yet not attend all the meetings going on in the school. It was the sort of attitude my father growing up in Pnom Penh had little time for. I began to understand why.

But these words you are fond of, these words like 'technology', 'software', 'professional skill', 'theory', 'design' and 'realness', they do trip off the tongue and it was remarkable how in meetings no one ever asked you what you meant and what was intended by them. We took turns being the student representative in meetings and all of us noticed the other administrator's trick you used. You appeared to be listening, and when the speaker finished, you had the knack of showingly moving your head and thereby

shifting the meeting by irritation to the next item on the agenda. Slowly the version of any meeting was altered according to the memory you wished to have of it. I think our little vigilante group which you began to loathe was right; that was how you began to see architecture. You were looking for the cheaper options and we students stood in your way.

I remember the group that started to ape your idea of stickers. As you invented new stickers for your car and the cars of your faculty, the students began to put stickers on the building, on the stairs, on the doorways, on the ceilings. I remember seeing one even recently. *Escape Now*, it said. It was written in that imitation electronic writing that you can print out now from the font menu on any Word program. There was a growing turbulence as other students saw their school becoming a prison. Perhaps it was our fault. We didn't teach each other to look over our shoulder.

They didn't see you coming I am sure. I'd slipped out for coffee, always been one of my weaknesses. None of them suspected a thing when you produced the two Kalashnikovs from your holdall and made them stand against the wall. And that was the wall that was always used for students' exhibitions, for pinning up their work when they had to come for a crit. On the wall, the drawings for the prison-of-our-lives were displayed.

But by then, early afternoon, nobody else around, you had your pick. Your large winged body swooped over them, kicked out their legs. As you stood menacingly, your other world came out. You were not of us, or of the school. Finally you had become the figure you warned yourself and your faculty against. You were the menace that needed clearing but it was all too late. And your laughter echoed all around the prison. You had, unbeknownst to the rest of the faculty and students set up a PA system. Your little revenge on the vigilante group was now a live event in the Zetaville school of architecture.

No film of students' work called *Involuntary Architecture* could capture this, no animation or music video would quite re-create the havoc you were about to wreak on these students that so much wanted to contribute to the new century. "What's the cheaper option now," you screamed to them, kicking their legs apart and pointing the Kalashnikov menacingly in their eyes. I can see it now. I can see the enjoyment in your eyes, the cowboy loss of life and intensity, the dulling dream of the duplex of Southern Man.

Where now is that firing squad that I so often like to imagine? Is it getting ready to shoot you in the back of the neck? Or is it the legal dose for you, when the electric chair and the death chamber have been

renovated? Or have they got it all wrong and you are one of the thousands of lucky administrators who have got caught looking the wrong way, feeling the wrong things and having to justify what has now become for you such a lonely condition?

I was walking back with coffee and heard the shots. I recognised the sounds from celebrations in Pnom Penh when the New Year arrives and the guns are set off into the air. My friends, the vigilante group, we were so close to our action, to carrying out our own plan. The students blinked. Everyone ran down the corridors of Panopticon. It couldn't be happening to them. This happened in high schools, that's where the copy cat shootings occurred. Not in universities, not carried out by a Dean with a Hummer and mentality to match, with a penchant for one-liners, the car sticker ya-ya of the Y generation and campus-land.

Were you playing a hoax on them, just as you played a hoax on all of us? Had you succeeded in taking yourself too seriously? Had education as you have made it become the hoax played on us all? School was dead certainly and you were about to make it even deader! "Hoodwink me, you think," you shouted, you screamed. How did you know that word? It's such a good one for your prison, for the school of architecture that was about to implode. And then you lost it!

## **Funny that!**

All these tricks, all this light-landing and never entering, isn't it so easy and so unrewarding? I wonder if your own father would have ever bothered with this. Did you know your own father? Have you become him, or did he land lightly only to be off again so quickly? Is it you or me in a mixed reality world? Is this what you offered as you attempted to steer the school towards the profession of loneliness. Why do we bother? Why do you bother? Many times we heard others mention a book, a work, a theory but never did we notice you continue to talk about it. Your embarrassment was legend, and I remember once in the early days, over the John Wayne Sandwich at the little local neighbourhood grill, you and me, Dean and student

representative, just staring at each other, lost in our own worlds, You the Grand Dream America strapped with automatic rifle, fake grenades and rope, me the Pacific Rim where you said you'd love to send your students in summer. You sat there and I just thought of Tommy condemned to shoot himself under the flyover in Dallas. What was the last sexual harassment charge before the one before that? Did you ever do enough to bring the perpetrators to justice? Is it enough to register this, just as you register your presence at a meeting, just as you registered yourself at the death of the five students, my five friends? There in your cell, are you preparing to receive the chaplain and the psychiatrist? Do we exist for each other as spectres? Were we students a payroll for you, a deposit system, a credit and debit account about to become the cheaper option?

Your look never held on long enough to count us as the data you thought you needed to fulfil your university administration requirements. Is that how you wished the students to learn? To put their head around the door, or to put their heads into a book, and then fire! How did all this become so embarrassing that you longed, like so many others, for that next paradigm which will dump on this one? And then the shooting began.

And theory, we must not even go there. So appalled you were by the wastage of language, you once expressed such comfort describing educational progress as the new talent of skipping a page, of scanning a word and an image, and taking only the necessary. Just as those cliff notes help students in the US prepare for their own exams, exams of someone else's doing, framing and controlling, so you began to skip on the pages of your own life. You looked inside the same room you held your faculty meetings and what did you discover? Not the life that you put there, but the death you offered these students.

It is still a mystery of course. We don't know why no one noticed. No one could even check your computer. The other members of the faculty used to joke about you in the goldfish bowl. Many said you were surfing and gambling online. Why did no one consider you might just have been preparing the revenge attack? If anyone had noticed your interest in the Kalashnikov they might have found that bookmarked page about the 'Jambiya' which, along with the Kalashnikov AK-47, is the essential fashion accessory for any Yemeni male from 14 years old upwards. What was the interest in the Yemenis? Did you really have a brother on the SS Cole? It was rumoured that you had been to see the damage done to the boat and had seen the injury to

your brother. I know you didn't consider using the dagger tucked in front of the belt but there's some confusion now about the phallic manner with which this is displayed.

There was even some talk of you sucking on the qat plant picked up in the markets in Yemen chewed by just about everyone. I suppose it's obvious now, but time and again we all missed that stuff about Double Eagle and those cutting edge airsoft designs. You began speaking like an internet advert and though we were worried we couldn't seem to get others to sense the alarm. "Everything is adjustable on this baby," you were caught saying to someone. "It's just awesomely weighted, the heaviness of the model in just the right places."

How did you know? We all thought you were getting on with guiding the SS Zetaville School of Architecture onto better things. Once, when you addressed the faculty meeting and spoke about re-configuring the weapons available to those in the Zetaville Corps in several different ways for close combat, guerrilla strategies and far range we should have been alerted. At least someone should have begun to monitor your behaviour. But none of us did, not even your own faculty. We seemed to be satisfied with all this silly cowboy stuff, of turning from the revolver to the

model airsoft gun. Meant for play, it was still tough and could take some abuse, you whispered to the IT support team. How did we miss what was happening in front of our eyes?

Why did no one ever get access to your shopping cart? Prices dropped to \$49.00 of the AK47 Automatic Electric Gun with a Cross Hair Laser Sight and it all came with an Airsoft Tactical Backpack. No one imagined that when you came in with your own damn fine backpack and sat down at faculty meeting with an authentic-looking replica of a Kalshnikov AK47 assault rifle. If we'd bothered to take this further we might have spotted your choice for the Airsport P-788 Riot Shotgun along with the Zetaville Delta Force Package. Suddenly architecture was so far from the proceedings that no one noticed any longer. It was survival time.

You'd already introduced the end of history and wished for a return to the revolutionary epoch, the 1920s when architecture was 80% journalism and 20% draughtsmanship! The assault language you adopted came from brochures for toy guns, but again none of us suspected that. The Assault Spring Air Pump Shotgun was something you felt could be a model for Zetaville Corps. There was a moment when you suggested we might have to have a Martial at the entrance to the school to prevent any disobedience,

and to monitor weapons brought into the school of architecture. Funny that, when you instigated it, you were the only one not searched. You got the idea from those sky marshals that are now on most of the aeroplanes that try and leave this State on permanent orange alert.

## **The parody of gaming**

There was an advantage to this assault package. It was guaranteed to give the students' next courtyard barbeque a punch. The suggestion that Zetaville Delta Force would become the 'Best of the Best' continued your hijack of SAS vocabulary and tactics. It was around this time you entered for us an area between the virtual and the real without even knowing it. It began to look like this. Of course you were the first to acknowledge that all words on the page were real, it was just the ones you happened to choose that allowed you to plan without anyone else realising where you were going. Never sure, did you understand the void you were creating whilst you continued to play on words and the poetry of assault gaming itself.

This was about where we lost you. In some parody of the administrators and government in charge of your country at that moment, you had become the exit strategy. You were the problem and the solution, and you decided to deal with both. "I don't do theory," you repeated so often that we students began to ask just what was it about 'theory' that you didn't do. Rejecting it, navigating it, thinking about it or ignoring it? Behind the glass, bringing in more ammunition and petrol, you began to contemplate the exile as self-reflection. As in your favourite rodeo, you were asking yourself the question, could I survive? Rodeo Architecture, you suggested, and a car sticker emerged from this piece of wondrous thinking. And you were slowly closing in on the moment when the world had to turn itself inside out. The suicide bomber was not your friend; you understood nothing of martyrdom. But this was not the world that pulled you in. We all began to see that. Like browsers we were buffeted and battered, buffered again by mediocrity, until all that we downloaded into our brains was the lonely expectation of a world you did not outline in any clarity.

Zetaville died but I guess it doesn't really trouble you anymore. You solved it. You closed it. Zetaville's social imagination died along with the creative

imagination. Pulled whichever way they like, students are throttled not by theory or impracticality, not even by the challenge of serious difficulty. They are throttled by incomprehensibility, by the stars falling down on them. By the administrator of the voids, as they often call you.

Ah, so many stories! We all have stories and choose the ones we wish to narrate. You do also. You have done it to me, Nguyen; you did it to the other students. But they didn't believe you. They looked into your eyes and saw a void. They saw in all your anxiety about innovation and design a low registering of closure, unexcitement and dullness. They were not alone in this. You headed a faculty that shared much of what the students thought but they too lost any way of communicating this. A dying body generally does this. That year – the last - students continually came up to us and asked about the future of the school in Zetaville, what direction it was going, what would make up the new programme. There was always a worried but politely confused look on their young, fresh faces. They knew we, as the vigilantes, had attended the meetings. We usually recommended that they sought further information from you, their dear leader, and from their own professors, from other

students, from other schools. Maybe they did or they didn't.

We began to try and understand their confusion and disenchantment. Often we noticed bravado in this confusion. They could make no real assessment of the school, its direction and its emphasis. They had no idea where they were going or why they were never invited to use their own thinking. They were trapped in the laziness which became part of their own survival. This is where their experience collapsed into one; it went on resembling a prison. Meanwhile the students you think of as dissenters or troublemakers are now nowhere to be seen. The impasse and boredom they once thought within themselves was in you. That was what they caught on your face when they stole upon you in your own room, the goldfish bowl, and they saw you, the Warden, signing release papers for those about to go on parole.

## On Parole

I, Nguyen, thought of Zetaville, I thought of Irving, Richardson, Denton and Dallas, I thought of Odessa and Midland, of Dublin and Waco. I thought of the school of architecture that had become a prison. I thought of all school and all prisons. So cool and so modern, we redesigned them and our heart aches now for the history that is lost, for the town that is not allowed anything contemporary and for those about to disappear from the maps. And most people trekking to the Internet Catalogue shop, carpeted, heated, wired will be buying an all-round plasma-screened giant cinema for the home with a flatness and elegance of line only bettered by those Bang & Olufson machines from the last century.

Apparently the future is 'smart computers' in alarm clocks, watches, key rings and pens. This, according to the captain of Team Microsoft is the future which must take on board the whole negative perception of hi-tech and the contemporary world. The innovation upturn, the jargon has it, will see us recreating innovation (your favourite word again) in the world of personal computing. We will be able to perform tasks usually run on full-powered systems. So, as you and Zetaville power down, the new world is about to set up its own contemporary upturn. This is the world of Spot – smart personal objects technology.

I wonder if we might start with a brain. Instead of letting the smart pen 'pull content' for us, as the phrase goes, from the internet. Obviously the result is inevitable; all screens will be writable and re-writable surfaces. There will be nothing like stand-alone computers anywhere. We will in fact be in what they call an 'augmented reality'; all architecture will become open source and we will also not have the luxury of standing alone either.

I had the feeling when I arrived back after you had shot my five friends that the world needing unzipping. I had the same feeling in your faculty meetings in Zetaville, so painful, so dysfunctional had communication become. We are in dire need of being

able to put up an umbrella under water. Unlike you, we had no sinister view of technology just a clear nostalgia for a world separated by water and stone. Popular culture, even the 20th Century, I began to think has not really happened.

As the police arrived and took you away, I was listening to people who could suddenly speak as though the last century and its modernity had been one huge mistake. What happens in the future was not coming out of what was happening now on their smart objects, on remodelled assault rifles or distressed fatigues. What happens in the future was coming out of what happened in the 19th century and before, what happened in those execution facilities that taught Albert the correct drop.

Thinking about you there on Death Row and Zetaville, I remembered reading a piece in William Gibson's *Idoru*, whilst invented beings were eating beef, drinking lager and playing with each other's mind: 'She had no idea what this place was meant to mean, the how or why of it, but it fit so perfectly into itself and the space it occupied, water and stone slotting faultlessly into the mysterious whole.' I had just returned from Pnom Penh and had gone to Nagoya in Japan. The huge presence of games, gaming prototypes and strategies often convince us that

the poetry of gaming was something briefly created by online inventions and a new design intelligence. These were innovative strategies that most of the world was ignoring until someone else validated and authenticated them. Most of us misread these games as an adventure for lost childhood. The hyper-violence appals us just as it re-scripts the student's game. Conceptual engagement however may be slimmer than we first thought, than you first thought when you said to us students, 'I'll get back to you'. You did get back to us. You shot five of us.

Now I understand you have exchanged architecture for gaming, your first love. You have invented a game called Howl. Your iDeath. In fact it is a 'holowatch', an online competitive shooter based on the TV show Star Voyager. The artist choosing to be called Allan Ginsburg exists and the whole of Ginsberg's poem 'Howl' is on screen, passing by in different layers, levels and dimensions. Other players interact with Ginsberg the artist. They can kill him with speech bubbles above his head and see him reincarnated in a future that had no Twentieth Century. The attractions of such gaming are not hard to sell and some reports have it that if your appeal comes up and you avoid the lethal dose, you would be a millionaire instantly, the moment you step out of Death Row. But that's unlikely.

Your learning in prison will then have paid off. Forsaking management, your conceptual, artistic and admittedly humorous iDeath program will engage in an environment that suggests re-shaped retail and educational zones. Of course you could be forgiven for thinking this only one more part of yet another William Gibson novel. Gibson after all is probably the writer more cited than any other contemporary writer in the New Media, or beyond media research. You see, I have begun to understand your decisions now, where you wanted to take Zetaville and why the students felt so disenchanted.

My experience will always remain partial. It is like a book of options allowing us to participate in man's struggle, anyone's struggle. Yet by opening history we close it again. Architecture can no longer do this; it has become an alibi for expedient celebrity. You have become an exhaustive cataloguer of association, intention and reference but you will remain mocked I fear, just as the students accuse you of the tyranny of bluff. Zetaville is a dying institution; legs up in the air. The form and space you wished to be so precise and see re-modelled as a prison has become another alibi for the form and space which struggles to capture any sum of associations made. The sum of these associations will never be whole.

The disaster you tried to avoid at your school is sadly permanent. The partially revealed history of the land, the site and surroundings in Zetaville school of architecture will always remain partial only to be relieved in their function as a rodeo centre or a tornado museum. The demands asked for a building will always suffer from the demands put on them by a now impossible word *Modernism* in your, by now, impossible university of Zetaville.

Why then, as you sit there on Death Row should we continue with the need to be contemporary? Does it allow us all a new gliding slippage in language, an ambiguity that prevents the next truth taking over somewhat haphazardly from this truth? And can we avoid stubbornly attributing this to that slip on the page, off the page, beyond the page, as we do in life between the virtual and the real? The old world is coming after the world that has gone and now needs new movements. The network architects of this world will see to it that they take over the field of interest you thought you could be disinterested in. You, Chief Administrator, General, Dean are about to become, in a favourite expression of yours, toast. Not a taxi-driver in Dallas or a Gaming Software designer of the Apocalypse after the one before. We have taken over your software.

iDeath awaits you.

# iDeath

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