I, Mark Kohan Ph.D., hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Studies.

It is entitled:
Story as an Organizing and Inquiry Tool for Educational Partnerships Committed to Social Justice, School, and Community Change

Student's name: Mark Kohan Ph.D.

This work and its defense approved by:

Committee chair: Miriam Raider-Roth, Ed.D.

Committee member: Mary Brydon-Miller, Ph.D.

Committee member: Holly Johnson, Ph.D.

Committee member: Chester Laine, Ph.D.
Story as an Organizing and Inquiry Tool for Educational Partnerships

Committed to Social Justice, School, and Community Change

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by

Mark Kohan

Miriam B. Raider-Roth, Ed.D., Chair
Mary Brydon-Miller, Ph.D.
Holly Johnson, Ph.D.
Chet H. Laine, Ph.D.
Abstract

This dissertation is an arts-based action inquiry into a grassroots educational partnership for social justice in an era of high-stakes standardized testing and teaching. Drawing on educational research in the public interest and multicultural theory (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Banks, 2006), I examine how students, teachers and educators who participate in an educational partnership organized by story describe and address the challenges, barriers and constraints they face in public schooling. It unites the work of a variety of social justice workers in education by organizing through stories and other arts-based inquiry activities (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Gruwell & Freedom Writers, 2007; Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2002) to create a dystopian novel about the current and future issues facing public education.

Using arts-based qualitative research guides (Barone, 2006; Maxwell, 1996; Vickers, 2010; Winter, 1991) and action research principles (Brydon-Miller, 2007; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Freire, 1970; Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007), I inquire into current and past educational practices, policy, and partnerships and theorize future ones based on the expressed experiences of students, teachers, and teacher educators, as well as through dominant paradigms for schooling and teaching. In a brave new world of public education seeing the erosion of state funding and increased dependence on foundation grants and private entities, partnerships guided by social justice stories of students, teachers, and other educators, offer an important way to communicate across organizations and contexts more effectively, enable a shared culture of empowerment, share costs and resources, and develop social innovations in schools that are community-based and globally aware.
Acknowledgements

“Who wouldn't be well served by some time for introspection?”

~ Alison Kohan

Thank you to those who dare to question, teach, and advocate for childhood and for future generations.
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Section One

I. Introduction

“Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” ~William Butler Yeats

Humans are hard-wired for story (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Gottschall, 2012; MacIntyre, 1981), having used narrative for teaching and learning since first walking the earth. Stories are both personal and cultural, individualistic and communal, and they have been the centerpiece of many social movements in the United States (Davis, 2002; Ganz, 2001; Horton & Freire, 1990; Loseke, 2007), which have relied on forms of partnership work and commitments. In recent decades, stories of schooling, teaching, and inequity continue to reveal the rigid, regimented, and high-stakes day-to-day reality our nation’s students and teachers face (Alonso, Anderson, Su, & Theorharis, 2009; Kozol, 1991, 2005; Ravitch, 2010). A paradigm shift is needed (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Greene, 1997; Gutierrez, 2008) to reassert the importance of story telling (or re-telling), narrative writing, and listening in education (Ball, 2006; Bell, 2010; Freedom Writers & Gruwell, 1999; Goodson, Biesta, Tedder, & Adair, 2010; hooks, 1994; Hopkins, 1994; Johnson & Freedman, 2001; Milner, 2010; Postman, 1999; Strong-Wilson, 2007). Calls for attending to unity and diversity in democratizing schools, as well as a focus on seeing, supporting, and celebrating assets or strengths rather than deficits in the public sphere are many in educational research (Ford, 2006; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Parker, 2004). Few, however, have been heeded by political and business leaders “invested” in public education and the crafting of its policy.

The majority of educational research – especially qualitative and action research forms – has been underappreciated, inaccessible, or insignificant in informing public and
policy conversations. While the history of education and educational reform play an important role in this marginalization, many current issues stem from the disinterest of the Board of Governor’s Association coupled with the power of testing, textbook, and technology lobbies on state and national politicians as well as educational administrators (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006; Ravitch, 2010; Spring, 2011, 2012). This dissertation is an attempt to address the need for more academic writing to be written in and for the public interest so as to capture their imaginations and concerns about what schooling, teaching, and learning are, have been, and could be in and beyond an era of high stakes standardized testing and regimented instruction. This writing is predicated on engaging *story* in two ways – story as an organizing process for educational partnerships for social justice (i.e., as a method for youth participatory action research, supporting teacher education, and inspiring school reform) and as a method of inquiry and analysis through dystopian story writing (i.e., creation of fiction).

Educational partnerships that make story and counter-narratives central to their organization can help address the marginalization of qualitative inquiry and action research traditions in the public sphere (Evans, Lomax, & Morgan, 2000; Griffiths, 2003; Magolda, 2001). Part of a broader call for post-modern arts and humanities research (Barone, 2006; Brown & Jones, 2001; Greene, 1977; Diamond & Mullen, 1999; Leavy, 2012a), focusing on *story* acknowledges that life in schools and communities are dynamic, temporal, and contextual, and that understandings of one another and our institutions are only ever partial. Story offers a way to rethink dominant schooling, teaching, learning, and research paradigms, and inspire an education of possibility rather than for certificate or credential. These understandings stand on a foundation of
sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and expect that the reading of – and listening to – one another’s stories is a transactional, exploratory, and subjective process (Rosenblatt, 1938/1991) with transformative potential. This includes the process of writing stories encompassing the Self, the Other, community and/or society, and current issues (Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2002; Leavy, 2013).

Of all story genres, science fiction dystopia has been used as one of the most powerful forms of social critique written to/for the public for nearly one hundred years (London, 1908/1975; Huxley, 1932/1989). Its roots lie even further back in utopian and satiric literature, such as Plato’s Republic, Arthurian Legend, Thomas More’s Utopia, and Swift’s Gullivar’s Travels, intertwining with the epic genre. George Orwell, in particular, wrote essays and dystopias that meditated on the role of social structures (1949), including schools (1992). This genre is a form of research akin to self-study, autoethnography, writing as inquiry, and arts-based inquiry movements in education primarily because it attempts to make sense of individuals and communities involved in complex social structures from subjective and intersubjective stances (Davis, 2004), but with one important difference. Science fiction dystopias have captured the public’s imagination and trust in recent decades in film (e.g., Star Wars, the Matrix, The Hunger Games, District 9), fiction (e.g, Clockwork Orange, Kindred, Handmaid’s Tale, 1984, We, I am Legend, Fahrenheit 451, A Canticle for Liebowitz, Anthem, and the myriad stories of Ursula K. Le Guin, Kurt Vonnegut, and Phillip K. Dick), and young adult fiction/literature (e.g . The Hunger Games, Divergent, The Giver, House of the Scorpion, etc.). The genre is one of the most popular in the United States (IMDB.com, 2013) with almost a third of the top 25 highest grossing films of all-time and one of the top sellers in
young adult (YA) fiction in recent years (Miller, 2010). It is heavily focused on turning contemporary social trends into oppressive societies (Sisk, 1997) and telling stories meant to highlight the injustices of both humanity and institutions through its characters and their relationships. These reasons make it an important vehicle for educational and arts-based inquiries, particularly among teachers and students whose lives are often micromanaged by “superiors,” social structures, and policies that attend little to their lives or to the needs of their families and communities. It also allows for detailed theorizing and cautioning about where current public education trends point us as a nation within a global context, as well as how we can best address the most troubling of those trends. With this in mind, this project assumes the working title of 2084.

II. Assumptions

In writing the story of 2084, I questioned the most dominant forms of schooling, instruction, and educational partnership – which are intended to support academic growth and achievement – but do so through technocentric and technocratic policies and practices. These policies and practices dehumanize the learning and generative capacity of students, teachers, educators, and community partners (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2006). This inquiry assumes and reasserts the central role that relationships, relationship building, community-building, community learning, and democratic inquiry can and should play in schools and society. I also attempt to question the purposes of education and processes of grassroots educational partnerships for social justice and illustrate how those differ significantly from the focus of most educational partnerships. I do so, in part, because those are the lived and storied experiences of my
partners, colleagues, and myself, as I live the life of a student, English language arts teacher, teacher educator, and community organizer simultaneously through various educational contexts across the United States and travels abroad.

Those identities blur and inform one another. It is for these reasons that an inquiry stance (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) on education and democracy, as well as a dynamic conception of social justice – aligned with feminist and critical perspectives – that recognizes the transformative potential of stories in partnership work (Bell, 2007, 2010; Griffiths, 2003), and post-modern understandings of educational and societal phenomena (Freire, 1970; Greene, 1977) resonate as appropriate representations of the challenges students and teachers face. These convictions, coupled with my schooling and teaching experiences with educational partners, suggest arts-based, emancipatory methods of research and writing (Barone, 2006; Diamond & Mullen, 1999; hooks, 1994; Kraehe & Brown, 2011; Leavy, 2012a, 2012b, 2013; Milner, 2007, 2008; Vickers, 2010) best serve as the basis for supporting, analyzing, and presenting the varied perspectives involved in an educational partnership for social justice.

This project assumes that practitioners are cultural workers (Freire, 1998b) – that is students, teachers, leaders, and other educators who work for and through a grassroots decentralized democracy or democratic processes. It also agrees with Heller (2001) that the protection and facilitation of grassroots democratic decentralization (versus that of technocratic democratic decentralization) is typically more just, aligning closely with Freire’s participatory pedagogy and politics (1970, 1994, 1998a). It recognizes that inquiry can be a powerful democratizing and community-building force in and beyond schools (bell hooks, 1994, 2003; Carole Hahn, 1998; Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009;
Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Evans, Lomax, & Morgan, 2000; Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota, 2006; Oakes & Rogers, 2006; Raider-Roth, 2011; Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006) and is one of the most important elements in reaching and teaching current and future generations of students, teachers, and citizens.

This project affirms the belief that stories help inspire and organize educational partnership work, and that they, along with the creation of fiction, such as a dystopian story, can be valid forms of an inquiry process and arts-based research (e.g., outlaw art) that pay particular attention to the importance of making educational research more accessible to and for the public (Barone, 2006; Evans, Lomax, & Morgan, 2000; Leavy, 2013; Vickers, 2010). Just as the dystopian genre is narrative fiction with altruistic political and moral intentions as well as didactic ones related to improving human existence and calling attention to contemporary problems (Sisk, 1997), arts-based inquiries should stir readers to feel both threatened in a new “wide-awakeness” and simultaneously empowered to resist (Greene, 1977; Barone, 2006). Both the sharing and creation of stories enact and embody social justice work and values, and a deep commitment and understanding to the foundations of education. This requires me to both interrogate and attend to my own identities and cultural positions (Milner, 2007) prior to and throughout the study. These actions also assert the subjective interpretations and biases inherent in all educational research and assessment (Pinar, 2012), and respect the multiple readings that participants do and/or bring with them in these experiences.
III. Stories Of Positionality

*Teacher-Educator Roots*

The inspiration for this work comes from many sources, but most recognizable would be from Erin Gruwell and the Freedom Writers, whose stories have been well-documented and celebrated nationally over the past two decades (Freedom Writers & Gruwell, 1999; Gruwell & Freedom Writers, 2007; Haglund, 1998; Lock & Sullivan, 2011) as well as critiqued for perpetuating a narrative of whites teachers as saints or saviors in urban education (Breault, 2009; Carter, 2009). In the spring of 2008, I confronted those narratives first hand. I had been teaching for several years at a public alternative high school in West Virginia when I received a call from the Freedom Writers Foundation telling me that my application to the upcoming Freedom Writers Institute in Long Beach California had been accepted. All expenses paid.

After seeing the movie, then reading the book, and finally reading the book with my students in West Virginia, I met a teacher at a state conference who was a part of the first class of Freedom Writer Teachers, trained through the newly-formed Freedom Writers Institute (Lock & Sullivan, 2011). He encouraged me to apply after hearing about the race, class, and gender issues that students and teachers at my school continually confronted.

Interested in what this opportunity could mean for my students and school, I readily agreed. Still the fear that the reality would not match the rhetoric (as so often is the case in education) pulled at me as I traveled to the Institute. Once there, I – along with the other teachers and administrators participating – took part in activities that Erin and the Freedom Writers had designed through their experiences together years before. These
experiences far exceeded anything I had expected. This didn’t feel like any professional
development I had ever experienced. It was so much more humane, humorous, and
hopeful. Many of the Freedom Writers (who were now in their late twenties) learned and
laughed alongside us in each activity we engaged in. Still the feeling of a catch, or
something too good to be true, nagged at me.

On the third day, I asked Erin and some of the Freedom Writers, “so what do we
need to do as a part of all of this?” Erin paused, made a quizzical expression and shook
her head slightly, “What do you mean?” I pressed - “so you’re spending a lot of money
on us to be out here and learn the methods that you created, what do we need to do when
the institute is over?” The highly-energetic Erin slowed as a smile crept on to her face -
“You were selected for a reason [the needs expressed in our application] – use this
however it can help.” Use parts of it, adapt it, be inspired by it to create something new;
there were no marching orders. There was no ego, no checklist, no territorialism. Just
freedom and respect for teachers, their contexts, and the needs of their students.

The following year, with the unwavering support of my principal and the school’s
math teacher, my students were able to engage in a Freedom Writers penpal partnership
with an alternative high school in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

From one of my journal entries from the early days of this partnership…

I’ve been getting a lot of resistance lately from a student named Amy. She says she
loves my class (the activities, discussions, and debates), but hates reading and
especially writing. Amy’s dealt with anger issues and is used to getting her way. Each
time I have given a writing assignment or prompt, Amy has complained
and spun around in a dance of circular logic until her face redens and she finally
blurs out something to the effect of - “I don’t want to do this! I just want to go home.
I’m going to go home! School is stupid. I don’t see any point in doing any of this!”

I coach, I coax, I cajole.

But to no avail; Amy will not put pen to paper.
I point out to Amy that she doesn’t like it when other students distract from class
discussion or get unfair treatment, but yet that IS what is happening each time she
refuses to do an assignment.

Then a package arrived just before Thanksgiving. The return address read: Sheila
Jones, Street School, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

The first batch of Freedom Writer pen pal letters had arrived.

Amy came into 202 (my room) on an errand to ask if I had some graphic organizers for
our history teacher. I handed them to her and then remarked offhandedly that her
penpal from Street School had written her.

Her eyes blazed, instead of glazed.

She asked if she could get the history teacher’s permission to come back down to my
room to read it that period.

I said that would be fine.

A few minutes later, Amy was back. I gave her the letter with her name on it. She took
a hold of it and read it immediately (still standing next to my desk). When she was
finished reading, she looked at me and asked, “Can I write her back now?”

I nodded to the computer and printer at the back of the room.

Amy gave a half-smile and strode to the computer with purpose. And she wrote with
purpose too.

20 minutes later, Amy had a neatly typed letter (which happened to be composed of 5
paragraphs) that shared and questioned goals, interests, and life experiences with her
penpal.

She had a reason to write: a new friend, from an alternative school somewhere
completely different from West Virginia, but someone who knew what it was like not
fit in with the mainstream.

And I had a reason to celebrate. I had a piece of writing that could finally start getting
Amy some grades and hopefully be the first attempt to change Amy’s mind about the
importance and possibilities of writing...in and for the “real” world.

My thanks to Sheila Jones and our penpals at Street School. Our students couldn’t be
more excited about this partnership.

With the support of local businesses and fundraisers, penpals students in the junior class
and I boarded a plane and spent spring break touring the arts, culture, and social justice
venues of Tulsa with their penpals. Most had never left the state of West Virginia before
nor ridden on a plane. Two months later, I accompanied students from our senior class to
Washington, D.C. for their annual “Discover D.C.” trip. Students who had never seen
themselves as part of American mythology began dreaming – they were seeing other possibilities and opportunities, and they wrote about them.

In 2009, my wife finished her doctorate and accepted the closest job offer she could to West Virginia; it was in the Midwest. That summer we moved. With a heavy heart, I began looking for a way to continue the most meaningful work of my career, work that connected the classroom with the community and the community with the lived experiences that have made us who we are. This is where a-ha moments come from – a collaborative commitment to voice and choice in education.

The University of Cincinnati offered me such an opportunity. There I met two teacher educators – Chet and Steve – who had been co-teaching a methods course that united secondary English language arts and special education students in a high school setting. Just across the street from the university, stands Hughes STEM High School. A marvel of 1910 architecture and engineering, the newly renovated Hughes tower not only keeps a close eye on the university campus in one direction, but also the downtown in the other.

As a supplement to their course, and as part of a STEM literacy grant, Chet and Steve created an afterschool “third space” or “hybrid space” (Gutierrez, 2009; Kirkland, 2008; Martin, Snow, & Torrez, 2011; Zeichner, 2010) with the help of Hughes teachers, including an English teacher named Joyce, so that they and their students could engage in “hybrid spaces in teacher education where academic and practitioner knowledge and knowledge that exists in communities come together in new, less hierarchical ways in the service of teacher learning” (Zeichner, 2010, p.89) as well as better address the literacy needs of Hughes STEM high school students. As part of this collaboration, they offered
a variety of afterschool literacy activities focusing on voice, which not only included the Freedom Writers group, but also Photovoice, Creating Graphic Novels, and Literature Circle groups.

After setting up a table and meeting students at the Hughes’ open house to describe their program, Chet, Steve, and I were able to interest a number of students in the programs. Le’Asha, Sabrina, and Frenchele were the first Hughes students to inquire into what the Freedom Writers were all about. With the support of Joyce, the group was able to begin a sustained inquiry into what its members had to say, teach, and learn from each other.

What began with inspiration from a hopeful national story about a teacher and students defying the odds has taken root and sprouted a new group of students, teachers, and teacher educators who are committed to making schools more thoughtful, humane, and hopeful. 2084 is a snapshot of some of those journeys.

Student Roots

Hulking

I

I am 3 ½ and living in a rural college town in the Midwest. I’m staying with my parents in the university’s international housing apartments. My parents keep talking about a house that is being built, but today they’re going back and forth about something that happened earlier in the day. My mom is whispering to my dad about the kids not wanting to play with me on the playground - something about the kids and families not
used to living alongside Americans, but maybe it’s just me. Was I really crying out across the playground all afternoon, “Will someone please play with me?!?”

The Incredible Hulk just came on the TV. Doesn’t matter anymore. Best part of the day. David Banner must hit the road to try to find a place to settle down for yet another week. Not likely. People don’t treat him right – no matter where he goes. But what they don’t know is that they aren’t going to like him when he’s angry. Oh, and he will get angry. RAHHH!

After the episode ends, I tell my dad to push me. He says, “Give me the money, Banner.” I say, “You’re not going to like me when I’m angry.” And within moments, I transform into something bigger, stronger, fiercer than I am (but something that had been burning inside all along). I am Hulk; hear me roar! We wrestle and the world is safe for another week.

II

Months later, we have moved into the country. No neighbors, save a trailer on the hill behind us, the trees and creek surrounding us, and a trailer park about a third of a mile around a steep ridge in front of our house. The preschool I had gone to was in town but the elementary school I now found myself entering was on the outskirts of everything.

There was little support for me to understand my Jewish heritage during this time – let alone why some of the poor kids and want-to-be rich kids were acting the way they were at my elementary school. Few Jews lived in the town I grew up in, and even fewer in the rolling hills around it. Many had left their Jewish traditions behind to blend in or simply to be left alone.
My dad had grown up poor without his own father from the time he was eleven. After his dad died, his Uncle Bud used to take him fishing instead of going to Hebrew school. Nonetheless, he had come back to find a Jewish identity as an adult through service to the social action committee at the Hillel near campus.

While we celebrated the high holidays and some of the lesser ones too, it was much easier to “pass” as United Methodist, the faith tradition of my mother and the other side of my family. That seemed not to have any stigma, especially since so many of the students at my school went to the United Methodist Church, or were at least outspoken about being Christian. According to some of the locals, Jews were always looking for money or trying to cheat other people out of theirs.

I gulped down the idea that "we don't discuss religion or politics at work or at school" without even thinking about it as a child, and the communities in which I found myself did not support learning about or interest in half of my heritage. I was not strong enough to forge ahead. Issues of race, class, or gender were part of a null curriculum that existed outside of my house, outside of my mom’s sharp eye and strong sense of morality, and my parents’ sense of service. I remember laughing at the racist, hate-dispensing jokes my elementary school classmates told – because everyone else was – even before I knew what they meant (e.g., I can still remember the excited smile of the boy asking, "How do you fit 6,000,000 Jews in a car?).” That memory still turns my stomach and drives me to action. What I quickly learned in school was that much of the community I grew up in did not share my family’s openness and ways with words. I remember telling peers and adults in school what they wanted to hear to blend in – to gain more access, status, and power. And because I was a white male with access to
college, religious, and country conversations from an early age, I discovered that I had
certain abilities to not only blend in, but also to stand out when I needed.

This led me to question who I really was amidst all of the tensions of those worlds
and words, but that confusion about my identity and place in school “paled” in
comparison to that of one of my family members.

III

By the end of high school, I became conscious of the trajectories of two slightly
older family members in Cincinnati, Ohio. From playing, banter, and telling stories with
them, I was confronted with deeper senses of race and class in America. One is white and
one black. One grew up in the suburbs and one in the city (and later the suburbs)… and
their respective school systems and histories meant two very different things for them.
While both struggled academically k-12, only one had the option to go to college, and at
a major comprehensive university at that. The other didn’t just struggle academically; he
struggled deeply – in his core - every time I saw him. His father was of African-
American and Native American descent, his mother white, and while his skin was dark,
his hair was straight and this meant he had no real home away from home, no place to
ever settle down, nowhere to relax and to be accepted as he was.

Like David Banner – the man and mask of the Incredible Hulk – my relative felt
forced to stay on the move, lest he be labeled as having “anger problems” or a “behavior
disorder.” Among multiple trades, he made ends meet and has found a more comfortable
place to be who he is, but it came at a much greater cost – not the way he had once
dreamed – and not the ways my other family member was able to realize his childhood
dreams. Not the way I was able to achieve many of my own.
In early adolescence, I went out West for a month with my mom’s side of the family. The National Parks, the landscapes, the big sky, even the architecture, businesses, people, and history of the region fascinated me – so very different than the Midwest and Appalachia. So big. So mysterious. Plenty of space to find and be yourself, at least that was what I felt at the time. My world exploded, both opening and closing in four short stimulating weeks – so much was possible “out there” and I didn’t have any way to experience it again until I was older.

By high school, thanks to a conscientious social studies teacher, I got to travel the West again a different way. I read Dee Brown’s *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, a chronicle of Native American tribes from their perspectives as the West was lost. It was the first book to make me want to know why injustices occurred and fight to stop future ones.

IV

These values were only strengthened in college at the University of Arizona. I met Luis my freshman year. He was the son of Mexican immigrants, who were at first unauthorized, then authorized, and, decades later, U.S. citizens. My freshman year in college, Luis, his mother, and three brothers were working to raise enough money to apply for a green card (even though his father was a U.S. citizen, after having been granted amnesty in the 1980’s). During that time, he told me a story of not seeing his father for over two years while they were waiting for him to earn enough money to pay their way from Guadalajara through Mexico to the U.S. border, and then a more trustworthy "coyote" to get them across the border into northwestern Arizona where his father was working the graveyard shift at a dairy farm.
He told me of how his first year in U.S. schools - a middle school in a small town in Arizona - he was asked to speak about a favorite pet or animal for a public speaking assignment in one of his classes. Because of the language barrier that mirrored the social and physical barriers he was also confronting, Luis tried to ask a fellow classmate, who was white, about what was being asked of them. His classmate told him an animal like a "cat." Luis understood this, nodding, replying that he had a "black cat," named "Negrito" (Spanish for "little blackie" - a common name for black cats in Mexico - and at that time, completely unaware of the drug-laced joint that went by the same name), to his classmate. His classmate smiled and said, "Well, here we call that cat 'N---er'…say that." Luis asked how to write that. When it was Luis's turn to speak to the class, he walked to the front of the room, uncomfortable with facing everyone. He did what he had seen others do - write a few words on the board so he could point to those. He decided he would write his cat's name and the word cat after it for everyone to understand him. But within moments of writing "N---er" on the board, he found himself in the principal's office while school administrators attempted to make contact with Luis's mother who spoke almost no English. Luis remembered being scared - but he also remembered growing a thick skin early in his American schooling.

In some ways, this isolation forced him to focus on reading, school work, and his imagination, but it also meant a feeling of alienation and not being understood, even after he had mastered the English language in high school. Because his grades were strong in high school, he would get his name published in the local paper for being on the honor role. The dairy farmer, who Luis's father worked for, saw Luis's name grade period after grade period. Luis's senior year, the dairy farmer offered to pay tuition costs for Luis to
attend the University of Arizona if he kept his grades up. This is how I met Luis, and how he learned from my experiences and my parents' experiences about how to navigate college campuses... and I learned just how much I had to be thankful for. I also learned that Spanish was a beautiful language with rhythms and history our own language could not fully translate. I learned that Mexico was full of mystery, cultural conflict and celebration. I learned that me and my family weren't the only ones to feel like we lived on the borders of things.

Seeing the plight Luis and his family endured because they were labeled “Mexican” or “illegal” or "brown" or some equivalent of the three by white people merged with the issues I was being challenged with in my studies in anthropology and in the Humanities, as well as in travels to Egypt, and later to Peru. These provided me sustained opportunities to explore the world and to question the role of humanity in it. What makes us human and how have people attempted to embrace that? What has stood in their way? How do we embrace that right now as we find ourselves in a complex web of worldly things, competing histories, and conflicting stories? These are not just memories of race, diversity, and learning for me, but memories and maps for moving forward - of not only remembering who I was, but who I am in relation to others.

As I think back about these questions and concerns, I wonder now if the Hulk would have ever made it into a Langston Hughes’ poem – had he been around back then – or inspired an Arthurian Legend or story by Cervantes. How does one live with the fact that he or she cannot live life the way he or she wants to? Especially when others and institutions attempt to hold you fast by a label that is supposed to mean something about who you are at your core… or what you’re able to do based on where you came from or
who you’re associated with. I can tell you something about what happens to a dream deferred, but only a part. I have learned to live with anger even though I have more of it for more people the longer I am alive. I have been granted too much access too easily to too many people's predicaments to know that I will never have it all figured out, nor is that the point. The point is improving access and opportunities for all of us to recognize just how much we don't know about each other, how much we have left to learn.... and to write, act, speak, teach, and advocate accordingly - from the classroom to community center to Congress - and beyond. It is for the sacredness of childhood, the world, and its partners that I embrace these actions.
Section Two

I. Conceptual Lenses & Research Goals

...At any rate when a subject is highly controversial...one cannot hope to tell the truth. One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold. One can only give one's audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions as they observe the limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncrasies of the speaker... ~Virginia Woolf

2084 has three academic goals as well as several practical and personal ones. The academic goals are threefold. First, to locate the exigency for and potential of educational partnerships for social justice, especially those that have been organized through story. Second, to theorize educational partnerships for social justice as addressing and redefining the purpose and processes of academic engagement, equity, and achievement. Third, to theorize the future of education based on current trends and contrast it with more flexible, meaningful, and humane schooling and teaching systems through the creation of a dystopian story. At a practical level, it is my hope that this dissertation will be a springboard for creating texts that will generate dialogue, if not stimulate a movement, that could help teachers and students across the country engage creatively with each other about current trends in education and ways to address them. That dialogue may also help them network with community stakeholders to bring about grassroots school and social change predicated on promoting more creative, equitable, and flexible schooling cultures where relationships and personal stories are emphasized and institutionalized. On a personal level, building upon my experiences as a classroom English language arts teacher, teacher educator, and community organizer, I want to continue to bring more student, teacher, and teacher educator perspectives to conversations in the public sphere about school reform. I also want to highlight the
important work students and teachers can do when they are allowed to explore, negotiate with, and question each other and their world. Writing an arts-based dissertation study of an educational partnership through the creation of a dystopian novel aimed at engaging the public on issues of education and justice – and the lives they speak to – is a union of my professional and personal goals.

*Goal #1: locate the exigency for and potential of educational partnerships for social justice.*

The literature relating to educational partnerships with social justice commitments reveals that they can be both formal and informal agreements to share in the development and implementation of projects, events, or other phenomena (e.g., school and community change movements) with other schools, governmental agencies, businesses, cultural centers, community organizations, parents, and, more specifically, some of the people that make up those entities (Anyon, 2006; Ball 2006; Brydon-Miller & Maguire, 2009; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Ford, 2006; Freedom Writers & Gruwell, 1999; Hemmings, 2012; Marshall & Oliva, 2010; Mediratta, Shah, & McAlister, 2009). The emphasis of much of this work and research has to do with equitable educational resources and support, and education as an act of empowerment, transformation, and social justice. These interests are either rooted in - or connected to - emancipatory philosophy and pedagogy (Freire, 1970; Greene, 1993; hooks, 1994) and John Dewey’s notions of democracy (Dewey, 1888, 1916, 1927; Harkavy & Hartley, 2009; Oakes & Rodgers, 2006).
Most research on educational partnerships committed to social justice focuses on serving and supporting participants and their academic literacies, development, or achievement in urban contexts (Cammarota, 2008; Carlisle, Jackson, & George, 2012; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Marshall & Oliva, 2010; McIntyre, 2000; Mediratta, Shah, & McAlister, 2009; Rogers, Morrell, & Enyedy, 2007; Morrell, 2009; Oakes & Rogers, 2006). Participants in these cases are not only students, but also teachers, parents, and university researchers, as part of an ongoing commitment to social and educational justice unite partnership work. However, little to no research exists that unites students, teachers, teacher educators, and non-profit or “cultural” workers throughout a region that encompasses urban, suburban, and rural contexts, and myriad ethnic, socio-economic, and historical backgrounds. This dissertation is a contribution in this area of partnership literature.

Also, because partnerships require partners, and those partners share different organizational structures, histories, and expectations, partnership work can and should be difficult to define beyond general definitions. Partnerships for social justice, equity, or cultural competence imply that each partnership is unique—both personally and contextually dependent – and that it depends on its partners to negotiate and renegotiate its needs, projects, and processes (e.g., relational supports) in and beyond their respective organizations or branches of the same organization. Here is where their power lies, especially in an era of standardization and commoditization: It is a potentially generative and flexible space that depends on people working both in and beyond current systems at the same time. As Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2011) note, “when practitioner researchers take an inquiry stance [in partnership with one another], they are engaged in work both
within and against the system—an ongoing process, from the inside, of problematizing fundamental assumptions about the purposes of the existing education system and raising difficult questions about educational resources, processes, and outcomes” (pp. 21-22).

Goal #2: theorize educational partnerships for social justice as addressing and redefining the purpose and processes of academic engagement, equity, and achievement.

Assertions of the importance of educational partnerships in positively impacting k-20 schools, students, teaching faculty, and the communities they are a part of have been well documented over the past several decades (Boyer, 1981, 1990, 1996; Goodlad, 1991, 2004; Holmes Group, 1990; Maeroff, 1983; NCLB Act of 2001). Much of this stems from Ernest Boyer who argued repeatedly that university-community partnerships were a way to address society's "most pressing social, civic, economic, and moral problems" (1996, p.1). He called this type of community engagement the "scholarship of engagement" and argued for building new kinds of communities of learning (Boyer, 1996). Thanks also in large part to the school reform findings and advocacy of Jonathan Goodlad and the Holmes Group for p-12 education, the need and interest of educational leaders all across the educational spectrum have found sanctioned space for engaging in meaningful partnership work to bring about school, community, and social change.

With the theoretical framework that Cochran-Smith & Lytle (2009) provide and its philosophical connections to the work of Dewey, Greene, Freire, and host of related, more recent post-modern scholars (Cammarota, 2008; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Griffiths, 2003; Oakes & Rodgers, 2006), educational partnerships building on shared
notions of democratic social inquiry and of social justice goals become the evaluative
criteria for selecting “scholarship of engagement” and inclusive communities of learning
that go beyond school lines. Griffiths’ work (2003) serves as an important reminder to the
ever-changing processes and practices of social justice partnership work in education
(2003), while Dantley & Tillman (2010) assert the need for shared goals and outcomes.
Action researchers, Catelli, Costello, and Padovano (2000) provide a general definition
for educational partnerships that hinges on two or more entities working together over
time towards a common goal and draw on the work of Goodlad (1994) and Schlechty &
Whitford (1988) to categorize partnerships as either *symbiotic* – equal parties working in
mutual self-interest on shared projects – or *organic* – interdependent parties jointly
responsibility for identifying and working towards common goals. However, the two
categories exist at ends of a spectrum that some partnerships can traverse (Catelli,
Costell, & Padovano, 2000), the latter being integral to conducting inquiry-based work
(Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). It should be noted, however, that studies by Breault and
Lack (2009) found that PDS schools, a proposed form of inquiry-based partnership, have
not – on a wide scale – enacted equity and empowerment work as originally conceived,
leaving the vision of a partnership – whether it be symbiotic or organic – unrealized.

In their study on k-20 educational partnerships, only some of which had implied
or explicit social justice goals, Clifford and Millar (2008) concluded that clear definition
of the term “educational partnership” was lacking in both scope and rigor by researchers.
They found that the term was: 1) not defined 2) defined by the membership of its
members 3) defined in comparison to another form of organization 4) defined but lacking
sufficient indicators to fully understand. This may be due to the wide variety of
purposes, possibilities, and challenges that educational partnerships can offer community and k-20 leaders as well as that this work is still in its infancy (Smedley, 2001).

I argue that central to understanding educational partnerships for social justice is that they share an inquiry stance and aims (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009) that unite many of the varied and related terms referring to educational partnerships as practitioner-focused. These terms can include school-university-community partnerships, community-academic partnerships, learning communities, community of learners, communities of practice, hybrid or third space, PAR (participatory action research) and YPAR (youth participatory action research), community-based education, culturally-responsive partnerships, alliances, coalitions, collaborations or collaboratives. An inquiry stance by the practitioners in these partnerships (which must include students) imply that they value and practice: a) local knowledge in global contexts, b) expanded views of interplay among teaching, learning, & leading, as well as who counts as a practitioner, c) an understanding of practitioner communities as the primary medium or mechanism for enacting inquiry as a theory of action, d) the position that the overarching purpose of practitioner inquiry is to provide education for a more just and democratic society (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). As Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2009) explain, inquiry can be a practice of questioning ways of being and knowing in the world that “recognizes the collective intellectual capacity of practitioners to work in alliance with others to transform teaching, learning, leading, and schooling in accordance with democratic principles and social justice goals” (p. 118).

In a just democracy, then, students, teachers, and leaders need to be encouraged, supported and provided with opportunities to express their opinions and challenge
practices with which they disagree, based on their lived experiences, as well as storying related to those experiences (Freedom Writers & Gruwell, 1999; Greene, 1995; hooks, 1994, 2003; Rogers, Moseley, Kramer, & the Literacy for Social Justice Teacher Research Group, 2009; Rose, 1995; Winter, 1991). Youth-led Participatory Action Research (YPAR) offers such an inquiry opportunity. Cammarota and Fine define YPAR and locate it as a Freirian vision that allows “young people to resist the normalization of systematic oppression by undertaking their own engaged praxis—critical and collective inquiry, reflection and action focused on ‘reading’ and speaking back to the reality of the world, their world” and go on to say that it “provides young people with opportunities to study social problems affecting their lives and then determine actions to rectify these problems” (2008). Cammarota and Fine explain that what separates YPAR from critical youth studies is that it is “designed to contest and transform systems and institutions to produce greater justice—distributive justice, procedural justice, and what Iris Marion Young calls a justice of recognition, or respect” (2008). YPAR is among a large and fast-growing area of literature focused on grassroots youth and community organizing to bring about improved educational inputs, processes, and outcomes for students and teachers, and to enact school and social change in an effort to combat institutionalized, social and individual acts of discrimination and deficit attitudes (Cammarota, 2008; Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Ford, 2006; Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota, 2006, Harkavy & Hartley, 2009; Mediratta, Shah, & McAlister, 2009; Morrell, 2009; Oakes & Rogers, 2006; Rogers, Morrell, & Enyedy, 2007).

Cochran-Smith and Lytle’s Inquiry as Stance reveals that these social practices are a part of a larger practitioner inquiry movement that is committed to attending to
issues of culture, context, and power, as well as race, class, and gender, in analyzing and organizing actions for school reform (2009). This is both an individual and a shared processes involving multiple and diverse participants from multiple and diverse backgrounds, experiences, and realities. Their commitments, along with many other action researchers (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007), are to continual questioning and experimentation on both individual and community levels, to dialogue (and the storytelling and listening that it implies), and to the democratic and transformative meeting spaces (or places) that partnerships and inquiry practices can help to create and sustain.

Goal #3: theorize the future of education based on current trends and contrast it with a more flexible, meaningful, and humane schooling and teaching systems through the creation of a dystopian story

With the embrace of corporate models and mindsets advocated by far too many politicians, lobbyists, economists, business leaders, private foundations, and the federal policy they impact, American schools have not only felt financially bound to compete for federal monies available through No Child Left Behind since 2001, but also tried to satisfy its definitions of what constitutes acceptable scientific research on education (Hyslop-Marginson & Dale, 2005; Hursh, 2006; Spring, 2011). This has led to standards-based reform focused on “accountability” and “school choice” movements driven by the privatization and consumer culture in public schools where student test scores are the measure of good teachers and schools (Delandshere & Petrosky, 2004; Hinchey &
The competition that stems from these models, and which can mostly recently be seen the form of U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan’s *Race to the Top* initiative, has led to narrow and deeply flawed definitions of what constitutes “good” or “effective” students, teachers, curricula, and schools (Ravitch, 2010). Misrepresenting what constitutes science, the scientifically-based research (SBR) and evidence-based research (EBR) language of NCLB and its proponents try to capture and quantify two infinitely complex phenomena—humans and learning (Biesta, 2007; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009; Combleth, 2006; Erickson & Gutierrez, 2003; Gillborn, 2006, St. Pierre, 2003, 2006). As a result, students, teachers, and curricula have been forced to focus on teaching and learning for test scores rather than for curiosity, connection, and creativity, and for personal, civic, and societal goods.

Unfortunately, in many cases, the exact opposite has occurred—students and teachers pitted against one another over test scores and reductive, dehumanizing models of schooling. The blame game and finger pointing occur among students and teachers (and parents… and administrators…) as the rhetoric of accountability heightens from those apparently immune from its demands and implications (Ravitch, 2010). All the while, money is diverted from the Arts, as music, art, theatre, photography, philosophy see their departments dwindle or die. The curricula, content, and objectives (and even class sizes in many cases) of English language arts and history are overcrowded and overly complicated by the departures of their companions (Davis, 2012; Fowler, 2001). Schools and communities have re-segregated by race and class since A Nation At-Risk (1983), leaving the promise of Brown vs. BoE (1954) and the Civil Rights Act (1964) unfulfilled (Alonso, Anderson, Su, & Theorharis, 2009; Spring, 2011, 2012).
While educational researchers are well aware of these trends, much of what reaches the American public about education, as Alonso, Anderson, Su, & Theorharis (2009) point out, is that public education is inherently flawed due to the work of teacher unions, lazy teachers, disrespectful and unmotivated students, and that only some schools are worth investing in (e.g., *Waiting for Superman*, *Bad Teacher*, etc.). Where are the voices for reflection and questioning of where we are, how we got here, and where might we go next? Where is the time for those voices to challenge and embrace one another in dialogue, as well as find new modes of dialogue and inquiry that connect them to school, district, local, state, national, or even international officials and issues? It is through questions like these that we show and assert our right as a nation that humans and learning are always more than scores, grades, and narrow or perverted definitions science that certain economists and policymakers have clung to as the only truth they will accept or allow. The creation of new public narratives for considering the value, purpose, possibilities, and diverse stakeholders of schooling and teaching is needed (Bell, 2010; Griffiths, 2003).

Humans and their learning depend on relationships (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Raider-Roth, 2005) that are situated in a vast network of physical and mental contexts, needs, feelings, and ways with words (Heath, 1983), all the while taking place in a dynamic world, a world in constantly in motion and undergoing constant change (Ayers, 2006). Educational partnerships for social justice, informed by and through the arts and arts-based inquiries (as well as broader conceptions of science) reframe and reform current conceptions of learning, assessment, curriculum, and professional development because they unite students, teachers, administrators, parents, teacher educators, and
educational researchers in creating, considering, and negotiating what is taught, why, how, and when (Cammarota & Fine, 2008; Evans, Lomax, & Morgan, 2000; Freedom Writers & Gruwell, 1999). Educational partnerships for social justice focus on possibilities, assets, and interests, and not on limitations, deficits, and conformity. They are more nuanced, complex, and democratic; they drive learning through questions rather than answers. And because they are created and re-created through/for/by questioning, new, more hopeful educational spaces and opportunities are made through the study, creation, and re-creation of the Arts. These spaces and opportunities are predicated on recognition, reflection, and a re-viewing of ethical and moral stances in the world, as well as research aware of its own snapshot of possibilities and limitations within a vast and forever-changing picture of the universe (Ayers, 2006; Diamond & Mullen, 1999).
Section Three

I. Research Questions

“The purpose of art is to lay bare the questions which have been hidden by the answers.”

~James Baldwin

This inquiry uses the following questions to collect, analyze, and present data around an educational partnership inspired by an existing story of social justice (or counter-narrative) within American schooling (Freedom Writers & Gruwell, 1999). The analysis and presentation of the data takes place through the creation of a new dystopian story that highlights partner voices, and synthesizes those with current educational research and my own experiences, to theorize future partnership and reform efforts, exigency, and possibilities.

a. How do students, teachers and educators who participate in an educational partnership organized by story describe the challenges, barriers and constraints they face in public schooling? How do they attempt to address them (i.e., present day and in the future)?

b. How will our public education system look in 2084 if current trends continue?

c. What is the role of student and teacher in 2084 and how/why does context matter?

d. What forms can educational partnerships for social justice take? Whom can they impact and how?

e. What are the possibilities for students and teachers, their relationships, and learning in and beyond 2084?
II. Relationships & Sites of Inquiry

“Spring is the mischief in me, and I wonder...before I built a wall I'd ask to know / What I was walling in or walling out, /And to whom I was like to give offence...” ~ Robert Frost

Relational Web

Capra (1997) makes explicit the interconnected nature of the universe as well as our subjectivity and action within it. He invites us to consider our web of life (Capra, 1997) and the relationships that it consists of. Also, the importance of relationships in education emerged from the words and convictions of Chet, one of the study’s participants (as detailed in Section Five: On Writing). With their assertions in mind, I want to be explicit about those relationships that helped support this project. I am studying, facilitating, and learning from an ongoing educational partnership to support student and teacher voices, as well as the professional development activities that bring them together with pre-service teachers and other community and cultural educators. This is in an effort to engage in social justice and democratic inquiry to promote more inside-out change. More specifically, I am a part of a high school afterschool literacy and leadership project, a form of youth participatory action research (YPAR), dubbed the Hughes Freedom Writers. Students chose the name after voicing interest in reading the Freedom Writers Diary, as well as questioning and engaging in Freedom Writer activities. In this partnership and its related activities, my multiple identities as a student, a high school English language arts teacher, a Freedom Writer Teacher, teacher educator, traveler, writer, border-crosser and experimental bridge-builder, have been respected, questioned, and allowed to co-mingle and jump tracks. This occurs as the diverse participants who make up the Hughes Freedom Writers write, question, debate, negotiate,
and support one another’s concerns with schooling and teaching issues along with their personal lives. It is what one of the students characterized as a “safe space” with “no judgment” and another as “a family.”

Attending to any possible instances of “seduction or betrayal” (Newkirk, 1996) that could arise in the group, I take those student characterizations and values very seriously; they keep fresh and raw the peaks and valleys my students and colleagues have sojourned, as well as the ones I have too. Structured ethical reflection and covenantal ethics of feminist action researchers (Brydon-Miller, 2007, 2008, 2012) help inform and attend to the relationships that support this study, as well as the consent form used (Appendix A), as participants were provided with preliminary findings at each stage of the data analysis and given the opportunity to withdraw or amend their participation and consent forms at any time during the course the data collection, analysis, and write-up. More details are provided in the following sections.

Site and participant selection

The Hughes Freedom Writers is an afterschool literacy and leadership partnership project between Hughes High School, the University of Cincinnati’s School of Education. It is part of larger educational partnership, the Teaching for Hope & Justice Network, located primarily at a teacher-led urban STEM school serving students in grades 7-12, the majority of whom are coming from low SES backgrounds. Participants meet weekly during the academic year, and occasionally at teacher or facilitator homes during breaks. Participants in this study have been selected based on sustained attendance and participation for more than one academic semester. This could include as many as
nine Hughes STEM High School Freedom Writer students, one Hughes STEM High School English language arts teacher, one doctoral student in Literacy, one university teacher educator, one community/cultural center worker at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center who supports programming for Hughes Freedom Writers, and several pre-service teachers. However, Hughes Freedom Writer partners who attended the majority of meetings during 2011-2012 and external PD workshops and conferences offer the broadest ability to comment on the range of the group’s activities and were invited to be interviewed as part of this arts-based inquiry, as they became driving forces behind building and sustaining this partnership. All participants, including student partners, were at least 18 years of age by the time interviews were conducted.

At a weekly meeting and in a follow-up over email, I explained the project and its goals to the Hughes Freedom Writers. I let them know that a fellow doctoral student in the group could be contacted if they had questions or concerns that they were not comfortable raising with me. Participants who were interested told me in person, texted, emailed, or called. I then met with interested participants individually to discuss consent forms and rights in-person as per a standard protocol (Appendix A). All of the participants were offered anonymity and the reasons for aliases were discussed; all requested to have their real names used. Three high school students – Adama, Frenchele, and Karissa – who had been involved in the Hughes Freedom Writers for more than a year were interviewed, as well as the cooperating teacher – Joyce, a university partner – Chet, and a community partner – Richard. The university partner is a teacher educator and professor of Literacy, while the community educator directs programs for one of the city’s largest museums and cultural centers. The community educator was included to
probe another stakeholder perspective on the partnership project (Brydon-Miller, 2008).

In sum, I interviewed six partners – three students, one classroom teacher, one teacher educator, and one community partner – who have been a part of the partnership since the first year it began.

**III. Data collection**

“Research is formalized curiosity. It’s poking and prying with a purpose.” ~Zora Neale Hurston

Data sources include: weekly meeting documents (e.g., journal entries, including my own, and/or discussion notes) from Hughes Freedom Writers (HFW), HFW Spring Grove cemetery writing retreat documentation (i.e., group notes and individual writing entries), selected local and national public presentations as well as Teaching for Hope & Justice Network professional development workshops that HFW participated in from 2011-2012, and semi-structured interviews of the formative and transformative stories of Hughes Freedom Writers and partnership activities.

At least one research interview was conducted with each participating partner (Appendix B). Interviews took place at either the university’s college of education or at an alternate site of their choosing near Hughes STEM High School. Classroom or office space was needed and available at each site. Site support letters were requested and granted from Hughes personnel, specifically the cooperating teacher and the school’s programs facilitator. Preliminary findings were member checked in follow-up interview(s) and partnership project meetings (Winter, 1991); these meetings included opportunities for reader response feedback and follow-up (Appendix B). Participants
were also invited to write directly to the public through a letter or poem from Hilltop, a fictionalized school in 2084.

The study took approximately a year and a half. Data collection for documents involving self-study and interviews took place during the 2012-2013 academic year. Data analysis and research project write-up occurred beginning in the spring of 2013 through the fall of 2013. Prior to each interview and member-check, participants were reminded that they could withdraw or modify their participation and consent form at any time prior to the conclusion of this arts-based inquiry project. Because this study received exempt status by the IRB, ethical reflection processes of feminist action researchers (Brydon-Miller, 2007, 2008, 2012; Greenwood, Brydon-Miller, & Schafer, 2006) were considered and addressed by the Hughes Freedom Writers which acted as the primary interpretive community for this study, while members of my dissertation committee and faculty associated with the UC Action Research Center acted as a secondary one. Four outside readers of various ages, in various professions, in different parts of the country were also asked to provide feedback on a rough draft of the novel.

**Ethical Considerations**

Hughes Freedom Writers were part of a structured ethical reflection (SER) process involving the ways values were enacted in the study (Brydon-Miller, 2012). Structured ethical reflection arises out of “a respect for people and for the knowledge and experience they bring to the research process, a belief in the ability of democratic processes to achieve positive social change, and a commitment to action” and that core values can be identified and “translated into a set of basic principles that inform the
practice of action research throughout the research process” (Brydon-Miller, 2012, p. 157). Structured ethical reflection can take the form of matrices where rows of participant-identified values meet columns naming each stage of the research process. Those matrices are discussed and condensed into one group matrix highlighting the most important value-driven actions throughout the research process (Appendix C). They provide “a structure for guiding ethical reflection throughout the research process” to consider critical questions at each stage that attend to the concerns of the participants and the principles of action research (Brydon-Miller, 2012, p. 157). Additionally, faculty on my committee and of the UC Action Research Center served as an advisory board for this project and contributed additional considerations for conducting rigorous, ethical research.

Attending to the expressed concerns of both the SER and my advisory board, participants were provided with interpretive findings at each stage of the data analysis and given the opportunity to provide feedback, as well as amend or withdraw their participation and consent forms at any time during the course of data collection, interpretation, and presentation.

While Hughes Freedom Writers did not express an interest in writing the story, they did want to see how they were a part of it. I offered an option for participants to submit a small piece of writing, such as a poem or letter, to be found in a fictionalized school in the novel. Several voiced an interest in submitting one of their poems in this way. To help participants direct how their values could be put into action in the writing and revising of the story, I used SER as a guide (Brydon-Miller, 2012).
However, when I approached the group with a SER matrix, they were hesitant. Typically the group works only from our journals, blank paper, or wipe boards, but a “handout” with many empty boxes and a title of a formal sounding process had their attention if not their trust. It was introduced as part of the annual writing retreat for the group. However, the group voted to open the retreat with a hot-seat collaborative writing activity, where each participant started writing in a particular genre for three minutes and then moved to the next seat/genre around the table for three minutes. After everyone had had a chance to write in a different genre, we stopped, read, and discussed the stories, poems, and images that had been created. After that, everyone journaled about where they were that day (i.e., what has been on their mind) and then shared in a circle. I charted common concerns, ideas, and issues on the board to use to organize what was being voiced and to cross-check with interviews later. After that activity, I re-introduced the 2084 project and read excerpts from Julio’s early chapters for “reader-response” feedback. As the last activity of the retreat (and after everyone had eaten lunch), I introduced SER as a way to “putting your values into action” with the project and a way to help me check with them about the process of implementing it.

Two Hughes Freedom Writers voiced concern over filling out the structured ethical reflection tables due to tiredness and lack of focus. I realized that in the space of a university classroom that I was using less accessible, more academic terms like “member check” and “reader response” instead of something like “ways you can make sure you’re okay with how and what I’m writing relates to our work together.” I adopted Karissa’s language of “being a critic” for the reader-response discussion to make it more understandable, but because I was less comfortable enacting SER with high school
students, I had a more difficult time translating its functions. When the group voiced concerns around filling in all of the boxes “of the worksheet,” I told them to only fill in the boxes where they see their values impacting relating to the creation of 2084. I also reiterated how their ideas could help change what I do in writing this story with the values they identify.

After waiting until everyone was done writing, Hughes Freedom Writers reported out from their matrices and we looked for connections and tensions in values and their related actions. The group found strong consensus around valuing respect, creativity, and leadership in the process which translated to agreement that these values should be a part of group meetings and dynamics for the reading, summary, response to, and revision of chapters. For the group, respect, creativity, and leadership weren’t just values that were shared but features of the way group meetings are conducted where everyone gets a turn to question, comment, and contribute to the creation of meaning.

IV. Data analysis

“...humans are storytelling organisms who, individually and socially, lead storied lives.”

~Connelly & Clandinin

Creating a science-fiction dystopian story is both an interpretive process and product that allows inquiry into educational research, trends, as well as the Self, and the Other. It is insider-outsider research. It makes strange the familiar to better understand it. Much of this relied on the reviewing of nonfiction, phenomenological interview texts for inspiration for the creation and development of fictional characters, contexts, symbols, and storylines, which were also fuelled by current trends in educational research, my past
experiences in schooling, teaching, and partnerships, and my imagination. Specifically, I used the findings of a literature review I conducted on educational policy, practices, and partnerships, as well as my own experience building and sustaining partnerships in and beyond schools, to help develop background notes for the plot, setting/contexts, and interactions in the novel. I used research on current and expected trends to project future educational and societal structures and to develop some of the characters. Kercheval’s *Building Fiction: How to Develop Plot and Structure* (1997) was identified as a resource if I encountered difficulty in the writing process, however, it was not consulted until after the first draft of the 2084 was completed and used instead during the revision process which will continue post-dissertation as I move towards publication. I drew on the interviews I conducted with Hughes Freedom Writers partners (Appendix B) to help develop the story by using their responses from the questions to deepen and expand story themes, characters, and interactions. In conducting the interviews, I consulted *Interviewing as Qualitative Research* as a guide for “interviewing as a relationship,” and for interview techniques that attend closely to relational concerns (Seidman, 2006). After finishing all of the interviews, they were transcribed and analyzed thematically in tables through six stages of analysis (detailed in “Section Five”) prior to and during the writing of the dystopian story, although notes on tentative characters and the structures they confront had been generated and added as early as the fall of 2011.

I composed a dystopian story that includes attempts to provide a summary of the relationships between, as well as implications of, those interview themes (Winter, 1991). Interviewees had the opportunity to develop a poem or letter within the context of the story to have a more direct voice (and, if chosen, authorship of this artifact in the story) in
its creation and presentation. Interviews, cross-checked with HFW writing artifacts (e.g., journal entries, poems, and conference texts), served as the basis for developing particular characters, dialogue, and action in the novel as oppressive educational structures are confronted. Data selected for interpretation fell initially into one of the four thematic categories related to schooling and teaching: 1) histories/stories, 2) values, 3) concerns, and 4) questions. As an arts-based action inquiry, I saw these categories as flexible first steps related to interview questions and expected the expansion of them (detailed in “Section Five”) as clearer snapshots of participant concerns and commitments in the voices and symbols of the story and its characters became evident.

Both literary and interpretive analyses of the creation of fiction were enacted, as the guidelines for dystopia writing came from the genre’s conventions: 1) concerned with improving human existence and directing attention towards contemporary trends and issues 2) highlight or predict a rising evil or oppressive forces while there is still time to address the situation, 3) move its readers to compare his or her “real world” to the fictional futuristic society and consider how the latter could arise from the former, 4) make readers feel simultaneously personally threatened and empowered to resist, 5) call attention to language, politics, and technology as powerful rallying points for national, cultural, and community groups wishing to emphasize both their heritage, identity, and autonomy, and, if possible, move readers to confront with their own relationship(s) with language, politics, and technology (Sisk, 1997). These conventions were used to plan, evaluate, and member-check my dystopian writing. Interpretive processes involving memos (Hatch, 2002; Maxwell, 1996), fieldpoems (Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2002) and concept maps (Maxwell, 1996) were utilized at each stage of this journey to help data and
characters speak to, even interrogate, one another.

V. Trustworthiness

"Caminante, no hay puentes, se hace puentes al andar.

(Voyager, there are no bridges, one builds them as one walks.)" ~ Gloria Anzaldúa

While 1984 is alluded to through some characters, themes, and conventions of this dystopian novel, its narration with multiple first-person narrators and points of view takes its inspiration from the Freedom Writers Diary. To this end, polyvocal analyses (Hatch, 2002) require not only consideration and writing from multiple perspectives, but also alternative explanations and interpretations of evidence. For this reason, I interrogated the voices that emerged, including my own, through the process of writing memos and fieldpoems on the building of truthful fiction, as well as through the reader response of my interpretive communities. I triangulated data and themes among data sources to keep my dystopian writing aware of connections or disjunctions among partner voices, my own experiences, and applicable educational research. This process entailed sharing and checking findings with Hughes Freedom Writers, as well as inviting their responses along with other teachers, students, educators, family members, the community, and “critical friends” (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007). It also required that I compare findings with empirical research studies and theorizing on educational partnerships and reform efforts as previously cited in earlier sections. Because this study is iterative, after initial interviews were conducted, member-checks have been regular and ongoing with Hughes Freedom Writers where their voices are included, incorporated, and interpreted until the dissertation is published (detailed in “Section Five”). Repeated member-checking
occurred in the context of weekly Hughes Freedom Writers meetings (or immediately following them) at each new stage of interpretation. During the summer, the group met several times and I added a member-check/reader response section to those meetings. The option for interviewees to meet with me individually was also provided at each member-check/reader response meeting.

These activities attend to primarily *democratic* and *dialogic* forms of trustworthiness, as democratic forms illustrate the extent to which stakeholders’ points of view were considered in the research process whereas dialogic forms focus on the “goodness of fit” in the research findings, process, and setting (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007, pp. 147-154). However, future studies are required to determine whether or not *catalytic* trustworthiness criteria were fulfilled (Anderson, Herr, & Nihlen, 2007, pp. 147-154). Specifically, if transformative learning of researcher and participant understandings of partnership work deepen and change over time as a result of the creation of a fictional dystopian story.
Section Four

2084

A novel by Eric Blare

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That sends the frozen-ground-swell under it,
And spills the upper boulders in the sun,
And makes gaps even two can pass abreast.

~ Robert Frost

To students and teachers everywhere – on you the world depends.
Acknowledgements:

This project is I-We, a community commitment to writing our world and warning it at the same time – that is, writing to know and understand just how much we don’t know.

Writing as a collective act of will and wonder. It is a highly relational process and a reaffirming one as well. The conversations I’ve had over the past two years with each of the following people – and many more unnamed – have led to write under a pseudonym that can be revived by anyone daring to reassert the need for collective questioning and creativity in standardized systems or those trending towards uniformity. It is intended to call attention to the importance of being both unique individuals with diverse tastes and abilities and a part of communities that influence past, present, and future selves. We are all culturally-negotiated individuals who are capable of much more than our current station, status, or cultures allow. When we wish to make new possibilities for ourselves, new culture, not simply reproduce it, then you are invited to chronicle a community of care and invoke the name Eric Blare.

Thank you…

To my wife and daughter who fill my days with a light that leaves current walls lying in their wake and who give me the strength to write, read, listen, and speak for a better tomorrow.

To my parents, Joyce and Ted Kohan for giving me time and space to write, to make mistakes, and learn from them. And thank you for being willing to learn with me.

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Chapter 1: Winter

We are driving fast. Hurtling down a superhighway. Although maybe it’s not. No protection. No Watchtowers in sight.

Flat desolate land races by just beyond the tinted windows of our Dorf Mindrover. Occasionally a field of withered, sun-burnt crops.

Suddenly heavy breaking. There is thud and our Mindrover jumps on the right side. A second thud as our back wheel comes down on the road, digging in to race on.

I turn quickly, craning my head to see out the back window.

Ew. Roadkill. Thin crushed bones and a large pool of dried blood. Gross. At least we didn’t kill it.

Turning back around to sit down, another softer thud this time on the right of the vehicle. I glance to see a Wild spinning down to the side of the road. This time the blood runs bright red.

I turn away quickly.

The Mindrover begins beeping. Tire alignment disrupted. We come to a halt.
“Damn it.”

“What Dad? What is it?”

“If I’m going to pilot this thing hands-free, my Eyes need to be more sensitive to my movements. It’s not handling like the test drive.”

“Oh, yeah…that sucks.”

Mom says nothing, just closes her eyes slowly, disgustedly. She turns her head (from him) and stares out the passenger window towards the horizon. Will has his Eyes on too, some war game projected on the back of Mom’s seat, the volume from his earbuds crackling with virtual gunfire. He’s grinning, his blond hair bobbing while making shooting gestures from his seat. Oblivious. Typical.

I turn back to watch dad. He checks his Links and then adjusts his Eyes and the thin, narrow earbuds that run along their frame wrapping under and into his ears. I hear more thudding - my heartbeat - louder, faster. Just my heart. Other than that – luckily, only the purr of the engine, the incessant beeping of the Mindrover re-linking with Dad’s Eyes, or the occasional annoying crackle or boom of a bomb detonating from Will’s game.
A moment later, Dad sighs to no one in particular. “There it is. We should be all set in just a minute.”

I hazard a quick glance behind Will. The deep black coat of the tall, waif-like animal is flapping in the breeze. If not for the blood leaking out of its mouth, perhaps somewhere else, it has the look of someone sleeping on their stomach.

There is a third Wild slumped on its back, not far from our roadkill casualty, in a field of long-dead crops. Its bloated purple body twisted, split open, partially picked by birds. It’s eyelids and mouth flung wide to the sky. Only one marbled lens remains and I cannot escape it.

Not until I hear a scraping on the other side of the trunk. The Wild we just clipped has somehow righted itself from its resting pool, wobbling and clawing its way forward. Arms outstretched as though expecting something from us. Its eyes swollen shut, thick lip on an unhinged jaw hanging expectantly open. (Perhaps in shock or awe.)

But then we are driving away. Quickly. In a precise straight line watching the blood-spattered Wild tremble in the wind from our rear visual.

My dad doesn’t say a thing. I catch mild annoyance on his face in the mirror and my own lenses darting uncomfortably, nakedly framed with my tan, rounded face and golden-brown hair. My Eyes are closed and charging. I had flipped them up only minutes ago.
Stupid mistake. I swing them back down, dim them to keep the sun’s brightness out, and count down the seconds until they’re fully charged. I see myself in the rear visual – much better, more together.

But the beeping. Why the beeping still? Is something broken? (Is this whole thing broken?)

I cannot stop my heart from jumping alongside the beeping. Everyone else seems… fine.

Then I am awake. Panting… clammy.

Throwing off my sheets, I press the Link around my right wrist, silencing the repetitive beeping of the alarm. Dreams are disgusting – I wish I could say it was the first time having that nightmare.

But they are just dreams.

6:30.

Elevated heart rate already. It looks like I got a head start on my workout. I instinctively check for my Eyes - charged and ready in their case on my nightstand - then head for the Regulator.

7:30.

I feel fresh and new. Rarely do I miss a workout on the Regulator and then a hot shower. This morning is no exception. Stepping out of the shower, I examine myself in the mirror,
noting the soft roundness of my shape. Most everyone is heavy, but most are blockish in their figures and low-built in their features. While my thick ankles are a constant annoyance as are the pin-sized scars on my back, I do like the way I look for the most part. Especially my face, and especially after exercise – it adds a redness to my tan cheeks. No make-up needed. I comb my long straight hair and give thanks for the high cheek-bones and petit nose my genes have blessed me with. I am fortunate to have all I do. But I work for it too. I work really hard.

Drying off my Links, I head off to get dressed and open my Eyes for the day. I keep them in a see-through gold-tint case that clips into my purse or even a belt if I like for travel. Today it is on my nightstand. I open it, pinch my thumb and index finger on the bridge of my light purple Eyes and slide them on. With each hand behind my ear, I find the earbud wire and curl them under, then up, and just lightly into the opening of each canal. Pressing the left frame, I hear the bip of the Eyes opening and a choir “Ahhh” as it syncs with my Links.

The first thing I see is my virtual representation staring back at me. “How would you like to look today?” I do like that. I can “look” for anything I want or even at myself. I start with myself this morning. With my right hand I move it to the holographic screen before me and select Menu -> Eye Tint -> lightly shaded. I check my gaze – selecting the knowing half-smile icon, and type, “Happy New Year, Midwesterners!” Then I scan what my friends are up to. Bridgie looks good as always. I type an invitation for her to come over after we take the Test to celebrate. Meanwhile, Corwin and Petie’s bet on the last
unit exam ended in a tie. And Atul and Mirabel are still bickering over the election and whether or not Sonny Day earned it.

The new Governor Day is a handsome young Technocrat – a moderate - who promised to fulfill the Leave No Child Behind policy signed into law over fifty years earlier by U.S.E.’s first president, just after the Great Reform. Atul is ecstatic at the decisive win from the previous month, but Mirabel is visibly frustrated (I’ve never seen that pensive face app on her gaze before), but even she admits that Sonny was “as cute as they come!” Liberal incumbent Simon Hartwell suffered partial paralysis (he was nearly 65 after all) and had to resign the Governor’s post four months into his second term. The liberal Technocrat that ran in his stead didn’t stand a chance after Goldhammer and most of the MNC CEOs backed Day. Mostly though the Talk is about actress Serena Cisneros because she had the latest Links line tattooed into her wrists. Part ink, part metal, they resembled delicate black lace with two studs to press on her inner wrists to set and sync her Links. A revolution to Link technology for sure. Mom would kill me if I had mine done like that, but I should ask her about getting mine upgraded. I have had the same ones since the start of high school. They are the 13P (premium) model, and 15 and 15P models are coming out in March. Unless, of course, you’re Serena Cisneros or another celebrity paid to model the latest technologies.

Links really are helpful to the extreme though. Without them, our Eyes can’t be interactive. We would only be watchers. I can’t imagine. But with Links, especially, high-end links that can handle the latest Eye apps, almost everything to almost anyone is
accessible, and Links come in all colors, styles, and are completely customizable if you have the money. My Links are purple, flexible bands, with four tiny buttons and a digital display no larger than my fingernail. I can interact with and access any Eye app on them, keep time, set alarms and reminders, and pay for anything I want to buy through the personalized barcode on my Link. They also can show me my location so if I visit other district I can always find what I want quickly whether it’s on the street or inside one of the towers. Quite useful. The 13.0 models, however, do not have Mindrover or other vehicle access. Yes, definitely time for an upgrade. My license will come in handy once I have passed the Test.

As for Will, he always asks for the latest Eyes and Links and always gets them. While his 16P Links have vehicle access technology, they are not enabled until his barcode is scanned for passing his driver’s test. Thank God.

Mom knows I save and appreciate their money – she may even be thinking about getting them for me as part of a graduation present...

I slip my robe around me, and press two buttons on the panel on the wall just inside my room and a drawer slides out from my wall dresser. 364 NutriGen bars stacked vertically with precision with a 365th bar placed horizontally and centered on top of the stacks. Just as I had organized yesterday. I take the top bar – Serenity, unwrap it, and eat while my outfit for the day is warming. Two minutes later, a second drawer opens with a steamed
and pressed outfit, the one I had queued for today – gold Kraft pants, a purple Kraft
longsleeve button-down, collared, with the cuffs pressed back, and cushion Kraft socks.

8:00 a.m.
Dressed and ready to go. Time to get my coffee and then get into my Test Prep app. I get
out my Do Not Disturb sign that Will stole for me from the MNC towers we vacationed
in last summer and slap it on the front of my door. I look for Module 6.6: Trigonometry
and the Test, and watch as my gaze slowly pulses red, instead of white, to let everyone
looking know that I’m busy and not available on InterFace or other apps. Everything else
will have to wait.

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12:00 p.m.
I head downstairs for lunch.

“Happy New Years, Winter.”

I smile. “Thanks, Dad. You too. Happy New Year’s, Mom.”
Mom looks up from her cooking, “You too Winnie,” she says with her customary down-
turned smile.

“Where’s Will?”

“Downstairs, gaming I’m sure.”
Judging by the corner of Dad’s mouth curling up slowly, he was perturbed but not surprised. “Well let’s get him up here. It’s lunch time.”

It’s his own fault. He lets Will get away with anything. He at least used to be strict with me.

“Winnie, please call your brother.”

“Sure Mom, no problem.”

I send a Link request to Will. Several attempts later, his virtual self materializes, dressed to the nines even though I know he’s still in his pajamas. “Yeah, sis’?”

“Lunch. Get with the program.”

“Yeah, yeah, be right up.”

Moments later, we are all seated around our rectangular stainless Ceasarsteel table. Porktein sandwiches, homemade fries, milk, and cream of carrot soup. Holiday lunch staples. It has been nice not to eat packaged or reheated lunches the past week. Mom’s Porktein sandwiches are the best I’ve ever eaten. She pan fries each patty with a special blend of seasoning from vials her mom gave her just after the Great Reform of the 30’s.
My brother and dad are seated on the short ends of the table facing one another while I sit across from my mother. I close my Eyes and flip them up. Dad having already done so. Will has his open and is whispering something. Interfacing at the table, not smart. Mom’s brow furrows, “William Weaver, welcome to the table.” “Thanks Mom.” He nonchalantly closes his Eyes and pushes them up with his thumbs.

“Will…” my dad lets it hang there. Mom just shakes her head.

She’s a solitary woman, with shoulder-length salt and pepper hair and a stern face that makes real attempts to soften when she sees me looking at her. She seems perennially disappointed. She spends most of her time using her Eyes on Dream Home apps, and reading non-fiction or historical fiction from the turn of the millennium before the Great Reforms. Dad says she does it because she lived in farm country before the Restructuring. Says she gets stir-crazy in the city. She doesn’t say much. She attends virtual church every Sunday, occasionally I still sync with her and go if I have all of my school assignments and Test prep completed. She cooks every night and cleans every day even though it’s easy to have food prepared and sent from any of the distribution centers in our community or just use the Echoing Meadows house service.

Echoing Meadows, the gated community we live in in District A-1, boasts some of the finest fountains, flowers, and golf courses in the city. Not that anyone really spends much time outside anymore, but they are stunning to walk by on the way to work, school, or the Clubhouse. HAL Weathershield technology protects the EM Clubhouse and Greens,
allowing in only as much water and light as appropriate. For city-living - for any living - this is as soothing as it gets. What could be a better alternative? It’s always bothered me that she doesn’t appreciate this more. Where would she rather be? Not that she would answer that question even if I asked it – she’s a master of deflection. Questions are always about us. She even answers our questions with questions, if pressed, answer in one or two words, or a change of topic altogether. Sometimes I wonder if there’s something wrong with her. But she’s always been that way, and I definitely got my need for organization and routines from her. She’s always been by my side and supported me, especially my studies, in her own kind of way. Even if some of it might be self-serving.

“You should get out of this place, Winnie. Fly high… fly far.”

“Cora, did you see the news today?” My dad offers.

“No, I was checking supplies… arranging things… getting lunch around.” Some of those were virtual, no doubt. I could see her floating back to her Dream Home designs already.

“Well, he’s done it. Sonny’s got the top MNC CEOs on board. All American city-states have perfected the MEATS curriculum that ensures learning for college and career. They waited for ‘til first of the year to announce the news. Now with the infrastructure we’ve built - food in plentiful supply, U.S.E.-America - especially Midwest - is primed for the next great advancement. It’s an exciting time to be alive right now.”

Mom looked at him slowly, “Mmm. Mm hm.”
“My money’s on an innovation that will solve our water shortage issues, then perhaps cancer or maybe even infertility, especially in the C districts.”

Dad was kidding himself if he thought B grade districts weren’t being affected as well, but with his schedule who knows what information he was getting or when. Fertility treatments had gotten really expensive.

“How about diabetes or heart disease?” I ask, thinking of the grandparents I never knew.

“Yeah… yeah, or one of those.”

While over 80% of adults are obese and over half of all children, insulin tabs are readily available in every home and business in every city-state in U.S.E.-America and throughout most of the city-states globally. No one really has to think about it anymore, but since I am only in a pre-diabetic stage, according to my last physical, I’d prefer it get solved before I get there. Plus, Mom and Dad aren’t getting younger.

My dad is a pillar of U.S.E.-AMW (American Midwest). He had started as a B-grade, born during the Restructuring just after the 1st Great Reforms were passed; he was tracked to a community college where he studied to be an electrician while working construction for Kraft. He was reliable, loyal, and hungry. Kraft liked what they saw in him (gave him a few awards with “Bootstrap Sam” etched into them) and paid for him to go get his electrical engineering degree while continuing to work for them full-time.

When the 2nd Great Reform came, and high-tech Walls and Watchtowers were needed
throughout U.S.E.-America and the other global city-states, my dad was among the top
engineers commissioned to do this work through Kraft which HAL Securities
subcontracted for part of the work, especially abroad. When he returned, he was rewarded
for his work by being named a Kraftsmen Masterbuilder, the highest honor in his field.
He is one of three in the American Midwest, and the only one in District A-1. He has held
that position since I was in elementary school. Really since I could remember. He, too,
was always preoccupied but in a much more light-hearted way than mom. He always
wanted to discuss what was happening. And why not? He had helped build it. We had a
vested interest to see it all through.

“So how are your studies coming, Win?”

“Good. The new Test prep app is really thorough. It doesn’t just show me the kinds of
questions that will be asked and give me practice questions, but it shows me old answer
banks with step by step procedures for arriving at the answers. I’m getting to the point
where I can anticipate the questions and skim for key phrases or sentence structures and
know what the answer’s most likely going to be. I’m almost ready for it. I think I can
answer every question on the Test before time is up. I’ve got my Eyes set for a 98 or
higher.”

“GOODY… TWO SHOES!” Will coughed loudly, giving a playful grin under his shaggy
blond locks.
“Shut up, Will.”

“Sorry, dad.”

“That’s the spirit! College scholarship, here we come. Barely 17 and almost done with high school. You’re incredible, Winnie.”

I can’t stop from blushing. “Thanks, Dad.”

“Yes, Winnie, nice work, dear… By the way, have either of you happened to look outside yet?” My mom’s words hung in there like a revelation. I didn’t think to check, with all of our climate control technologies. All I noticed were the flurries trending in the corner when I was checking news this morning. “It was supposed to be a record-breaking snow and it’s certainly more than I ever remember seeing.”

Dad nods enthusiastically. “This morning I drove out to inspect the Wall and it handled the snow without issue. The heating elements melt it immediately. The perimeter is clear, although I had to stick to the Belt. The city streets are buried. There was even a break in the Weathershield.”

12:20 p.m.
Will and I devoured the rest of our lunch as he spoke then pushed back from the table. I saw the gleam in my brother’s lenses, just before he snapped his Eyes back down and on. We popped out of our chairs scooting for the front door. Well for Will, it was really
lumbering. I tried to hip-check him as I’d seen hockey players in his apps do. I gasped for air. 12 years old and easily pushing 300. Being shorter than me, all I really accomplished was impaling myself on his lowered shoulder as he steamed ahead.

I stop to catch my breath and hear my dad laughing in the distance.

As feeling returns, I cross the living room and gather my boots. Will is already outside, front door flung wide open in his flannel pajama pants and tee-shirt with “War Machine” printed on it. His favorite band, much to my Mom’s chagrin. (He has got to get it together or he is never going to pass the Test.) “There it is” he points with one hand, the other covering his Eyes, chest heaving all the while. Sure enough right in the middle of the Greens. A gaping hole, the sun’s rays streaming in, touches of blue sky and clouds peering in. No golf today. One of the younger kids down the block is examining the break in and the giant white heap in front of him – perhaps really seeing snow up close for the first time.

“Winter, this season was made for you,” I hear my dad say, lenses exposed and sparkling for the first time in a long time. Like the snow unlocked something in him. “Let’s go play in it while it lasts.” He scoots back from the table, joins me near the door, and then pushes the request panel to our front closet. It replies with our winter outerwear, Kraft snowsoftening shovels, and snow saucers (that double as shields during snowball fights). It’s been awhile, since before Echoing Meadows…since we sold my dad’s parents’ home in B-2 and took this snow equipment with us. I fight to fit into my suit and zip up. It takes
dad even longer to stuff his hulking body and thick head of hair inside his white
snowsuit, latching it, and finally dropping, then opening his Eyes. He looks like a big
white marshmallow with goggles, one battling to maintain its angles from puffing out
into a ball and rolling away. A moment later, clad in our whiteness, we push out from the
door, shovels resting on our shoulders, saucers strapped to our forearms… like gladiators
of old.

The sun blinds me as I step outside. I forgot to drop my Eyes. Uhhh! It’s been a long time
since I felt it’s direct effect. Screens, walls, and the indoors dominate my life. For good
reason. School will sustain us. It is what keeps our country – the world - together. School
is what separates us from the animals, from the Wilds. School is our protection and our
future. MEATS make a better world. A safer world.

In 2084, we have finally done it. No child will be left behind from now on. Not one. Not
if I –not if we – do our part and follow the rules.

I slide the shovel off my shoulder and stab blindly at the drift that surrounds us.
1:00 p.m.

I unwrap from my snowsuit and dump it in the laundry tube. What a break! I am
exhausted from the snowball fight and the shoveling, not to mention the Regulator this
morning. My breathing is getting more shallow and make a Kraft line for my bedroom to
get my inhaler. Too bad more people didn’t come out to help with the clean-up. The ones
that did likely did so because they saw my dad was out there, but most were probably too busy at home, Eyes wide open.

Breath coming back. Time to get back to work. I can’t believe I spent that much time outside. It’s a holiday, I know I shouldn’t feel bad, but I do. If I take a shower after dinner, I can get four more hours of Test prep in, maybe even get through module 7. Then I don’t have to feel guilty about InterFacing with Bridgie and maybe a couple others after dinner.

9:00 p.m.

I sync with the room and select the “tanning” option for my bed under the “my things” menu. I lay down, for my nightly warming. It’s not so much about the tan as being really warm to my core, enveloped in a cocoon of quiet. It’s easily the most relaxing part of my day.

Although nothing can be completely guilt free. Will calls it my casket because when the long sleek end tables fold up and over my bed to enclose it for tanning, the whole thing does kind of resemble a burial pod. Why does he make comments like that? At least I don’t have to share a floor with him anymore. Mom and Dad know this is the most important school year of my life. Having him two floors down has been a big help.
This is going to be a good year. Test in less than two weeks. All set. I’ll treat myself to some movies when it’s over, see if the family wants to sync with the same one just like old times. I will get a 98. No way Atul can get higher than that. No one’s perfect, but if I can’t be perfect, I can be almost perfect.
Chapter 2: Resistance

I am resistance.

I’ve felt it for as long as I can remember and I remember a childhood interrupted.

“Ponce Lucas. Ponce Lucas, step forward please.”

I remember running a fat dry tongue around the inside of my mouth in a search for moisture that ended unsuccessfully. Only cottonball everywhere. Things got worse when my sand-paper tongue nearly glued itself to the top of my mouth.

I was lucky at the time. I didn’t have to say a thing. If there is such a thing as luck, it was then. Simply go through the motions. Walk, present cradled hands, nod in acknowledgement and feigned thanks once the standard-issue Eyes had been deposited in them, and then walk back to my seat.

Of course all I really wanted to do was crush them. Spit on their wires and circuits, and spout off about what was about to be lost.

Take those black soft-plastic spectacles and grind them under foot. The way U.S.E. does to all of us. Grind us into grits. Pieces of people, but not actually people.
The sad part is, I could feel everyone else’s excitement. For with the Eyes meant the ability to be connected with everyone and everything in an instant. To be immortal and irrelevant all at the same time. All Eyes connected to an ever-expanding highway of useless information – mostly meant to create an endless loop of searching and lusting after things. Objects of all kinds – objects of entertainment, objects of desire, objects of faith or fortune. Objects all to consume. Six years old and already catalogued, corralled, perhaps even critiqued. The only play allowed: One Game. High-stakes. Headset required. Eyes defined by self-satisfied men in suits and those working for them in towers of power, towers forever blocking the horizon. Power I will never know. How can you dream beyond a dream that never changes? You explore, then claw at, every corner only to find one truth: you’re hemmed in. Magic kingdoms aren’t so magic when you relive them day after day, seeing the same things but with less luster each time until all you see are cracks and chips and fencing. I see and hear the commercials for U.S.E. and MNCs creating a better world for us all, the advertising and slogans saddling every school and entertainment page our Eyes scan…every virtual field trip…and yet I don’t actually feel any of that impact, only distraction. Too much salt water out there, not enough fresh in here. This is where I am now. And I must find a way out.
Can those corporate castles be climbed? Or toppled. Two fantasies, no traction on either… yet.

I don’t know why it still surprises me that education is just another object of possession and status. I possess some education, but some of my classmates say I’m a disgrace to the C grades because I don’t look the part – too thin, too stoic, too consistently non-descript. My vices too veiled. My language too outstanding. I don’t fit in and I don’t care.

“Hey, Ponce, why you always be in plain colors? Getcher self some Wall St. shoes, man. Goldduster shirt. Sumthin.”

Most of the time, I don’t care. (Why spend time trying so hard to be different or stand out… just like everyone else?)

I don’t consume enough of anything, save the rules of the game of my schooling. That is where I put my efforts.

Thirteen years ago and I cannot escape the thick-necked, thick-bellied man (thicker than most, which is saying something) who called a name that would be mine, like a a shackle, a death sentence for dreaming during the day. Replace my
child’s eyes with new ones, meant to control my field of vision for the next half-century or however long it is that I survive.

Our next face-to-face meeting last year. “Mr. Banks, may I take the Test this winter? I’m ready.”

“Not this year. Not yet. You just don’t understand – It’s a great honor for a C grade to go to college. You may know how to pass your school exams, but you aren’t ready for the… rigor, ehem, the reality of that… world. Your Articulation scores are strong, but our country runs on innovation and industry. Truth be told, you’re not the kind of student the new economy needs. I mean there’s a place for you, for sure. But college? Not until those MEATS scores improve.”

MEATS = Mathematics, Engineering, Articulation, Technology, Science–
“MEATS feed our future: Leave No Child Behind. Feed your mind forever.” Latest MEATS instructional models now accessible through all Eyes. Education for everyone. They “allow students to own their world” and “come out ready for college & career.” How could anyone argue with such pillars of innovation and industry, especially when “it’s for the kids?” Indeed, no one does. Even with liberal and conservative bases constantly squabbling and bemoaning moderate control in the Technocratic Party.
All MEATS has meant to me though is *Mindcontrol, Enervating, Anesthitizing, Time-wasting Scripture. Consume this and you too can prove your mettle to society!* It’s not about me at all.

It’s sad really because those fields should be interesting. Except that they’re not. Not at all. (They start and end with where those fields are at, and occasionally where they’ve been). They mostly feed a global military-prison-school industrial complex. In the new United States, we make complicated boxes or bombs. When we can’t control the box (and what or who is inside it), we blow it up.

Of course, that’s not what Tillman Banks thinks. Our curriculum director for district C-8 (and the man who anointed me with my new Eyes thirteen years ago) believes the American city-states are a beacon of hope and hard work to the rest of U.S.E. for their “contributions to security and freedom everywhere.” Despite C-8 being one of the poorest, most polluted districts in the city, it *IS* inside the walls. For this, protection from the Wilds should be enough, not to mention the freedom from rising and unpredictable tides. Or whatever beats in his small bloated head. I have to remind myself he is but a face of the faceless towers looming over our city. Banks echoes the empty rhetoric of Emile Goldhammer and the Technocratic party, who pay him quite handsomely I am sure, to loom.

“Any of you can pick yourselves up by your bootstraps. It’s happened before and can happen again.”
MEATS feed the mind: Leave No Child Behind
LNCB: Our Freedom, Our Future.
LNCB: Strive for economy, education, and country.
LNCB = Jobs.
LNCB = Just do it.

If I have to hear some version of that speech regurgitated in my face with all its sticky hot bile, I’ll…

Last count: 7 shot dead in the drear, on the cold broken stone of our neighborhood. And the first month of the new year wasn’t close to over. Scores more have already vanished, likely collapsed or incarcerated (who knows maybe even incinerated) for deteriorating health conditions, drug abuse, violent crimes, or “illegal” watching or tampering with their Eyes. There’s a thousand and one ways for them to get you. The vast majority in C-8 though, Linked, Eyes open, but not paying a damn bit of attention to the others who’ve been unplugged… permanently. Pulled deep inside the digital playground of Emile Goldhammer and the MNC interests he represents.

The truth is no one picks themselves up without a system or lack thereof that allows them to get ahead. And ahead of what? That’s just it – I don’t want to be someone else’s game piece. Just where is it that we’re progressing? And who is reaping the rewards of that progress? There’s no water… no Weathershield technologies in our district. At least the snow came in feet this month, we’re
melting and bottling a lot more than last year. Maybe a lot easier to get to spring rains.

All I know is that I am where I am because my family extended what was possible beyond school or government support. Thing is my dad’s knowledge and talents aren’t valued in the new economy – not enough certification. Too expensive. Too invasive into the creative life of family or community. For when people blindly decide to follow the game the way it’s been written only the A grades win. The rest of us are supposed to be content because at least we don’t lose.

As the old joke goes in C-8, at least we’re all passing. Whatever helps the white collars sleep better at night.

So overjoyed I don’t suck I can barely stand it.

The reality is most of my classmates and people on my street don’t have a parent willing or able to help extend the Possible. For them, “public” school is a private affair - the be all and end all of life. If they do not play their part and digest what is heaped on their plate, then there is always life beyond the Wall. The Wall causes fear or fearlessness in most in C districts – causing many to crack (drugs or violence) and vanish. Perhaps hauled away to a prison complex somewhere
beyond the city while those who remain promise to recommit themselves to the discipline and commitment to U.S.E.’s core curriculum: “MEATS mean we leave no child behind.”

What this really means is get in line and shield us from anything that could be a threat to our comforts, power, and material wealth. Or so I have come to find.

And I am resistance.

I have known it since the day my twin brother came home from pre-school and died in my father’s arms. Since he looked at me resolutely (a strong current coursing through him) and said, “Mi’ijo, the future lies with you.”

The powers that be have a cruel sense of humor. I was always the sickly one. The one that was on the brink of death when I was born, secretively small, tucked behind the placenta of our mother, by a doctor too sympathetic of rebels. A few months later, my father told me he was found shot in the head at his office. Official cause of death: suicide. The reality: U.S.E. officials or Gold Dusters had found something they didn’t like.

Apparently, my father had enveloped me away in his jacket almost immediately and made out of the hospital as if to light a cigar. My aunt had been waiting. She was a nurse by training and certificate, but a healer by upbringing.
My brother’s name was Ponce. Identical to me in every way, except that he was bigger, stronger, fuller, and smarter. Likely imperceptible to most, he had a slight edge in all of these areas on me, until one particularly dark night blotted them out.

Blotted him out. Forever.

We were 5 years old.

I have lived as Ponce ever since. Coming back to school thinner and more confused played perfectly into the illusion that school officials had painted. They were sure my brother was a goner. To see him again was quite a surprise. I knew the angle to play. My father had drilled it into me in the privacy of our dilapidated home and Ponce had shared his learning, his knowledge, of pre-school with me every night when he returned home. We had so much learn. The mask I wear is not only of feigned commitment to a system I know is unjust, but that of my brother. Sometimes they bleed into each other and wrestle for my awareness.

But I know who I am.
I am resistance. Not the raging kind, like a waterfall, but the ever careful drops of a scientist calibrating what it will take to make one great and mighty discovery, one that imagines a new sense of... humanity. U.S.E. and its puppetmasters have put me in the boxes and bubbles of a lab, raised me there really, so how could I be anything else? And yet I want to be something else, anything else. I want out of my life sentence.

But for all my calculations, the irony is I’m not very good at MEATS. I practice, and talk my way through it, show proficiency, even competency (if short-term memory counts as competency), but not mastery. Not in the way they define it anyway. I get lost and bored, buried in details with no story. Long ago, I came to the conclusion that my scientific interests and abilities were better served constructing an alternative to the current system, rather than dedicating my current time and energies to marinating in the juices of MEATS curriculum. Perhaps someday the dam will break and I can be a part of a waterfall – one that replenishes what was left for dead, barren, broken, or valueless.

Can water still overwhelm the walls we’ve built? Wash away our synthetics and our drugs, and other technological vices of this age?

Resistance requires knowing some history, some story of how we came to be or where we should be heading. Hopefully both. I have a story, one inspired by
history but lacking in exact facts. I am a reflection of my education and it is one of instruction, of memorization and exercises, not dreaming and exploring. It is one of control. And so I will control one thing that cannot be taken from me – a plan to resist and destroy the dam that holds us back.

It is winter now. Cold, dry, and biting… at least in the C districts, but I will take the Test.
Chapter 3: The Test

Grade A schools always scored the highest on the Test. The top grade A students typically score between 92 and 95%. Two students are rumored to have scored a 100%. They must work in the Tower District for HAL Securities (both virtual and physical), Kraft, Dorf, or one of the other top companies in U.S.E. No one can select any MEATS major at MU without a minimum score of 94 on the Test, the highest standards in the country, and on par with the Asian city-states.

Environmental and virtual technologies, fuel and food systems, biomedical engineering, water purification technologies. All of it - fascinating. Creating something like Weathershield, but actually perfecting it. After last year’s summer virtual science program through Midwest University, I know I will major in the sciences. The question is which one. To produce anything to make life easier for millions must be an incredible feeling.

My dad did it and he can’t even remember what he scored on his Test. How do you forget something like that? Especially these days, it makes you or breaks you. I know that since the 2nd Great Reform, at least, it’s been go big or go home. I will bring my A game. Mom and dad don’t need two freeloaders living off them the rest of their lives. God that’s terrible to think. Why does my mind go there?

Breathe Winnie. Breathe. You can do this. 98, nothing less.
InterFace request - Bridgie Wilson. I touch the virtual “Accept” button in front of me.

“Bridgie?”

Her broad smile, zebra-striped Eyes, and dense, black curly hair greet me the moment our Eyes sync. “Winnie, you doing okay?”

“Hey, yeah, yeah, I didn’t get much sleep last night for some reason. My routine is a little off, that’s all. I’m okay. I’m ready for this.”

“Atul and Peter took it this morning. They said they felt pretty good, followed Test prep pretty closely.”

Bagga and Cho. A-L this morning, M-Z this afternoon. Of course, Atul did well. One of us is going to be valedictorian. Glad to hear Peter felt good about it; the “Cho-man” had really been struggling in the AP MEATS courses this fall. Bridgie right along with him.

“Good. Good. Thanks, Bridgie. How are you?”

“Ready as I’ll ever be. It is what it is.”

Now that loosens me up. Bridgie is the best. Everyone is out of their mind competing for the highest rankings possible – they matter for the limited slots at MU – but she’s calm in
the face of it all. It probably helps that she isn’t shooting for a high score. She just needs an 85 or higher to qualify for the k-12 instructors’ program. She said she was even willing to work in a C grade school if she had to. That’s important work, someone’s got to do it, but it’s dangerous and she’s better than that. She told me once that that would be easy, “memorize the curriculum and help those kids work through their own learning management plans…once that’s down, you have so much time to do other things.” I knew what she meant. She was a big Gamer too. The less time she had to be working or thinking about something else, the more she could lose herself in the Legend of Zoltar. She reminds me sometimes of some weird combination of my mom and brother, but with a more genuine smile than either. She lost her mom to a coma when she was four and seems convinced that none of us are going to be around very long despite our recent advances in medicine, especially diabetes treatments.

“All right then. Let’s go earn our futures. MU, Me, You - this fall.”

“Okay,” she smiled. She has the whitest teeth. I need to ask her what she’s using on them after the Test.

“We’re almost free. I can’t wait.”

“Let’s not get carried away, Win. There are walls inside the city too…you just have to look a little harder to see them.”
“Huh?” Where did that come from? “Right, but pretty sure college is more freedom than we’ve ever had.” I notice my nose crinkling.

“We’ll see. Hope so.”

“Bridgie is something wrong?”

“No, I can’t explain it. I don’t feel down or anything. Just feel like I’ve lost something or I’m going to lose something.”

It’s the game or her past – or her past and the game – talking. The Test is getting to her.

“Bridgie, this is what all our hard work has been for. C’mon, you’ve always been there for me. I’ll see if my Mom will make coconut cake this weekend when you come over. Just for you.”

“It is, yeah, right, of course. Okay Win. You’re right.”

Not a moment later, we are asked to leave our seats in the school’s board room to line up and have our links scanned, other apps locked, and the Test uploaded to our Eyes.

Even though there are nearly 200 seniors, well 100 now, taking the Test, the whole process is done in minutes.
We enter the white-walled, windowless testing center. A sea of steel grey cubicles with blue-cushioned HoverTech chairs. A large white table in the front for test administrators to track our Eyes and progress. I take my seat.

The countdown begins. Just like I practiced.

You got this, Win.

The big bold numbers flash in front of my Eyes: 10…9…8…7…6…5…4…3…2…1.

Win.

The first slate of questions are Foundations of Engineering and Advanced Mathematics. Ready and waiting for the challenge. 45 questions in 50 minutes, just like the Test prep. I’m done with the first slate in 45 minutes, a full five minutes to spare. Close my eyelids and see MU’s campus in my mind, daydream about conducting an experiment like those I’ve watched clips of a hundred times at MU… Next up, Economics & World Politics 35 questions in 30 minutes... Done with two minutes to spare. I hate politics. Is it really that hard to do what’s best for everyone? Here comes the mid-point: Foundations in Technological Innovation. Only 30 questions in 30 minutes. I’m done in 18. I take a sip from my water bottle. Close my eyelids, MU… but sleep washes over me. MEATS feed the mind. Think. MU. All that emerges from the darkness though is the gawking face of
the Wild from my dream. I shake my head. This is NOT happening. Eyelids open, its
hollow black olive lenses searching for me, peering into my Eyes. I take my hand
touching the hologram button in the air for “music.” Pachelbel’s Canon. Classical music
for Test-takers while we wait. Thank God. This will clear my head. Eyes wide open, I
strain to focus – Articulation up next, 45 questions, then Science, the last 45 questions.
Focus, focus on the white light slowly pulsing next to the Test menu in front of me. I try
to lose myself in it and the music. But all I see is the marbled eyeball from the Wild in
the field.

I’m going to barf.

I get up from my Testing Center cubicle. The Test vanishes. Stomach contorting. Frantic.

The Test manager looks at me with surprise. No doubt having been monitoring my
progress.

I cannot stop myself and launch through the door of the Women’s room only to explode
vomit all over the finely-tiled floor.

I’m crying and on my knees, shaking.

A Test attendant is beside me seconds later, sticking me with a low-dose sedative. Take
the edge off. Thank god I signed that waiver.
Breathing steadying, but shallow.

This is not a big deal. It’s pretty commonplace that A grades take stimulants before and sedatives after to survive the Test. Some take them frequently throughout the school year to keep up with the workload or stress of exams. I’ve always just stuck to my routines after I took one of my mom’s sedatives a couple years ago and did not wake up for two days. I was really behind when I woke up and hated the feeling of being disoriented. Of not being… in control.

Okay.

“I’m okay. Thank you.” I rise, calmly. Adjust my Eyes which were resting crooked on my face. Waive my hand for towels.

“I’ve got it, Miss.”

“Thank you.”

I wipe of my hands, shirt, and knees, then wash my hands. Dry them. I move back to my cubicle. Take the sweater off the chair. Put it on to cover my episode. Take my inhaler out of my pocket. Inhale. Hold. Release. Must get back to the Test. No one’s watching. Everyone’s working.
I nod to the Test manager and sit down. My test screen comes back up. Only 7 minutes into Articulation, but I need them. This is my weakest area, most A grades weakest area. Still, I’m in the 95th percentile. I know a lot more words than most, but occasionally I get tripped up on context or implication.

The first question appears: As it appears in “The Sympopath and the Scientist,” the word “cleave” is referring to…

I know what cleave means, I want to be a scientist. Next.

When the red light in the corner my Test screen begins to pulse more quickly, I know I only have 2 minutes left. 8 questions left. I’m going to have to make some educated guesses without doing the reading. Too time consuming. You can’t earn points for questions left blank.

Done just as the jingling bells ring in my buds and Articulation vanishes from my screen. Science will be beginning in 10…

I feel tired. Thick-headed.
89? 89? 89?!

Everything has sprung. Everything is spinning… but me.

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I wake without my Eyes. I see Bridgie with hers on, sitting legs crossed, bouncing her top leg as she chews her gum. She’s in Legend of Zoltar.

“Bridge?”

“Oh, hey, Win.” She taps the air to pause, and another time to lighten her Eyes. She walks over to me and smiles a sad smile. I know it’s true. This time I wanted it to be a dream...needed it to be.

You don’t come back from an 89. Even if I took the Test again in March, the only other testing window allowed if you’ve already taken it (and the far more expensive one). The two scores can be averaged. I would need 100 to qualify for a MEATS major.

I would need to be perfect.
Chapter 4: The Philosopher & the Fighter

Every night after our Eyes were closed and stories had been read or told (often both as we move back and forth between family stories and those of the printed page), my father would tell me, “You are Julio Milintica Luchar-Tlaloc. You are from a family of philosophers and fighters. But, you are who you are and who you want to be. You must make it. No matter what.”

Every night he repeated that until my first year of high school and then his weight and his cysts and his consumption metastasized. It left him fat and raspy with the pain of remembering what it was to speak and stand strong.

I do not tilt at windmills.

My Eyes are squarely on the power brokers, the ones who decide who gets the most water, the cleanest water, the clinical trials, the food distribution, the standard-issue Eyes and the gold ones. It’s not for the reasons they think. They mistake my fervor for their world of hollow work, wars, and words.

I’ve always been good with names and faces… and connecting the dots. For some reason, most people I know aren’t good at this at all. Thick-headed and distracted with their work and entertainment. That seems to be intentional.
Goldhammer and his Golddusters cover everything the Technocrats do not. A former and current Chairman of HAL Securities. Goldhammer left the post originally to chair the formation and direction of the Technocratic Party during the 2nd “Great” Reforms. He is credited with having brought the Reb Techs and the Dem Techs together. As chairman of the Technocratic Party, HAL Securities reached everything, including unprecedented profits. Any business, school, or government office was in some way “serviced” by HAL Securities, one of their subsidiaries or subcontractors. His “Hammerheads” were installed and promoted everywhere in the Party, including the last five Presidents, who echoed his soaring rhetoric and the high-stakes corporate worldview he championed in public policy. After three terms as chairman of the Technocratic Party, he returned to direct the world’s most powerful MNC. He is routinely the top person trending always with another grand pronouncement about the health or wealth of U.S.E. and its citizens. He is the only person to receive U.S.E.’s “Man of the Year Award” in three separate decades. None for the 80’s, but this decade is far from over.

I have little doubt that Wall Street was his idea, or at the very least, his doing. Wall Street connects us – running the circumference of the city and its diameter directly downtown to the MNC towers. Of course to get there for those of us living on the perimeter would be nearly impossible. Bubbles, we call them in C-8. For within our massive bubble, are scores of miniature ones, whole cities within
a city, each closed off to the other without proper permissions – money, transport, and certifications. Of course you can’t have one without the others. It would almost be easier to leave the city altogether than get to the Tower District. Almost.

C grades have rarely received permissions to go to other U.S.E. cities-states and as a result rarely show interest in such things. Each superhighway heavily fortified between cities to keep out the Wilds or perhaps even El Cartel if it were to try to make an organized attack. That’s a big if. What would the point be for them to make such a move? All of the American city-states have a Wall now and a Wall St. that both surrounds and centers them. And everyone has towers looming and drones humming overhead. So the move I need to make is simply one of short distance but high difficulty. The time for me getting out of C-8 has almost come – I cannot proceed with my plan without access and permissions beyond the district. I know Tillman Banks needs some convincing and that the time is now.

The Edwin L. Knight Foundation has just opened up an opportunity through Midwest University that may just be my certificate out of here.

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There was a dream once that was Mexico. Before El Cartel took over most of what was that nation and then much of the Southwest. Before we lost the power to dream, to reimagine what life could look like, and feel like, and there were ways to carry it out. Now there is only rule by violence and fear down there, or conformity and control up here. El Cartel’s expansion allowed U.S.E. to outlaw Spanish decades ago… after all it’s the language of drug lords…kingpins…killers. How narrow, how convenient. I wonder how many of our politicians ever read *Don Quixote*?

I shouldn’t feel so singled out though, the only sanctioned languages left are Mandarin and Hindi in the city-states of U.S.E.-Asia, German and English in U.S.E.-Europe, Arabic & English in U.S.E.-Africa, and English and Mandarin in U.S.E.-Australia. The former countries and peoples of Central and South America left to El Cartel and the Wilds. That meant Portugese, French, Italian, Greek, Bengali, Japanese, Russian, Hebrew…Nahuatl – the other tongue of my ancestors - and a thousand other tongues washed away in the floods or weakened enough from their homelands’ devastation. During the Restructuring, all U.S.E. had to do was put its foot on their necks. Silenced. Each remains only in virtual libraries that require security clearance by U.S.E. linguistists and historians at the top universities in the world (the only universities left to employ linguistists or historians anymore). At least I know Spanish is still being spoken somewhere.
While each city-state has a great deal of autonomy depending on the key players of their Tower districts, they are all organized through the Technocratic Party and the corporations they serve. There is no bigger spokesman for the corporations than Emile Goldhammer. He speaks and the Technocrats craft their messages accordingly. No one can be that consistently on the right side of policy being crafted at the city-state and transnational levels. They rarely question anyone or anything beyond the towers or A-grade districts. They don’t think beyond their own private bubbles or A-grade education. How could they?

Goldhammer and the MNCs have boxed them in too. He keeps them tightly wound, chasing mythical giants, that supposedly put our existence at risk in -- and beyond -- the Wall. Giants that have become our reality.

Unlike Quixote, I have no empathy for Goldhammer and the reality he maintains.

For somewhere along the line of succession to Goldhammer, I was left without my ancestral tongue, only a yearning for it. My blood surges with it, but my mouth does not know it, nothing but a few words and phrases that taunt me and tempt me and torture me. I know I am only scratching the surface of a deep and powerful source – holding pure water or boiling hot fire – I know not. Perhaps both. All I know is that neither can be known, only sensed. Only felt as a force
beyond our current conditions. Calling me to keep looking. Calling me to do something beyond C-8 for C-8 and if possible, the city itself.

It’s hard with Eyes and Links on 7 days a week. I know that every holographic image I project and view from my Eyes or every tap I make from my Link is recorded, possibly watched, possibly watched with interest. This has required me to be boring. Consistently boring, whenever Eyes are open and linked in.

I read the news – troll who’s making headlines in politics and entertainment (often one and the same for me), follow my city-state’s professional and college teams, listen to the steady thumping and synthetic sounds of terrible (and terribly hypnotic) music readily available on any channel, ogle the latest models, enter and engage my school modules, check academic progress, and judge or vote on city, school, and trending apps and apparel I couldn’t afford if I wanted it.

When I was younger, I would visit the Global Parks app (which used to be free) and browse many parks in an effort to mask the importance of the one I really wanted to see. When I was virtually at the Grand Canyon, I would pretend I was the only person there, finding it for the first time – in search of the fountain of youth. For my brother, for my father, my aunt…my mother. For everyone who
never had one. During those brief visits, I would imagine that somewhere down there in the chasms there was a deep and ancient magic.

But that was long ago, and nowadays I never deviate. I customize my gaze with the mottos and emblems of C-8 and U.S.E. (never know who’s watching). This is strange to some only because of how generic it is - most typically saddling their gazes with heavy corporate or college branding as well...or instead. I never look at anything I haven’t heard other people my age talk about. My home life will not make an appearance during hours I’m watching or the hours I’m at school, or in any open Eye space for that matter.

And this endless vigilance leads me to exhaustion.

But in those moments of weariness, those moments when I close my Eyes (and Links) for the night, my father and my aunt are there with stories. Stories of our past - “a family that knows its past is a family with a future, mi’ijo.” And I would ask for them every night to try to keep alive something that was lost in my mind’s eye.

I know that El Cartel swallowed up what the seas and drought did not in the Southwest. I know we were transported to the confines of our new city-state of columns and concrete.
But I remember how big the sky was, and the canyons and washes, the wide-openness of rugged landscapes just beyond our old home. Wind-swept mountains and desert, with the scent of nightblooming cereus and rocktrumpet welcoming warm summer nights. Physical walls did not exist, simply blockades in between the breaks of the mountain ranges that circled the basin. Of course, the droning of the drones always circling overhead like vultures, but even that seemed more distant then...perhaps that is why other cities chose to build walls or invest in such high-tech border security.

Even though it is not my home any longer, I still linger there. I remember a sense of something greater. I remember the Possible.

Mi tia used to tell me that there was a God, and that its presence was felt through the land, and the plants, and animals and stars above. That those memories of my first home are God reminding me that we are guests here and wherever we go. Tread lightly for we are impatiently unaware of what really has come before. For some reason this is what I pray to, a God of open-spaces, a God capable of mischief and creativity, as well as silence and listening. My God is in all things and beyond them at the same time. It is present in the creation and destruction of all things and the flatness in between. A shape-shifter unlike any other. And when my God takes the form of a woman, a mother to those that still play, or
shriek, or listen to nature’s remedies and warnings, I catch a glimpse of the Possible. No Eyes needed. Not some Technocratic god of Innovation or a bearded white man capable of washing away all of our sins. Our sins too many, our history too deep, too implicated with vices and commercial comforts. We are all accomplices in the current system, like it or not, perpetuating societies of consumption and control, while claiming innovation and progress. The more I recognize and admit how much I don’t know, the more comfortable I feel. That makes me, my family, undetected anomalies - freaks - but ones that won’t lie to ourselves about our current State.

“Tia, why do you read the Bible if you don’t believe in the stories?”

“Ah, but I do believe in the stories, Julio. It’s the current interpretations of them as facts or history that I do not. Stories can do things instruction cannot, when we listen to what they have to say rather than… wrapping ourselves up… worshipping a human form or condemning others who do not. We are precious short of creative stories, Julio, so I surround myself with the origin stories of many different peoples, tellers of a great many worlds we have lived in and fought for. I need to have a sense of the sacred, the possible, in the storm we find ourselves in. Something beyond what our current Eyes can see.”
And it is a storm. Day after day buzzing with fervent activity. Skies, instructors, politicians, industrialists, always dumping. Always beating frenetically against the glazed shingles or slick tin of our roofs. Always beating down. Keeping us in. Head down, knees bent, trying on the different shoes all made in the same place the same way, all praying to the wrong gods.

Why are they so afraid of letting us cross borders in and beyond our cities? What else is being hidden from view? There must be other open spaces. There must be others willing to open new spaces.

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Just after midnight. It’s been nearly three weeks since Mr. Banks had finally approved my request to take the Test. 19 years old and I can finally see a beanstalk beginning to sprout. We have closed our Eyes for the night. Time to see in the dark, time to try to catch a scent of desert flowers and warm summer nights. I check the Link on my wrist to make sure it’s not connected. Story time – “Dad, you maybe feel like telling a story tonight or you want me to get out the books again?”
He points to floorboards with a preoccupied look on his face. He is looking older. More rings than usual under those eyes, under everywhere. And more glaze in all of it.

“Okay Dad, which one?”

I bend down to pop open the loose boards that hold our family’s stash of books. I love the smell of them and could almost catch a hint of their pages from that dry little hole sandwiched between our kitchen floor and the ceiling of my dad’s room in the basement.

I hear him put his bottle down on the counter. Perhaps he is too lubricated to read tonight. As I looked up at him, about to repeat the question, his wet dark brown eyes came to rest on me.

He wheezes the words into being, “Anaya. We need… Anaya… to-night.”

I nod. He has soured on Cervantes of late. Too much fun, I’m sure. He laughs rarely and smiles even less, but a sly and low and knowing grin used to creep across his face when he used to read Quixote to me. Even more so when I would read it to him. Anaya, by comparison, more meandering, bending, and mending. Humanity has some questions I can’t find on my exams. And so we will soak in
the song and language of people – real people, our people with real emotions, and real eyes – people we don’t always fully comprehend, but always feel connected to for yet another night.

Just as we walk into our dimly lit little living room -- consisting of an old brown couch splitting its armrests and two orange over-felt felt chairs arranged in a semicircle around a flat-topped chest that doubles as our coffee table -- I hear the front door beep (having scanned a sanctioned Link) and the footsteps of mi tia. Just in time.

A quick glance to see she had closed her Eyes and Links.

“Tia, we’re going to start…”

“Sobrino, there’s an envelope here for you. The letter, you need to read it. Now.”
Chapter 5: A Way In

“I know MU is as hard to get into as Harvard-Dorf… yes, especially in the MEATS fields. Yes, I know there are more international states sending students. Well, I don’t care what you have to do. My daughter has earned her place.”

I listened from the stairwell.

I got my 98, but on the second attempt. 93.5 composite. Not quite good enough.

No more visits from my silent stalkers. I’ve been on sleep and anxiety medications for the past two months.

Atul got a 98 the first time around. He’s majoring in aerospace. As an engineer for the private shuttle industry, he’s going to make a killing. He has his choice between MU, Harvard-Dorf, and Stepford. He chose MU. One less slot in the MEATS cohorts.

I’ve been waitlisted by MU and Stepford, denied by Harvard-Dorf, and accepted to Northwest University. I refuse to apply to Southeast. It would be an obvious downgrade. NU would be a downgrade too, but at least they’re middle of the pack in the Rankings.

MU is where I belong.
“Good news, Win. MU wants you to come in for a second interview, but it’s not in MEATS… at least not yet, not directly.”

A swell of joy, then suspension.

“What do you mean?”

“There’s a round about way of getting into cohort next year.”

My cheeks flushed.

“You qualify easily for the MEATS curriculum & instruction management program.”

Bridgie’s program. She had made it with an 87 in January.

“Dad, you know that’s not what I want. An instructor? Me, really? They could train a monkey to do that job… I’m sorry, I shouldn’t say that. Please don’t repeat that, but… you know what I mean.”

“Look, Win, you’re really detailed-oriented. You mastered A Grade curriculum k-12 and are about to graduate a year earlier than most. Salutatorian is nothing to sneeze at. They need that in MEATS C&I Management. Plus, if you accept that placement for one-year, the Admissions Director has promised me that the committee will re-evaluate your
application next year along with a third Test score that would bring your composite over a 94. Two of your electives would even transfer, plus the advanced standing that you’re going to get from AP courses once you’ve enrolled. The 2085 cohort won’t even know you were there the year before. You’ll be 18, already tested out of most of your gen. ed.’s. You’ll be ahead of almost everyone else coming in.”

I nod. I want him to stop talking. He doesn’t know what it’s like. Things were different even when he went through. I am feeling… too much. I want to hurt…

“Winnie, do you hear me?”

I look up and nod twice more.

“Thanks Dad. Thanks, really.”

“You’ve earned it, they just couldn’t make an exception. MU can’t risk dropping in the Rankings. Plus too many Towers’ kids… and I guess the international student applications are really up. Those really bring in a lot of money for the university…”

I give a cursory smile, walk to the bathroom, press a button, and take a pill. I will sleep to stop the feelings… to forget.

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“Tell me a-geen wahy jou want to be a k-12 instructor?”

I have never heard this accent before. It pops up only occasionally with particular words. Had he been an international from U.S.E. Asia, that wouldn’t have surprised me, but an international that came here, a long time ago no less, from an African city-state, perhaps an island or South American nation that no longer exists, is very rare.

He smiles sweetly, peering through thick glasses with heavy black frames, that look like they’re about push his head down to the desk he sits behind. Glasses. Wow. I’ve only seen those in a pictures and virtual field trips back in time. All Eyes are programmed to adjust accordingly to each person’s ocular needs. Even so, most A-grades have their lenses lasered to perfection usually before they go off to college or just after. (I hear it’s safer to do it later.)

Dr. Compao asked me to remove my Eyes when I first met him in the lobby of the C&I Management building. He typed in a security clearance code on the elevator to activate it. A sign greeted me when we got to the top floor of the building. “No recordings – All Eyes must be Closed beyond this Point.” After I had closed mine and put them in their case in my purse (which was then held at the front desk just off the elevator), I was led through black metal double doors at least four or five inches thick, activated by another key pad on the wall rather than Links, and into the biggest office I have ever seen for a professor, at least 2000 square feet. They didn’t show us anything of the sort during
campus tours or summer camps, even though we saw many heavy metal white doors that required proper Link authorization in many of the MEATS buildings, and many a large lab space. But this, this was like something from one of those horror movies Bridgie likes to watch about people living alone or visiting a big wooden house in the woods from before the new millennium. Not a single detectable window. A high, dark ceiling with wood beams running its length. Antique lamps, casting their light to the floor, light the shadowy room. A gas log fireplace crackling, surrounded by books, and desks, and globes, red tapestries with gold stitching and cords, and glass cases with old-style boats and old, cushioned high-backed chairs. Chairs with wooden legs, not a single HoverTech lounger to be found. It looks like a museum or mausoleum…something really old, just old and stunted.

The whole thing is really uncomfortable. This small, smiling black man, with cotton white hair running temple to temple in a semi-circle around his shiny bald head. Wearing only a collared silk button-down, open necked, with black wavy spots on a tan background, shirt one size too big save for the part around his bulbous gut. He is seated in an embroidered chair and portraited by a wall of books that follows the curving walls around us with the fire-place on one side. He is staring at me intently through aquarium-sized glasses as though I have something small, yet potentially decipherable, etched into my face. He’s probably had to wear those face anchors from reading all of the books in here. Not Eyebooks, either, actual paper and print books. Hundreds of them. Thousands. There’s probably not enough trees alive now to replace his library, a real library. This
guy is a relic. Easily the oldest person I have ever met. An amiable relic, but a relic. It’s no wonder history isn’t a major anymore.

I clear my throat to buy myself some more time. “I…I…I just love science and kids, they’re great.” I am dying on the vine here. I know Articulation cost me those two points on the Test last month.

“Your mastery levels in high school are very impressive, and your 93.5 composite would be one of the higher Test scores MEATS C&I has admitted. Scholarship material, no denying it. It’s just, forgive me, you don’t strike me as the kind of person who wants to spend much time with children.”

How dare he. I am so sick of other people trying to dictate what’s best for me.

“Well, I want to instruct A grades specifically. High School. I know how they think. They need a strong foundation for the Test and deserve the ability to go to the school of their choice. They deserve a chance to make the next great discovery for U.S.E.-AMW. Nothing would delight me more than to know that students who work hard and earn a chance to contribute to society get it.”

Better. Take that.

Is he chuckling?
“I see. That is... illuminating, Ms. Weaver. As you are well aware, most of our A grade instructors often retire from science and industry and then go through our ‘C’ing Eye certification program to deliver curriculum and instruction to supplement their retirement... what most of them call ‘giving back.’” Or we get the opposite: bright-Eyed young students, such as yourself, who loved their A-grade schooling and want to relive it the rest of their life – in large part because they were better at it than anything else in their life, and for some of them because it’s just so comfortable, so certain, in uncertain times. It’s all they’ve known and it’s all they think they want to know. The part you said about “contributing to society” though is what should interest us most today. For there is also a whole other set of A grade students who we get who want to save the world, bring A-grade culture and taste to B and C grade students. To districts, we’re told, that aren’t ready yet to make meaningful contributions beyond foundational labor in MEATS fields.”

“So what if I told you that there is a new intervention being piloted in our high school certification program that pairs incoming A-grade C&I students with an incoming B grade, or possibly even a C grade, student? The pilot would require both partners to spend time learning the curriculum management plans and corresponding instructional practices for both grades. This would require field experiences in both districts and a at new instructional research facility working with special... education students. Is this something that appeals to you?”
Well mom will be happy about the travel anyway, even working with talented & gifted. Likely concerned about the field trips to B-district schools, but at this point, I’m with Bridgie, it is what it is. Whatever gets me back on track.

Dr. Compao leans forward as if to follow the question towards me, cocking his head as if to better hear me. Is that hair in his ears? Thick white wiry tufts creeping up and out from his lobs and ear canal. Then in a tortoise-like move, he slowly rights his head, staring directly at me. I can see the deep rings of an insomniac under his glasses and his beady eyeballs boring a whole in my head. This guy almost looks wild… like a...

“Do you understand what I’m saying, Ms. Weaver?”

This intervention sounds crazy. There’s a reason why those people are the way they are. They haven’t earned what we earned. It’s that simple. I don’t feel good about this at all, but this is my only shot at being what I know I can be: a scientist who pushes the edges of innovation. This just wasn’t the innovation I was expecting. Baby steps. Step by step. All in good time. Patience, Winnie. I can hear Bridgie in my ear.

I swing my head to the side just for an instant so my hair can help sweep up this mess. I smile widely with all the honey I can muster, “I’d be delighted. Thank you again for considering me for such an innovative program. It’s an honor.”
I’m greeted with a quiet grin and a nod of his shining head. Note to self: titrate an old school solution for this guy – ratchet up the deference. And I have got to remember to tell Bridgie that his head could double for Zoltar’s crystal ball! Deep darkness with white storm clouds swirling, shrouding an impending prophecy… that sounds like something she’d say.

My smile is real now and beaming. I can do this. It’s one year, an extra year with my best friend. I’ve needed some downtime anyway. Maybe even wean myself off the pills.

“I will oversee the program personally. We have one spot left in our cohort for this coming school year. So the only other question I have for you is… will you join us?”

My mouth drops open to mimic surprise. “Oh thank you! Of course.” I rise from my chair and present my hand. The folds of his cheeks spread and his grin grows wide to reveal pearly whites, the rings under his eyes almost enveloped now by his glasses. He seems younger, excited. He gives my hand in a warm squeeze, and then places it on the inside of his right arm to escort me out.

I want to earn what I get with my brains, but the truth is good looks really help.
Strange. Outside of my family, I had never read someone else’s hand-written writing on paper. Language is the ocean we live in, and in U.S.E. we relate by typing and formatting the font of our choice. But they’re providing the playing field, defining its borders. The only mail we ever give or get is Eyemail. But there is this letter controlling the look and feel of someone’s own relationship with language, that was slipped underneath our door.

My gamble paid off. Even more than I expected.

A letter from Edwin Knight himself.

Edwin L. Knight was something of an enigma. A well-recognized recluse, squat and plump with a thick wild beard - burnt orange with streaks of white - and Eyes always darkened, right hand almost always on an intricately carved wooden cane. He was something of a celebrity only because sightings of him - one of the richest men in U.S.E-America Midwest - were almost as rare as a Wild sightings, and because of his awkward dressing habit and peculiar gait, swaying like a baby penguin from side to side for balance and momentum forward. He supposedly came from old American money (although that’s not an uncommon story attributed to a number of politicians and businessmen in recent years, who
wanted to project an image of trustworthiness and community buy-in, only to have them turn their attention and divert resources to other U.S.E. city-states at home and abroad). Today Knight Entertainment produces Eye programs, as well as Eyenimation and other special effects for movies, series, and even for special events throughout U.S.E. and abroad. The Talk often refered to him as a lunatic or a charlatan, sometimes both in the same post.

His foundation, however, is known for sponsoring apps to support reading, writing, graphic art, and other learning communities across A and B grade school districts. B-grade school districts seem to be the main focus of his foundation’s giving though as they were tracked to either community colleges or small colleges for the Arts. It gets little fanfare or interest. I remember a clip of him being tracked down by a reporter asking why he would donate so much to the Arts. His answer was typically disgusting (as are the answers of all of the fat cats licking their paws looking down on the rest of us from their golden towers)... perhaps too typically disgusting. I thought I might have found a silver lining. He said that “artists have to be connected, at least in some small way, to those suffering and those struggling to strive for success... for how else could they hope to emulate those experiences in their art for the rest of us?”

Why would he want those experiences captured on screen or in dance, theatre, novels or anything else? 99% of our conditioning is around not seeing people
suffer, but to see how much better life is with Walls and safety systems, high-tech gadgets, and grandiose high-rises. Games and sensual foods, or filters, or fuel. Everything dripping with sexiness. Sadness doesn’t really sell these days. There are scripts where the hero falls briefly, but is always able to right himself, obtaining the good life, but that hardly qualifies as “suffering.” Perhaps to remind A-grades of their superiority, but they already knew that and acted accordingly. Why such a large investment with so little return? All tax write-offs could be directed towards MEATS programs. It didn’t make sense, unless he really valued the Arts, really knew and appreciated stories of the past, perhaps even the ones that had been left behind in the Great Reforms. Like the ones under the floorboards in our kitchen. The ones my grandmother saved – Anaya’s *Bless Me Ultima* (which includes several of his essays), *Arthurian Legends: an Illustrated Anthology*, the *Bible, Creation Stories of Tribes of the American Southwest, Don Quixote*, and *People’s History of the United States* and a very illegal, and partially indecipherable, essay from Gloria Anzaldúa – seven books spanning over 3000 years of human history. Reminding us that some of our current condition is also one of the past, and that there was great Possibility that has been lost. Each slid in a secret compartment in her suitcase. A compartment, if found, could have left her, my father, and sister out in the water and the Wilds. But it was not, and as a result, she compromised… at least outwardly. When the Restructuring occurred, Luchar became Lucas; it would give her children and her children’s children a better chance in the new Unites States, or so she prayed. She
carried the weight of the regret of that decision with her every day, my father said, until the day she died.

Yes, if there is unpredictability in the system near the top, it would be Edwin Knight. Which is why I risked submitting an essay I had been writing (and rewriting) on my Eyepad over the past couple years. It carefully condemns Goldhammer’s reign, his power grab, and the world being remade in his image by masking him as a Pharaoh and the rest of us under his yoke in Egypt, carving and carrying the blocks of Pharaoh’s self-glorification, every day, all day, for years until the weight of those blocks crushes us to unidentifiable bits. “The Pharaoh’s Return” is framed by my imagined self having fallen asleep in MEATS Foundations and dreaming that I had been transported 3000 years in the past. A Pharaoh consolidating power and slaying any Moses or god that got in his way in the name of progress. When I awake from the dream, I am – as anyone would expect - hotly embarrassed and decide I must rededicate myself to my studies lest we end up like the age of Pharaohs. I just hoped someone working for Mr. Knight could read between the lines.

The scholarship opportunity was new and the best fit I had ever come across – “all expenses paid to the essay winner from a C-district by the Edwin L. Knight Foundation to attend a competitive, well-resourced university” - not some small community college, magnet or virtual college. That meant MU, although not
explicitly stated. Those other schools offered no real ability to leave B or C grade districts or professions... not that there were really any professions available in C districts, anyway, just grunt work. The degrees and certifications I could get there would not help me get to the powerplayers, not in this lifetime. But this scholarship could. It focused on a pilot program in Articulation, by far my strongest subject (and most people’s weakest), and more specifically on one that would help evaluate, perhaps even assist in, the redesign of the latest curriculum and instruction management plans for k-12 Articulation. Upon completion, I would receive my instructor’s license for any English-speaking U.S.E. district in any city-state in the world.

The College of Education at MU, like most Colleges of Education in U.S.E., is focused on instructing young minds in the fundamentals of MEATS and their articulation to life and society. It is heavily regimented and product-directed. With good reason, accountability, like everywhere else, depends on churning out high numbers. If you’re not producing per protocols, you’re flunking or about to be fired. Being an instructor, and one day perhaps a curriculum manager, was akin to being a glorified security guard or an event planner – helping to protect and ensure high number turnout – and widely considered not to be a legitimate profession, but a needed and useful trade in perpetuating the New Economy. Still though, unlike those other positions, C&I Management had a home on MU’s campus. It offered access to young minds in a sustained manner...if there was a
way to move beyond simple Eye instruction. And then there was the opportunity to be on that campus and have access to most of MU’s resources. This is better than I could have expected, especially at my age.

Dear Ponce,

Your essay moved me. You will be hearing from the department soon. Find the teacher there and trust him.

Let’s get rid of those bad dreams, eh? Block by block.

Student by student.

~Ed

p.s.

Burn this. Now.

Done.
So much said in so few words. I show my father, he nods, his nose-flaring, lenses moist. One tear makes a break sliding quickly down his right cheek to the floor. His strong hands on my shoulders, then smack on the back. He is grinning, nostrils still flaring, really grinning, and then it is gone. Wiped clean and reset. “Ok, ok,” he nods. “There is planning to do,” he rasps. Mi tia hugs me and leans close to my ear, “I am so proud, sobrino. The Possible has heard our prayers.”

There is more resistance and from someone with access...someone with power. How big is his network and why have we never heard of them. Am I the first in resistance-building? How much...what else is to come? Is this a trap? His apps and programming run on Eye Technologies and HAL Securities owns E.T. Is he really working with Goldhammer and luring rebel-sympathizers from the Great Reforms out of hiding?

We have many questions, but few answers. Only the guiding belief that there must be others out there like us and, if not, that we should be the first to shout from the rooftops should the right opportunity present itself. The plan I get them to agree to is that should I ever be accused of terrorism or labeled an enemy of the States, I became that way at MU. That college and access to that many ideas and opportunities overwhelmed me. I became reclusive. I acted alone – an Army of One. Then again this could be another dead-end – Knight mentioned “a teacher” and teachers and teaching were phased out years ago. Outlawed, a
crime against U.S.E. education policy and protocols. Where am I going to find one at MU and isn’t meeting with him paramount to walking into a lion’s den?

I don’t know what Knight has planned, but it’s better than working Wall maintenance with my dad and watching him die. The chemical sprays they use for sheen and protection against the elements are filling him up – a pre-formaldehyde “treatment” care of HAL Securities. With water so scarce this past year, he had taken to drinking state liquor more – he said it was because he didn’t like the taste of C District water – but I know it’s so that mi tia and I can keep trying to move forward, get a little traction should a beanstalk sprout (and I’m sure it eases his pain). He is the canary in the cage, wilting from the fumes and flames of Hell. If I can’t get him out, the least I can do is shut down the mine.

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“I have it on good authority that you are a risk-taker, a dreamer...an explorer. You come by it honestly. I was told you have a vision for rebuilding the public trust. You know what they used to call those people?”

I shook my head, still marveling at the tempered, ornate beauty of Dr. Compao’s office.
“Teachers.”

Yes, this must be him, but I don’t know how to signal that without giving away what I know. Best to wait - see if he keeps talking. Although I want him to be what I think he is so much that my eyelids are beginning to moisten.

“Really?” I tilt my head to the side, half-pretending to examine his books. More than half wanting to. Those books could take me away from U.S.E. for a lifetime. I want to hear the spines bend on each one, smell their pages, and lose myself in their the pages by the fire. Father and Tia would love it here in this…this time capsule.

Dr. Sidi Compao is much older than I expected and at the same time in much better health. He doesn’t dress like any instructor, professor, or anyone who’s anyone in U.S.E. An odd sight to see someone of his status in khaki pants and a collared short-sleeve black button down that hung free over his distended belly and waist. Seeing someone darker than me in a leadership position, in education no less, is the biggest revelation for me though. A picture of him was unavailable at MU’s Eyesite, but I did find out that he was an “Endowed Chair” of the C&I Management program in the College of Education before meeting with him. He had a string of publications on improving instructional strategies and protocols throughout U.S.E. city-states on all five (recognized) continents. A man of many
places can be far more dangerous than a man of one. But he is also a man of
books and history. Is this who Knight intended me to meet?

“How do you know why they outlawed teaching?”

I shake my head.

“Because if you eliminate teachers, there can be no more teacher’s unions, no
more teacher tenure, and no more teacher intuition. No more teacher
improvisation and no more big ideas or tough questions getting in the way of
districts and states that needed to show tangible progress in the face of
dwindling budgets. No more unpredictability. So now we have -
small discrete packages of information masquerading as education, neatly
compartmentalized and organized by someone in a cubicle or a boardroom or
both. Those compartments are sold to superintendents and curriculum directors
over wine, travel, and other kickbacks. Those administrators, in turn, promote
teachers to a district leadership position if he or she is willing to be saddled with
those compartments and swear by the products inside them. The monster
reproduces itself quite effectively and quite quietly. Schools still look the same on
the outside.
Everyone knows how important and powerful the Securities lobby is for our global defense systems, and energy harvesting needs, but few realize that the third major lobby is shielded by and connected to the other two: Eye Technologies and Testing influencing all things related to education. They’re about protection and control as much as our guns, bombs, and drones and they’re embedded in every school and school app that exists today. They craft what we see and believe to be possible. If things are going to change, they will sell the new Eye apps you need to study for the new benchmark exams at each level, that ultimately prepare you for the Test. And they will sell you the Test and the Test prep apps – if you can afford them - at every level of schooling and they will sell the State the technology and upgrades that support it.

There’s a reason the American States used to subsidize public education before the merger, before the Restructuring. Prior to the 21st century – if you can believe this – public education budgets were focused on human resources – like teachers. Teachers created activities and places to stimulate the minds of young people to explore and create something new as part of their education, not simply reproduce a reliable model, or ensure a market for more EyeCandy. If you haven’t noticed, our public education is mostly privatized, but it’s called public to rally pride and commitment to the system that enslaves us all at all levels.”
Oh I have. I’ve been seeing, not just watching. He lost me with the union and tenure bit, but connected some dots I hadn’t before. He is speaking my language. A language that leads to resistance.

“It is in the very private hands of a few. One more wall protecting the EyeTech Industries.”

My heart beating in my ears, I swallow slowly, and keep my mask placid, lest a hidden recording device be aimed at me. “How do you know all of this?” I say as evenly, as emotionless as possible.

“Because I’ve lived it. I helped create it. Immoveable arks for a waterless world. Fear for what would happen to me and my family if I didn’t. Afraid to be left in the desert or dark forests of the Wilds if I did not bend the knee. But they are all gone and I am afraid no longer. I have nothing left to protect nothing to wrap myself in except one idea – what if. Do you understand me?”

I nod.

“Fear not here, Ponce. You are in the presence of another traveler and dreamer. I am too old for games that grind and gut people like meat. I am a resource for you on your journey ahead.”
There it was. I nod slowly at first, but can’t stop once I get going. Tears streaming. Not a single word. A real quest with real consequences. I don’t know if the tears are from excitement, affirmation, or the fear he assumes. But I know I feel in a way I have not before.

I stand and join him standing by the fireplace. I am closer than I have stood to anyone before, save my father and tia. “How do I know I can trust you?”

“You can’t and that’s part of the problem. The whole system is set up to breakdown the family unit, even if it doesn’t end with divorce. It’s set up to divorce us from each other, where fear of the Unknown and fear of the Other undermines any trust we might believe possible. We’re all hamsters on a wheel afraid to get off because it might mean we have to talk to somebody, look somebody in the eyes, their real eyes.”

“I am not afraid.”

“Then look me in my old eyes, not just the lenses, and know I bear the weight of thousands like you behind them...thousands I sacrificed for a family I thought could be shielded from this madness. That I am a man done hating and fearing what I am or could be...”
“I want to show you something. Have you heard of the Voynich Manuscript?
No, of course you haven’t, only a handful of archaic bookworms in the academe have. I happen to be one of them and have a copy of it...here.”

He takes turns and retrieves soft blue covered book, containing ancient looking text, over a foot and a half long and nearly a foot wide with a few inches of depth. It looks nothing like any of our books below the floorboards.

“This anthology contains copies of some of the most perplexing manuscripts of human history. One of them is the Voynich Manuscript.”

He finds a soft-ribboned bookmark, opens the pages it separates, and offers the large book to me. “From our medieval world.”

“Incredible,” I whisper.

The pages are white with compact painstaking writing of a language I have never before seen in my life. It is sandwiched around and in between an equally enigmatic plant with three blue-petaled sunflower-like tops, with white and yellow florets embedded in the center like wavy teeth. Each is heavy-headed, but only one of the three tops has wilted significantly and sinks in the distance
between the two who loom largely across the top of the page. Lower on the main stem of the plant, there are three bluish-green leaves on either side each with roughly ten digits waving around a round center. At the bottom of the stem or trunk are three brown roots, each with its own little offshoots that weave down to the bottom of the page and into blackish-brown wheels like those used to steer old ships, each wheel containing white handles on the outside and white spokes on the inside.

“What does it say?”

“That’s just it. We don’t have any idea. A language unto itself.”

“How did it survive the Restructuring?”

“It was housed at one of the old Ivy-League universities prior to their consolidations and relocations. A rare-book dealer came by it before that. A man named Voynich, the manuscript’s namesake.”

“Note the other pages - the chimeras, zodiacs, flowers, plants, and the women at play. This took years to create... and is not of our world, at least not of our world anymore. Do you think something like this is worth saving if it can’t be read...can’t be understood?”
“What?”

“It’s slated for removal at the end of the year – the original… and the six copies known in existence. It serves no purpose.”

“No.”

“Does that offend you?”

“No, that can’t happen. It does have a purpose, just not one U.S.E. can understand…right now.” If I am being recorded, it’s too late. Not an hour in and over printed paper detailing life of some kind over 500 years in the past. There is no way for Compao or Knight to know the reading list that helped rear me. Is this some sort of cosmic sign to speak?

“That which cannot be easily understood is almost always feared. You cannot let another language die, Dr. Compao.”

“But it has no people.”
“It does. It has all of us, each with a different possible interpretation.” I don’t know what it was about those images and the hieroglyphs from the age of Arthurian legend, but this manuscript must not die as so many misunderstood languages…and people…and ideas before it.

“If say the manuscript was removed from the binding, from the other stories before it was scanned and incinerated, and its Eyefile deleted, could you find a good home for it?”

He does not wait for a response. He places the book on his wide dark desk and removes a cleaving pen from his pocket. In an instant, the pages snap cleanly from the binding. He lays them out and then proceeds to roll them vertically.

It pains me to think of what pages are left in the book, awaiting their demise.

“Hand me that stick.”

A narrow smooth dark green baton – about a foot long and no more than an inch in diameter - resting on the mantel of the fireplace. I take it and feel almost nothing, like air.

“Press both ends with your thumbs at once.”
“Harder.”

There is a soft zipping noise and a hidden compartment running almost the length of the baton opens up and out on two sides. Dr. Compao takes the tightly wrapped (and now bound) roll and places it inside. “Close it; it’s yours.”

“Thank you. But…”

“If you tap the end with the small insignia on it twice, it will expand into a walking stick. Push it twice again and it will retract into its compact form.”

Fascinating. “Where…how will I use this?”

“Where we are headed, my dear boy. Where we are headed.”

“Won’t this make people suspicious?”

“The moment you were born you made people suspicious.”

Wait, what? “Excuse me?”
“The same as me – dark, different from the white world that writes the rules for freedom and progress. I’ve been suspicious my whole life. So I smile… so I can put others at ease. If it were not for diversity safeguards at schools, that is, before they were repealed, considered obsolete during the Great Reforms, I would never have gotten the opportunity to study languages, history, the Arts, or practice teaching each one. Before they were condensed to Articulation and bent with the sole purpose of making MEATS accessible, making it consumable. What a narrow vision…and I am old and have had enough narrowing vision of my own that I don’t need someone else’s narrow vision too.”

Thank goodness. Keep him talking, see where he goes. I lean in nodding.

“It never ceases to amaze me how uncomfortable I make them. My colleagues, I mean. I don’t fit into their boxes nicely. ‘So what are you anyway? Where you from’ I tell them what I think they want to hear. I smile and nod and listen politely. I give platitudes and I dispense pearls of wisdom when situation dictates. I am from many places and I have learned quite well to adapt.”

He sighs deeply as though he has just dropped a heavy load. “I could ramble all evening and you have to get home soon. My research assistant, Johnny, will take you. Miles to go, yes? It’s going to be a late night.”
“Why tell me all of this? Why share a priceless manuscript? I thought... I thought I was brought here to instruct the next generation.”

“No you didn’t. I read your essay. Few will have the chance to know the power of reading, writing, or speaking as exploration – not in small scripted packages for an exam, or a form, or a checklist, but in larger, less sure attempts – essays, extended essays, novels, poetry and other genres too often left untouched because their outcomes are infinite and measureless in a measurement-obsessed world. There are priceless few left who know what it is to string words together that can create and question ideas into being. Fewer still willing to take the risk of sharing that knowledge... to build capacity for wonder. Even fewer still afforded the opportunity with dark skin and dark roots. I sensed that perhaps you share some of those values... or could in time.”

“Am I wrong about you, Ponce Luchar?”

How did he know that was my last name? My real last name. He knows - my whole family...

He puts up both hands, open, palms facing me, until they frame his face. “It’s okay, it’s okay... I didn’t mean to startle you.” He sees the fear. “Your father, Jose, ‘Joe’ as they call him, right? And your aunt, Luci, are going to be looked
after.” He hands me a card with the word ‘Knightwatch’ scribbled on it. “You understand? Same goes for us. There is capacity to protect this work and the actors who struggle to make it happen.” I hand it back and the paper is quickly crumpled into a ball and discarded into the fire.

“Your grandmother was a teacher, yes? Eetz okay. Jou can admit it.”

So many questions. He knows so much…but not everything. And what the hell is Knightwatch? Why write…why not just say it?

“I can see I have been too eager for your company. I have bent the knee too long and have too many demons to exorcise for one night. I admire what she did, you know, your grandmother. I fought to keep my family name intact, but that is what survived, not my family, not their ideas. You can help them live again. You can learn how to be a teacher."

“From you? Are you my teacher then?”

"Yes and no. I am not yet, but I hope to be. Too long a lecturer… a learner… an eccentric company man. But a company man nonetheless, just with a new employer and a better company. One that pays for deviations from the norm. That’s where this room and my current title come from. We all work for
something and that something for me is building a network of people who can work in and beyond the current system simultaneously, something that many teachers knew how to do quite effectively in their day. Make no mistake, my goal is not to bring the system down, but to revitalize it, make it better. Teaching – real teaching – is transformational. Your sponsor and I have agreed to try to resuscitate teaching, but that takes more than a handshake or some policy on paper. It takes a sustained commitment to building relationships and communities that support learning, not just memorization of steps or content. It’s a very different kind of innovation. The new gas deposits they’ve found near the intersection of AMW, ANE, and ASE territories offer a rare opportunity for us."

"What? Why?"

"Nation building, right here at home."

With the population being "maintained" (which really meant it was declining again), how were they going to build a new city-state? Where would they get the people from? The previous city-states were constructed in response to a series of high impact floods, quakes, and subsequent desertification that ravaged much of the world in the middle of the new millennium… but that occurred mostly with long-established cities that had weathered the natural disaster the best. The only questions that were really asked were who to let in, when, and why, while
keeping in place our economic and political systems – and the world’s powerbrokers who dominated them. I have always known that the energy, agriculture, prison, and waste industries resided in Watchtower territory beyond the Wall, but the idea that those industries could be used to help prospect new land – build new immaculate cages and populate them -- had never occurred to me. A new box to play out a tired old game. Why now?

“In two weeks, you will be introduced to the new Midwest University Regimented Knowledge Institute, MURKI as we call it here, built specifically for establishing an instruction plan for the new citizens of America Mideast. This coming academic year, you and five others from the incoming cohort will spend much of your time there.”

I don’t know whether to scream or smile. This has either been the best decision of my life or the worst. At least he understands irony - his devilish grin after announcing the acronym was telling. Did he choose it? Did he choose all of this or is all of this coming from Knight? He sees MURKI as a real opportunity, but it’s not going to mean much time at MU, at least not yet. And this talk of teaching brings big risks just as I’ve gotten a foothold. I remain stoic.

“Are they aware of all of this? Of an attempt to bring teaching back?”
He smiled broadly – his teeth gleaming. “No, they were given the platitudes and smiles speech.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Off with you then, young explorer. Keep your head low – stick to your regimen, and be sure to pack your walking stick for the next time we meet. Johnny will be at the front desk beyond the doors.”

Turning to leave, battered, exhilarated, confused, I hear myself venture, “How do you know I won’t say something to someone about my involvement in all of…this?”

His smile subsides as the balloon in each cheek deflates. His answer is matter-of-fact and certain. “Because we’d both be dead.”
Chapter 7: Cracks

I have been beyond the Wall twice before. Once when I was in elementary school, no doubt the source of my reoccurring dream. We went out with my dad to his assignment in America Southeast. I remember how bright and quiet the superhighways were. How the road seemed to stretch out forever as though there had never been floods at all, only a great hardening of the Earth taking all water with it. How impatient I felt. We had to drive all day and into the night. Why would you go beyond the Wall really? You can go virtually anywhere you want to go with your Eyes on, unless you’re a MasterBuilder or work in another one of the security sectors. The second time was just last year on a visit to America Northeast and Harvard-Dorf's campus. A state-of-the-art campus, as prestigious as they come, but still a private school filled with Tower district brats and far from home. Hard to imagine it had to be relocated hundreds of miles inland from where it originated just within the past 50 years. I flew on a Kraft jet there and back. High above it all on a bright and sunny day, marveling at the seemingly endless nature of the cities and the golden rings around them – walls my father built – then the tan dry squares and rectangular patterns of fields long dry, some sort of drilling or mining operation, and then some green broccoli-headed forests capping rolling hills before another series of dry fields. I remember wanting to look down at all of it for the whole trip, but the hum of the jet’s engines lulled me to sleep within the first twenty minutes.

Today though it's overcast. The highway glazed with rain from last night. Spring has been very wet. Dr. Compao had asked all of us to meet at the conclusion of MU's spring
semester to see the new MU Regimented Knowledge Institute, or MURKI, as he
continued to refer to it. MURKI indeed. I expected it to be on campus, perhaps in another
district. I had no idea I was agreeing to go beyond the Wall when I met him, nor would I
have had I known.

Six of us were invited, chosen really, to represent our instructor licensure levels. Bridgie
and a lower B-grade girl, scrawny really, I think Dr. Compao said her name was, Krystal,
she seemed nice enough though, probably pretty scared. Probably never been out of her
district before, let alone around with A-grades. The two of them represented pre-k to 4th
level instruction. Then there was a short buxom blond with a mousy face from district A-6,
named Vanessa Vandekamp – did she ever look the part, and a handsome guy from B-2, my father’s old district. Scott Sanders, tall, thick, athletic build, with a rawness not
uncommon of B-grades but a hunger, likely for coaching and drilling, maybe more. Since
Dr. Compao asked us to remove our Eyes for the trip and he looked at me with a strength
and vigor I’ve rarely seen in an A or B or otherwise, I cannot keep stop stealing glimpses.
Why couldn’t he be my co-instructor? Instead, he and Vanessa represent 5th-8th level
instruction.

I am paired with the only C-grade of the bunch, just my luck this year, things are getting
better for everyone except me it seems. Ponce Lucas. Like that was his real family name.
A chiseled, straight brown face, freshly shorn, with dark eyes and eyebrows, closely
cropped thick wavy black hair, wearing standard C-grade colors – a raggedy black short-
sleeve polo shirt with gold pants (although they were really more tan than gold) - and
way too much deodorant. It couldn’t possibly be cologne – I’ve never smelled one this pungent. It doesn’t help being packed into a bright white Rover XL, only eight seats and eight of us, including Dr. Compao’s research assistant, Johnny, who is navigating from the front passenger seat. I can’t get a read on Ponce, his eyeballs wandering, but never near me. He even looks away when talking to me. Well-spoken, but pre-occupied. Even if I have to do all the work, he doesn’t seem like he’ll get in the way. He and I will represent 9th-12th instruction.

I am sitting in the back of the Rover, furthest from the door, then Bridgie and Ponce on my right. Krystal sits in front of me, Vanessa to her right, then Scott by the side hatch. If I get the chance, I will sit next to him at lunch, hear how B-2 is doing. I unzip my all-weather hooded vest to give my neck some air. Glad I decided to pull my hair back today. I purse my lips in case he glances back again. I put off serious dating until I finished the Test and found someone compatible at MU. Scott may not be the perfect choice, but a fun way to dip my toe in the water. He seems like he knows what he wants; he’ll climb, not to the Towers, but an A district for sure.

A whirling sound grabs my attention. “Bridgie, do you hear that?” She’s asleep, headrolling back and forth on the back of our seat. Another late night gaming. Since Dr. Compao requested that we keep our Eyes up until we reach MURKI, Bridgie has made every effort to avoid conversation. This wasn’t what she had bargained for either. Krystal turns around meekly, eyes downcast, “it’s the drones.”
“Oh, right. Thanks.”

I hadn’t thought about that at all. Only saw them once on our drive to ASE nearly a decade ago. They patrolled the skies for U.S.E., but never inside the walls, at least not over A or B districts. Apparently over C if Krystal knows this though. Maybe to help protect the Wall. Years ago there had been vandalism to the solar panels my father had outfitted on both sides of the Wall to help meet mounting energy demand and costs. As a result, only the top lip of the Wall on the inside now held solar panels. Out of range for hoodlums. Drones are armed, like Watchtowers, but I had never heard of an issue where one misfired on a U.S.E. vehicle. Still my mind wanders over what could go wrong beyond the wall… perhaps it will be as simple as my driver.

At least my dad was driving the last time I went beyond the wall and not someone about to die. Dr. Compao must be in his 70’s which would place him over a decade beyond life expectancy in the American city-states. Given his commitment to old bottle-bottomed glasses, we might not make it back even if he doesn’t drop dead at the wheel.

I don’t know why, but since the Test, it really makes me feel better to assume the worst about people so I’m not disappointed so much.

Johnny whispers something to Dr. Compao and points. “There, there. That’s it, Dr. Compao. Right there.” I can’t see much from the back, just the black hair of the back of Johnny’s head, some dry flat land split by a dirt road through the tinted window over
Scott’s shoulder. The dark clouds have moved on and the mist has burned off. The horizon waves as though on the verge of liquefying. It’s going to be a hot one.

The vibrating of the Rover comes to a halt. We’ve pulled onto the shoulder in between two older looking Watchtowers about a mile apart from one another, their tall metal spires, sharpening to a needle nose with a red flashing point piercing the sky. In recent years, newer models have sprung up, most often in close proximity to the Wall, resembling sharply sloped pyramids, although these are grey and metallic with a large red Eyeball swiveling on their point, no doubt paying homage to the symbol so commonly found on our e-money and Eyebill accounts. Watchtowers and EyeTech are the way we extend the security of our borders and our way of life. Eye Technologies aren’t just reassuring, they’re ingenious really. They protect our superhighways from the Wilds and provide full Eye and Link connectivity to any U.S.E. citizen who has to travel.

My dad told me once that they track our Links automatically and the Links of any U.S.E. made vehicle to ensure that U.S.E. citizens are protected. On our roadtrip years ago, I remember Will slapping his face to the window, cheering with excitement because he got to see one of the Watchtowers fire its HAL Flatliners into the Wilds. It was after dark and the quick rapid fire couldn’t be heard only seen. Golden streaks slicing through the black night welcoming us to the outskirts of U.S.E.-America Southeast.

God, that really was an awful trip. USE-ASE is known for its physicality, harshness, and heat. Their A-grade districts were overrun with ego-maniacs, spending and consuming as
much as possible at all times and wanting you to know it. It was gross, no sense and subtlety of America Midwest. Their Wall and security technologies also weren’t as well maintained, which prompted the need for my father’s visit. They seemed predisposed to having to fend off more activity from the Wilds. A trigger-happy bunch down there, inside the Wall too. Shootings seemed much more prevalent from what I remember from watching their Eyenetworks. The worst part by far though was that their water -- even the whole city-state -- smelled like a sewer. As soon as my dad found out about their water problems, we only drank from a WaterSafe cooler that had to be special ordered from their Towers district.

We were headed back east, but thankfully not that far south. Johnny said we’ll get to see mountains and trees, maybe even up close depending on the perimeter for the new state, but won’t be within 300 miles of ASE or ANE unless there is a brownout in Midwest.

We are moving again. Slowly, carefully. Off the paved road on to the dirt one, in between the Watchtowers. No sign of Watchmen. Then, two black Goltddusters just visible on the horizon – there must have been one at one of the Watchtowers… unless the tower can do all of that. A humming growing louder as we approach them sitting on their K-20 Dusters, energy-fencing behind them.

“Going the right way, I promise,” calls Dr. Compao from the front seat, having taken the Rover off of automatic several miles before reaching this shady looking turn off. No sign of Wilds though. The only person registering concern seems to be Krystal. Bridgie raises
her head with the jostling, pushes her eyebrows up and shrugs when she sees my look of alarm. There I go being too high-strung again.

“Hey Dr. Compao, how come you don’t wear suits like the rest of them?”

Scott, tired of answering Vanessa’s questions and listening to forced giggles for 300 miles, has decided to give someone else a try and the three of us in the back seat aren’t really options given the bouncing and noise. Vanessa has been fawning all over him since we left the university, living up to every stereotype about the education majors at MU. This is just one more reason why there aren’t any women in science. I raise my eyebrow towards Bridge and slowly tilt my head toward Vanessa, and roll my eyes. Bridgie responds by turning toward me and making a subtle barfing gesture. We share a smile.

Dr. Compao checks the rear visual and a wily curl appears on the edges of his mouth, “Don’t you like my outfit?”

“No it’s, it’s not like that professor.” Scott dons a protective grin. “I, I just meant that…”

“No, my boy, eetz okay. I am teasing you. As you can see I don’t fit the stereotype very well – especially the older I get. Most people write it off that I’m too old to worry about it. I’m glad you asked though. The truth is I have had enough suits to last me. Men in suits bring silent shackles – many of them don’t even realize they’re shackled too. I think
we have big problems that require us to roll up our sleeves – if we have them – and all get our hands dirty, and not just once a month.”

“Huh. But don’t you think it would be kinda strange to see everybody walking around like that, especially in the A districts or the Towers?”

“It’s all about cultural conditioning. We are conditioned to think people in suits to be more serious and have more important work, followed by those in uniforms who are often expected to carry out the suits’ big ideas.”

“Huh, okay. That makes sense I guess.”

“Pardon me. One moment”

We come to a stop. Dr. Compao drops his window and a Goldduster, Eyes open visible underneath a black visor flipped up on a golden shimmering helmet, clad in a tight gold Tevlar suit accessorized with black gloves, belt, and boots, peers back.

“Quiet day out here, Dr. C. Quiet day. I was waitin’ to escort you into Pandora’s box and then we’ll do a few laps around the perimeter. Got your Link handy?”

Dr. Compao nods. “Yes, here you go.” The Goldduster retrieves a small black Link detector from his thick utility belt and scans the professor’s wrist.
“How many total?”

“Eight.”

“Do you need all of their Links scanned too?”

He shakes his head. “You’re all set. Follow me.”

Golddusters are the country’s biggest private military and securities force, operated by HAL Securities. They are routinely used to ensure the safety of U.S.E. citizens inside and outside the Wall, and escort important freight to and from the Towers. Will calls them “special forces… highly trained” and I have seen footage of them on the front lines of natural disasters, securing our borders from the Wilds, water, or anything else that might encroach on our way of life. I feel better just knowing they’re here. On their new sleek midnight black K-20 Dusters, no less, the latest in speeder technology. Wait until I tell Will.

We creep behind the van to the thin pink lines of energy fencing which dissipate just before the van reaches it. We drive by and it reappears seconds later. Still nothing on the horizon, but a suddenly we slow to a halt.

“Here we are.”
Johnny pops the side hatch for everyone to get out. I’m the last to see it. There is a hole, a pit really, with what looks like a massive black box in it. “It used to be a swamp. Now the home for MURKI and TREAT…the Transnational Research in Energy Advancement Technologies…twenty thousand square feet built to house new city-state experiments for education and energy securities.” Johnny’s arms outstretched with his palms up as though he were presenting us with this gift. So this is what the Goldduster meant by Pandora’s box.

“Eetz not finished yet,” adds Dr. Compao.

Johnny continues, “There’s a new deep drilling operation southeast of here that’s going to link up with TREAT once their wing opens here. It’s likely to be at the forefront of energy harvesting technology – you will likely get to see some pretty interesting equipment coming and going next year.”

Dr. Compao interjects with a cursory smile, “But let’s go inside, shall we? Please bring your packs. We’ll eat lunch in there.”

Lunch offers little opportunity to talk with Bridgie… or Scott. Dr. Compao talks endlessly, breaking only to eat, while Johnny takes the lead, telling us about TREAT owning the western half of the complex, while MURKI occupies the eastern half. We tour MURKI’s instructional demonstration labs and viewing rooms to get a sense about
the life we will be living this coming school year. Apparently since MURKI is not complete, no recording with Eyes or other devices is allowed for security purposes. The facility is sprawling, with white walls, white lighting, and high ceilings, not unlike the interior of many buildings on MU’s campus. This makes me feel better – the exterior had the look of a compound. Scott and I exchange knowing glances during our walk. He likes me.

“Dr. Compao, wasn’t this sector closed years ago due to quakes?”

It’s Ponce. He’s been quiet the whole trip unless asked a direct question. He’s been tighter lipped than my mom.

Dr. Compao brings our small party to a halt. He turns to face all of us, smiling sweetly – almost creepily sweet. Is he annoyed?

“Yes, but there has been little seismic activity in recent decades in this area. That’s a good question. In any case, there is an emergency bunker up ahead with supplies should any catastrophe strike.” He points down the hall and turns to walk again.

“But couldn’t drilling change that?”
Dr. Compao waves his left hand without turning around, “Our engineers at the university and those at the Towers tell us the area is safe for habitation and harvesting again. Come, we have the East wing to see before we get back on the road.”

Thirty minutes later we reach the surface of MURKI, rising through an elevation tube that places us on the long flat black roof of the complex. A blast of heat and humidity greets us immediately. The horizon even wavier than before.

I look at Bridgie, nostrils and upper lip turning up. She nods, her brown lenses doing a sweeping circle. This is not what she had in mind for her first year of college either. She’s not going to get to see much of Petie or her games while we play instructor in black box in the middle of nowhere.

Johnny motions us inside the Rover. We all climb in, but Ponce, who is a good fifty feet from the hatch. Dr. Compao is talking to him, looking down at him, arms crossed, finally raising one arm palm to the sky. Ponce nods. If he says anything I can’t see it.

We are moving now back down the dirt road, through the energy fencing, back to pavement. Back to civilization. Sweaty and bouncing, soaking in the icy air of the AC, when there is a skidding and a shift, like something fell or broke loose. Bridgie looks at me, “Winnie, did you feel that?”
Then a tearing that builds to a roar. The ground is shaking. Dr. Compao taps the brakes. Dust and debris cloud the window. *Shoooonk!* A smashing. Impact. *Oh my God.* The Rover is rolling side over side. Someone is screaming.

My right hand clutches Bridgie's leg while our safety harnesses strain to keep us from flying out of our seats. Finally we land sideways. Tremor after tremor snaking below us. We rock back and forth to each one until the shaking subsides and our wits return.

A quick scan to see that everyone is still strapped in. Thank god. Bridgie loops her left arm inside mine, squeezing it, and rubbing my right hand still locked around her leg. She pets it gently.

Like an amusement park ride without the amusement, Winnie. Just like that. No one’s hurt. Help will be on the way.

“Dr. Compao? Dr. Compao?” Johnny is hanging sideways above the professor. His left arm reaching down to shake the old man’s shoulder. “Dr. Compao?”

Krystal is huddled in a ball, shaking. Vanessa crying and clinging to Scott’s left side. Scott is taking his Eyes out of his shirt pocket with his right hand free…turning them on. Good call for help. Ponce is stiff as a board, lenses darting, one hand pressed up against the inside wall of the Rover, the other clamped down on the seat.
Then he is up and out of his harness. “Scott, pop the hatch.” Scott gives a half-nod, only half-listening, searching with his Eyes.

The hatch opens up.

“I’m not getting any signal. Nuthin,” Scott announces.

Ponce is out and makes the jump down to the ground and a second later the back hatches opens. “Get everyone out. Get to MURKI. I’ll help Dr. Compao.” His look is focused now. No one else is making any decisions. I can smell circuits burning.

Bridgie and I detach. We rub Krystal’s back and motion to Vanessa and Scott how to exit out of the back. Scott tugs the shirt of Johnny who is crying quietly, still hanging above the silent body of Dr. Compao. “Johnny, this way.”

One by one we slide out the back of the Rover to find our packs and the vehicle’s first aid kid on the ground in front of us. Ponce is wearing his already, looking intently towards something… likely the superhighway, getting our bearings. I collect my pack and follow his gaze.

A Watchtower bent and twisted ruins is lying across the highway. I turn quickly the other direction to see the second tower snapped in half, its needle-nose having plummeted and impaled itself into the ground, twisted grotesquely over itself again with metal tendrils
waving out every direction in search of their stem from which they were ripped. I cannot take my lenses from it.

Little wonder why Scott wasn’t getting a signal.

My heart is racing. “Winnie, you hear that?!” Bridgie has made it back to the dirt road, left arm outstretched pointing the way for the others to get to MURKI, right arm bent with her finger to her ear. My ears strain, still ringing from the quake. Then I hear it. I think I hear it… a low hum… a whirling, really. She breaks in before I can complete my thought.

“Drones!”
Chapter 8 – Breaking… a Way Out

Scott looked like a typical B-grade jock, but with more charisma. Easy to see why he was his high school's star quarterback. B-grades make the best athletes -- they have the size and weight of A-grades, but aren't as soft. B-grades occasionally experience water shortages and non-obesity-related diseases, even the occasional violent outburst or suicide, but nothing like C grades do. Anxious not to talk about myself, I peppered him with token questions when we first met at MU, waiting for Dr. Compao and Johnny to finish stocking the Rover for our trip. Scott planned on redshirting this year for our football team and hoped to stay at quarterback for his college career. No surprise he wanted to go pro, but tempered enough to know that might not happen (something severely lacking in the C-grade athletes I know). He was full of himself for sure, but anxious to make a difference on the football field both playing and coaching.

He was all of these things and more I'm sure, but now he is dead.

He, Bridgie Wilson, Krystal Gail, Vanessa Vandekamp, Johnny Hashatori, and Dr. Compao are as many people as I have witnessed die in sum as all those before. All at the hands of HAL Securities. Justin Baldwin, Chaz Dillard, Neville Gordimer, Big Al Walker, E’sha White, Vaytron Wolfe. That’s not including the
dozens more I knew personally who were taken away by Golddusters, to where I can’t say, but somewhere worse than, or at least equivalent to, death.

At the first sounds of the drone, I knew we were in trouble. I saw the group on the round waving frantically for help. To be seen.

I yelled no. I screamed to get back. Then I turned - to run the other direction.

Winter Weaver standing in the way, puzzled, still shocked from our accident. I grabbed her wrist pulling her down behind the Rover. “What the hell are you doing?!” she had shouted, but then she heard it too. The whistle of something coming in hard and fast.

The explosion was remarkably contained. The earth shook but only for a moment. Her face had dropped with the horror and sadness of someone who had never really known those emotions before. She craned her head around the edge of the up-turned Rover needing to see what her mind already knew to be true.

She made not a sound. Thank goodness. Her breath short, quick, shallow told me she had seen. The drone was circling away from its target, likely to make another pass soon.
I grabbed Winter’s hand, told her that she must follow me, and we ran to the
only place I could think of for cover. 20 yards through scrub brush to a rip in the
earth, one side across from us lording precipitously over the crack, while our
side jagged and tiered. We slid down to an exposed boulder with the roots of a
bush exposed to one side. A makeshift rope, good enough. I took it and used it to
lower myself down a tier to a smaller outcropping that folded under the boulder.
Winter was in shock, expressionless, her body moving, but no one home. After
three harsh whispers, she refocused on me and lowered herself down
mechanically. We hid under the belly of the boulder, sunk down on our
haunches, holding hands. I prayed that if we were going to die that it happen
now. Crushed quickly, without a sound. Die in the earth not on hot pavement or
up against a cold wall.

But we did not die. We heard five more explosions and the earth shuddered each
time, but the boulder did not drop. And then it was quiet. Quiet like I have never
heard before.

By dusk, the Golddusters had come and gone. Likely inspecting the kill sites, and
looking for any possible survivors.
If there is a time for action it is now. Winter has not said a word since I grabbed her wrist and pulled her behind the Rover. We stopped holding hands hours ago. She is catatonic and I am left to replay the day’s events in my head, alone.

The sun is going to be down soon. Time to find shelter, real shelter. We need to find somewhere other than a crevice in the earth next to a superhighway for safety. After a few taps and then tugs, she follows me to the roots and climbs on top of the boulder. I follow until we are back on top the rolling plain. The Rover has been disintegrated, Dr. Compao right along with it. The Watchtower remains are also no more. Strange. Why destroy your own technology?

There is a stand of trees in the distance, at least a mile, maybe two, maybe more, beyond MURKI, and MURKI has got to be close to a mile from here.

“We’re going to hurry,” I say. I think I detect a nod, although her gaze is far off, far away from me. “Come on.” I put my hand out because I don’t know what else to do. She slides hers around it and we start walking at a brisk pace to the edge of the world.
Chapter 9: Seeing Stars

It’s freshman year. I am leaning over one of the white jelly-bean-shaped table tops in our classroom, each seating four to five students around it and that allow our instructors to slide in and walk us through holographic models that demonstrate the correct way to problem solve or produce our intended product for the today’s lesson. The light of the sun is trying to reach us, but softened by an entire wall of tinted windows and cast to the ceiling by the room’s blinders. Bridgie, her black curls, bouncing softly, leans towards me from across the desk. A hologram displaying the process of meiosis – slowly shuffling genes – is in between us. Our instructor is detailing its role in sexual reproduction. I find it fascinating, every stage a world unto itself – unique…but then I see her face through the undulating green image – front teeth exposed, she is biting her lower lip with one eye-brow raised as though she were seductively stalking the hologram. I look away. She’s going to make me laugh. This is not the time or the place. A giggle slips out…

“Miss Weaver?”

“Miss Weaver?

“Winter Weaver?”

“Winter Weaver, that is your name. Please talk to me.”
“Please.”

Ponce is in front of me. I can barely make out his face. It’s clad in shadows and a pale white light.

The moon. Are those stars? My god, look at how many of them. How bright. How…

How am I here. “How did I… where are we?”

His mask drops. He has concerned, steady lenses, focused on me. His black brows rise. He is… different.

“You’re safe. We’re in that stand of trees east of MURKI. It’s late. We’ve been walking for hours. Just stopped a few minutes ago – I’ve been trying to get through to you. Do you remember any of it?”

I shake my head. Nothing but the blast.

“I remember…I remember… Bridgie.” And then I am crying. In waves uncontrollable and ugly. On my knees, gut spasming, eyes and nose flooding. I want my friend back. I need her back. The one person who could smile or shrug in raging storms. Whose outlets were fantasy and fun – not drugs or bizarre, aggressive ones like so many others in our
world - a world of serious business. She is a light in a long dark night. The one person I could show my imperfections to and know there was no judgment, only love.

Ponce is rubbing my back gently, as though he may break me.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

Eventually I am choking for air. Pointing at my pack, scared and exhausted. He acts quickly, unzipping it, rummaging and pulling out my inhaler. I take a puff, and sputter too quickly. Another. Another. Another… air. Thank you, thank you god.

I flip my head to the sky in a half-nod; he nods back. I fall on my back in a soft green clearing, framed by forest. I’ve never seen trees this tall before. And the stars…stars so many and so crystalline sharing the night sky with a moon bigger than any I can remember. Tomorrow, tomorrow I will get back home and dad will set this right…tomorrow…Bridgie… Somewhere though I know none of it can go back, some walls can’t be mended…

I must sleep.
I hear a fly. Something on my leg. *Slap. Slap.* I sit upright, squinting at the dawn. Alone in the woods. Woods beyond the electric fencing. No Watchtowers. No way this area is protected from…

*Wilds.*

I hear a snapping behind me and turn. Ponce is walking out of the forest towards me. He sees I’m up and reaches for his pack. He produces his water bottle and hands it to me.

“Drink?”

I feel how dry and crusty my lips are. My throat scratchy. I’m parched.

“Where’s mine?” I whisper.

He points to the ground just a few feet from my head. My bottle. Empty. “I made you drink last night. I was… worried.”

The thought of sharing germs with some guy I barely know disgusts me, but I am so thirsty. I hesitate only for a moment and then feel moisture return to my throat and lick my lips. He is kind though. I didn’t see that when I first met him. Still C-grades are known for destructive behavior, best not to get on his bad side, especially here.
“How do we get home?”

“Can’t,” he says quickly.

“Why not? We’re in the Wilds. It’s only a matter of time before they find us. We were lucky last night. We… I need to get out of here.”

His lids narrow. “Where do you want to go for help? MURKI? Midwest? Let them know they made a mistake, so they can finish the job?”

I’m speechless.

“You know why they bombed the Watchtowers too? So no one – nothing else – could steal any of their technology. If they can’t have it the way they want it, they’re going to blow it up. The earthquake must have triggered some sort of safety protocol.”

_Protocols over people. Protocols for the people._ I can hear my 9th grade MEATS instructor chirping the merits of staying objective and following directions as written.

“What are you talking about?” I know he has a point, but I don’t want to believe it.

“We live in a militarized state. ‘Stand Your Land’ laws. Golddusters lurking around every corner with their state-of-the-art weapons, and drones always circling overhead. That doesn’t seem like overkill to you?”
He’s a conspiracy theorist. My dad has warned me about complainers and critics – *It’s a lot easier to criticize than it is to build something worthwhile.* That’s what he always says.

“I think you’re overacting. Golddusters protect the Wall and our business interests beyond the Wall, that’s it. As for drones, this… this is like… I’ve hardly seen them before. They’re for keeping Wilds out and El Cartel if they ever try to come North again. Drones…” killed my friend.

He knows where I was headed. He knows I’m recycling USE rhetoric rather than digesting reality. Still the world he is describing is not the one I have lived in. Not until now.

“Winter, in C-grade schools, my district, there are Golddusters everywhere. They supplement where the police won’t. It’s bad there. I promise.”

He means what he says, but what about *Leave No Child Behind?* This was the year. Could C-grade schools not be getting better?

“Winter, I need your Eyes and Links.”

“Why?”
“Because once they get this area on their grid again, we’ll be showing up and they’ll know where we are. And they will finish the job.”

“What did you do with yours?” I ask, needing to stall, needing time to think this through.

“That’s where I just came from. I got a rock at the edge of the forest and smashed them. Then I buried them under those trees back there.” He motions to where he just came from.”

I look at my Links and unzip my pocket to retrieve my Eyes. They are dead.

I look at him, “I’ll be right back.”

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He is sitting on his haunches talking to himself – maybe praying – when I return. I’ve never believed, but maybe that’s because I never had a reason to. Church just another routine or gated community to choose from in making your way in society. Science isn’t a choice. It is the way to understanding how the world works. It’s a way of knowing what you know.

He’s not done doing what he’s doing, but I don’t care.

“I know a drone killed my best friend. I know that she was the one person who kept me from thinking this world was insane, because she was in it, and yet refused to be pulled
down by it. We need to find a way back to Midwest, to get into the city undetected. My dad can help us. He’s a Masterbuilder.”

Ponce stopped talking and turned his head to the side the moment I started talking. He shook his head when I finished and rose slowly. He’s muttering under his breath. A fake smile greets me. “Winter…then you should know that those Walls are impenetrable.”

“Winnie”

“Winnie… we would need help on the inside and I have someone I know who may be able to help, but we need to go into the Wilds first to try to find someone who can help us make contact.”

My blood runs cold. “You know someone on the inside who can help? Go into the Wilds? Ugh! Are you out of your frickin’ mind?” I don’t know if I scoffed out of any real disdain, but definitely out of fear. Please don’t say…it.

“We don’t have a choice.” A stoic stare.

Like hell. “I do. I’m going to MURKI to see if there’s a way in. See if I can make a call to my dad from there.”
“That’s west, it’s open, exposed. Drones will be patrolling. I already saw one this morning. You won’t make it, and if you did you wouldn’t have the time to find a way in, if the quake caused one to open up.”

He’s too matter-of-fact, too stubborn for his own good. I’m going to give him a piece of my mind, “If we go any other direction, we’re going to get torn to shreds by Wilds and those drones won’t even have to waste another bomb! Wake-up, you’re choosing a death sentence!”

Unwavering. “No, won’t happen… it’s just the unknown.”

“How can you be so sure?” Not their taut emaciated bodies, their expectant eyeballs. Not…

“Because Dr. Compao told me…”

“What? In your little pow-pow outside the Rover before we left? What’s he telling a C-grade lucky to make it to college that he’s not going to tell the rest of us? Huh? That’s so damn important?”

He’s hurt. He can feel something too. He’s averting his lenses, won’t look at me now. Thank goodness.
Silence. Just bugs. We sit for several minutes. I shouldn’t have said that to him, not like that, but we can’t go away from the one place we know we need to get back to. I should say…

His gaze has picked me up again. Ponce’s jaw hardened, “You want to you know what he told me?! You want to know what he told the ‘runt of the litter?’ He told me that due to the declining birthrates and healthy births in America, we were going to attempt to see if Wilds can be trained and initiated as C grades for the new city. That there are ones in this area that are capable of being… taught. That’s what he told me!”
Chapter 10: The Flood

Yesterday, preoccupied, I slathered stroke after stroke of deodorant wondering how a man like Dr. Compao must feel to be free of many of U.S.E.’s vices and distractions with his new office. Grandfathered into the new system and able to preserve a place of days gone by. Maybe even export it… and what that could mean to a new city-state without such a long history of corruption. Knight must be resourcing it all – the top floor, older non-HAL security measures, inner walls only to avoid outside surveillance. Dr. Compao probably made the case to his colleagues that his office was a lab or field trip unto itself for students in Articulation to see the ways the Arts had or could support MEATS fields. I wonder what will happen to it now. All those books.

I have part of one. One shred of his legacy – a human legacy - for exploration, dreaming, and asking questions that can only have multiple answers, if any at all, or more likely only better questions. He must have sensed his time short, although not this short. The Voynich manuscript held tightly in the forest-green baton sitting snuggly in my backpack with the remains of yesterday’s lunch and a poncho. Is that enough to get somewhere… somewhere to contact the Knightwatch? I don’t have the first idea how to do that, only Dr. Compao’s belief that the Wilds are not to be feared the way we have always been conditioned to believe.
My deodorant has become quite a nuisance. I’m ashamed that I even use it – one more way the system is set up to mask the stench of its disrespect rather than make a substantive change. Anti-persperents are too expensive and I don’t trust body sprays, so this is what I get. I smell terrible, having sweated right through it in the early hours of yesterday, no masking my scent… especially today. What a sorry excuse for a bath. During the spring, there is more rainwater available that makes bathing three times a week possible. Last night was going to be my night for a good rinsing, instead I am stinking to high heavens in a wood full of sharp senses. We’re sitting ducks if we don’t get on the move, but Winter is proud, and scared, and confused. Her best friend dead. I can’t imagine. My best friends are my family, trusting anyone on the outside would be too dangerous. I am friendly but not forthcoming enough to ever have been a real friend to anyone. After Ponce died, we had to come to terms with the fact that we were all likely to see each other die in unfortunate circumstances, but we would work as if that was not the case all the same. We would search for inspiration… for the Possible.

So how do I get through to the daughter of a Masterbuilder, who has known a life of privilege of seeing what the system will shower you with if you keep your nose clean and play one of the roles predetermined for you? She says she wants to be a scientist. A MEATShead from an A district - not much of a surprise. That’s where most of them come from, A or B, although most are men… at least
the ones making news are. So maybe there’s something there – that she’s unafraid of a male-dominated field. She’s certainly better looking than any science instructor I’ve ever had…

Mi tia has always told me not to be so hard on MEATS, especially science. That its history is one of amazing discovery. She says that science, like all of the MEATS fields, has been perverted by corporate interpretations of it through the policies they sponsor and the predetermined findings and products they want to see. She says that the science of today is not science at all… she calls it… scientism because it believes the world fixed, immutable, mechanistic, controllable. This fits well with Goldhammer’s championing of production-based standards and punitive accountability measures if worker bees, including scientists, don’t make their quotas. She says it’s a quiet corporate take-over of all public systems that has nothing to do with the scientific method, yet invoking the name science and “scientifically-based research.” She says the scientific method can be appropriately applied to phenomena that can be isolated for study, especially in petri dishes of health and medical labs, but I have never known those times, nor cared enough to look for them. She is insistent though that science is being misrepresented in U.S.E.’s MEATS standards movement. That what has been codified into law does not understand that scientific facts are only the best substantiated theories at any given moment in time, that they can and inevitably will change if one is true to the nature of science. That real science
assumes and appreciates change in what was known and believed to be possible. That is what she tells me and I can see she believes it. But all I have known is that the science of today is being applied to people, to isolate them and their pieces, even though we are social beings – amalgams of our environment, community, experiences, place, time, and history. If those parts of who we are were allowed, taken into account, even sanctioned by the system, wouldn’t we be capable of being much more than simply a collection of metastasizing cells?

Maybe the science Winnie believes in is the one mi tia believes to still exist. Maybe.

I know am a stinking C-grade to her. She practically said as much, but I’m going to have to find something to focus our conversation, something to make moving forward possible.

“We need to get back to Midwest as soon as possible. My dad, we need to get a hold of my dad.”

“Puta madre.” She has a wall with the Wilds. I don’t blame her given the movies and occasional news footage that someone on a roadtrip captures and shares with their Eyes.
“What, what did you just say? I’m not walking east, north, or any other direction when we’re already over 300 miles away from where we need to be. My dad will be out – he’ll have other people out this morning looking for us. We can keep in cover in these trees until we see more than just Golddusters at MURKI.”

I shake my head. She doesn’t realize her dad has already been fed a line of misinformation, likely that the earthquake swallowed us whole. Even if he were to come, they wouldn’t think twice about putting him in the ground. No retirement to have to pay out. Masterbuilders have to make a pretty penny. Their title is more ceremonial than anything – they’re recognized for being good troopers, of executing the grand plans of small men in big towers.

“Do you hear me?!”

I shake my head. I’ve had enough of her carrying on. She doesn’t know enough to fear U.S.E. more than the Wilds, still expects her connections or technology to get her out of this mess.

“Do you hear me?!“ She is red and shaking. An indignant princess - beautiful and benevolent... but only if you get in line...know your place. Not so much as a thank you for getting her out of the shooting range or giving her my water, or staying up all night to make sure we weren’t accosted by Wilds. No. Just her ire.
I cannot stand by while she flaunts her privileged upbringing. I can’t stop myself.

Dam breaking… “I hate you.”

She looks shocked. Like I hit her. “Hate me? How... how can you hate me?”

I feel low, lower than my grading, but she needs to hear it...

“Because you are of the part of the power structure and your A-grade culture allows us to be needled, and measured, and scrutinized, by your values and your long history of opportunities and resources. Not mine. Not those of most children. Packaged, judged, and labeled. They’re children, you know, even though they’re C-grades – GODDAM CHILDREN! And we all feel the weight of your grade every day of our lives. We have to confront it, squirm, conform, and subvert ourselves to your way of life, because that’s the measuring stick.”

...or maybe I needed to say it.

“You think it’s easy being an A? You think I don’t have problems? My mother...”
“Look, we’re all posers, and hacks, and portraying something we’re not. The only difference is you and your people don’t realize it. It’s all a façade. The bombing should have shown you that.”

“What are you talking about?! My life isn’t a façade. I was who I wanted to be yesterday – I was going to college to make a difference in science. How is that a façade? How is wanting to investigate our world something that bothers you… or hurts kids in your district?” Her nose crinkled up, whole body shaking.

She’s standing right in front of me and we’re leagues a part. I am scum. Chivalry must not die with books. Not the over the top kind with flowery speech and sensational deeds, but the one that holds ideas about how to treat one another with a sacredness towards each person’s potential. I need to be honest with her, need to be honest with myself about the hate and the lust I have for the things she has had, the things she is. There are parts of me that don’t feel that way of course but there is a Wild caged inside me that claws at my innards and begs me to give myself over to their extravagance, material and corporeal desires so often associated with A-grade life. She likely has no such beast or burden locked away. Time to come clean and bridge this the only way I have left. With the truth.
“I am Julio Milintica Luchar-Tlatoc. I am from a family of philosophers and fighters. But, you are who you are and who you want to be. You must make it, Winnie. No matter what.”

I am crying. That is all I have left.

--------------------------------------------

Silence, but she does not stamp off. Instead her face softens, the anger drains way. “Ponce, I don’t understand. Ponce?”

I am so tired.

She is patting my back. “Ponce, come with me.”

“Julio.”

“Julio.” She looks at me deeply. Does she see me?

I just want to sleep, and it’s not even mid-morning. I rise. She takes her pack, opens it, and produces two NutriGen bars. “Breakfast. C’mon, let’s walk…we’ll go your way.” She seems kinder now. If she’s a scientist, then she values reasoning, and she must have realized that going back is only going to end
badly, at least without some help. That or she just feels bad for the miserable
sniveling C-grade before her, the only other person that can help her survive the
Wilds. We are walking towards the rising sun.

The walking and the food revive me.

“Where did you get the extra food?”

“My mom always packs me something extra, even for school. I’ve got some fruit
gummies left for lunch or dinner. Your choice.”

I smile because I feel like it. She gives me a half-smile back and we walk side by
side, not saying a word, but not in silence, the forest alive now with crickets and
birds vying for attention.

I have never been in a real forest. Winnie tells me she hasn’t been either. There
are parks in each district. C-8’s had a stand of trees that was patrolled day and
night for illegal activities. When I was younger, Dayvon and I would go to the
playground after school until mi tia would pick us up after her shift at the
hospital ended. The playground was safer, all enclosed in a chainlink fence, even
though there only ever seemed to be young kids who didn't have their Eyes yet
or old folks who were losing their sight altogether. I remember one old woman,
she called herself, Sassafras, probably in her late 50's, but she looked at least two decades older. She was blind and came to the park, felt the trees, and sat on the bench by the playground every day that I went there. She used to sing a song…

Kookaburra sits in the old gum tree
Merry, merry king of the bush is he
Laugh, Kookaburra! Laugh, Kookaburra!

What a life you lead

Kookaburra sits in the old gum tree
Merry, merry, merry little bird is he
Sing, Kookaburra! Sing, Kookabura!

Sing your song for me.

Kookaburra sits in the old gum tree
Eating all the gum drops he can see
Stop, Kookaburra! Stop, Kookaburra!

Leave some there for me

Kookaburra sits in the old gum tree
Counting all the monkeys he can see
Stop, Kookaburra! Stop, Kookaburra!

That’s not a monkey that is me.
Most of the time, she used to talk to no one in particular, but for the whole playground to hear, "Those who do not know nature as a child must have a second birth when they finally meet it…or else be consumed by it. Mark my words. Follow the trees, little ones. Follow the wind in the trees and any Kookaburra you can find."

One time, I did follow the trees. Dayvon told me not to. I ventured out to see what our trees, or the wind in them, had to say, to see if there was magic in them. What I found was two Golddusters punishing a teenage boy from our neighborhood. They had knocked off his Eyes, beaten in his nose, blood flowing freely from it. The boy saw me peering around a bush, but the others did not. He shot me a look of alarm - warning, even in his pain. I turned and ran for a policeman I had seen on the other side of the park. When I arrived, breathless, speaking faster than my words could form. He smiled at me, put his thick hand on my shoulder, and said "Slow down there, boy. There's nothing to worry about. Golddusters will clean up the neighborhood, you can bank on that. That boy's in trouble for good reason, I'm sure."

That was the beginning of my education beyond school walls, but still confined by those of Midwest. As we walked, I told Winnie that and more. The stories I had never shared with anyone other than my family, some not even with them. My birth, my father’s health, mi tia, the struggle to overcome Tillman Banks and
the school system in C-8. I told her about the harsh conditions of our schools – the massive turn-over in C grade instructors and instructional models, the high drop-out rates prior to even reaching high school, how C-3 skims the highest MEATS scoring students in all the districts to show the greatness and progress of the C, how those who do graduate in other C-grade schools are typically older than students in A and B districts, how the military, Watchmen, and Golddusters market and recruit heavily in C-grade schools, and how those along with clinical trials for drug companies offer the fastest or only way out for many students severely under-resourced at home and at school. A way for more water, money, prestige, but, more than anything -- just a way out.

She was shocked. Amazed and horrified. Her face deeply troubled with quiet tears occasionally making a break.

“Do you have any idea how hard it is to get to the nearest certified Testing Center for us?”

“They don’t give you one in your school?”

“Scam testing centers spring up in our district every winter, claiming they’re certified. I had to take three buses an hour and twenty minutes to get to one I knew was legit at the north end of my district. Along with the cost, that distrust
helps suppress Test participation in C-districts and it works. Why do you think they hold the Test in the dead of winter?”

“I can’t believe they would let that happen. I mean, I do. I believe you, but why?”

“I’m sure the scamming agencies are fronts that ultimately send C-grade money back to the top. I’m sure that’s why harsher drugs are allowed to exist in C-districts too, so that U.S.E. can get a big cut of the money it generates there. People hooked on drugs are much more malleable. Their money ripe for the taking. And people who won’t be missed if they disappear.”

“Really? That’s not on any of the news I see.”

“That’s because they wrap us up in seeing only what we want to see. We’re provided with digital divides the moment we plug in. The scariest part to me is that you never know who’s watching you at the end of your gaze – spying on you – scanning or looking at what you did – reducing you to nothing more than a series or number of clicks each day. I mean there are servers in the Tower district recording everything we view, every click, everything we do with our Eyes. We are always Linked – look at everyone’s wrists, Winnie… new age chains everywhere.”
Chapter 11: Driftwood

He is not who or what I thought he was. He is not to be feared. He has anger, but he is not angry or aggressive in the way C-grades are often portrayed. I see that now. His story profound – I don’t think he realizes how special…or maybe I don’t know enough C-grades to know that many of them have these kinds of stories of “passing” or attempts at it. It’s so far beyond anything I’ve known. He has known loss, without being lost. He has faced his fears. I respect him.

And I have decided to face mine. No more will Wilds come for me in my dreams. I am coming for them and if they tear me to shreds, so be it. I will not live in fear anymore. Fear of the Test, fear of other districts, fear of what others think of me, fear of being a woman in a man’s world, fear of the Wilds.

I am done fearing. I can do that for me. I can do that for Bridgie. I can do that for my mom. I may be scared, but I will not fear. For all of us.

So we walk. Nine hours into the east. In the first five we passed many an overgrown house or trailer with roof caved in and rusting remains of vehicles, a huge stinking dump surrounded by electric fencing and filled with plastics of all kinds and flies, then what looked like a prison compound in the distance, and finally a marker for a drilling station to be built. No people, everything is automated or appears empty. These aren’t the Wilds at all, not really. Not yet. Just U.S.E. operations that we aren’t meant to see or think
about. Then, not an hour ago, we walked by an agro-business operation; it was saturating its fields in pesticides. I watched a bird flying through it, straighten quickly as though struck by invisible lightening, then fall to the ground and spasm repeatedly, convulsing wildly. It took us at least ten minutes to skirt the field through the edge of the forest. Even at last glance it was still in the throes of the neurotoxin.

“But it’s no wonder birth rates are declining. We’re poisoning ourselves…”

Julio grimaces. He agrees, but can talk no more. He had poured out so much of a life that had no listeners. He has given me most of his water, saying he was used to working with little, but he is thirsty now. Really thirsty. He’s having trouble just keeping one foot in front of the other. Purple rings under his eyes. He is exhausted after yesterday and last night. Still, the tree stands are thickening, the forest climbing and becoming more expansive. The smell, the strength of tall trees over fifty – maybe one hundred – feet high with gnarled roots twisting into the earth around us, and the quiet – the quiet that comes when you’ve stepped off the hamster wheel and looked in the mirror to see you’re not a hamster at all and you’re meant for more than wheel work. I need to find a stream, somewhere we can stop for the night.

I tell Julio. He nods, head low on his shoulders.

“Stop for a minute. Julio, it’s time.” I hand him the fruit gummies. He chews each one slowly, silently. Eyes closed.
I’ve only seen two drones today and both times they were far away. Did they have heat-sensors? Did they detect us as in or part of the Rover with Dr. Compao and then were activated to engage on their second pass? If U.S.E. thought we were still alive, we would have been found or destroyed by now. So if we are free of Midwest’s strictures and prescriptions, what now? What are we supposed to do? Where are we supposed to be? It’s overwhelming and exhilarating. Set adrift with no course but the one we set.

I hear a thud. Julio has fallen, face down on the ground, upper lip held open by a tree root. Eyes mostly closed, moaning.

“Julio?” I bend down to help him sit up.

“It’s okay. I’m okay.” He says through labored breaths. I look around. I don’t recognize a single plant or tree. If I knew what they did, if there was somewhere to get water. I see his gummies on the ground. I pick them up and sit down next to him up against a fallen tree. He is dabbing his busted top lip with the bottom of his shirt. I offer him a gummy and the best smile I can muster. He gives a faint smile back. “Go ahead. Eat it. I’m hungry too, you don’t want me to have to wait all day do you?” I see his teeth stained with the blood from his lip. He’s a mess.

“Winnie, no, you don’t have to. I…”
“You stink.”

“Ha, yes, I stink. I do. I really really do.” He rests his head on the log behind him. His stomach shakes and his head bobs gently. I made him laugh. I can’t remember the last time I made anyone laugh.

“Do all of you C-grades smell like that?” I tease to see if I can keep him awake until we can follow the hill we’re on down into the valley up ahead. It’s something Bridgie would do.

“No, just me,” he chuckles. “Aren’t you lucky?”

We eat the rest of our snack, and I offer him my hand. “The sun will be down soon. Just a little more okay? Then you can sleep, I promise.”

“Wait, my baton.”

“What?”

“Dr. Compao, he gave me a walking stick. It’s in my backpack. I could use it.”
I get it for him and he tells me how to extend it into a pole at least five feet long. What a strange gift. Did Dr. Compao expect something like this to happen? That man defies any category I could put him in. Why did he want me to be a part of the cohort?
I think about these things as we walk, but find no satisfactory answers. I will ask Julio once he’s had some sleep.

Within the hour, we are at the bottom of the ridge. A large pond gleaming through the trees before us. Thank goodness. We get to its banks only to find it smelling nearly as bad as Julio. Fish carcasses on the bank. Julio stumbles forward for it. I catch him and take him to the water’s edge. We’ll drink and rest here or near here for the night. I help him lower himself at the bank of the pond, when I hear something.

A woowoowo behind me. A Wild. I squeeze Julio’s arm and stand over him, turning slowly around.

“You ain’ gonna letcher boyfren sip summa dat Devil’s drink ar ya? Dat der’s strait poysen.”

They can speak. I have more adrenaline than I have ever had on the Regulator.

A Wild, she’s over five and a half feet tall, lean but muscled, not emaciated like the Wilds in my dream. Long tangled red hair, pulled back from her tanned and freckled face. Left ear mangled. Her eyes narrowed to two slits, twirling some sort of woven string above and behind her head.
“Statecher bidness.”

I don’t know what to say. Try to get her to feel bad, come close, then take her down just like in one of Will’s boxing games.

“You dumb? Whaddaya wun?”

“Water… food… shelter… can you help?” I beckon an outstretched hand. She’s hard to understand. What is she spinning?

“Where ya frum? Say it, fancy pants gurl! Where you frum. Now!” She knows, she’s dressed in… hide? We stand out.

I offer it slowly trying to think how to make it not sound so daunting to this… this creature.

“USE Midwest, but…”

Thunk!
Chapter 12: Ascent


Thud.

Winnie lands hard, falling over me the moment she is hit. It didn't look like the stone -- or whatever it was -- hit her with that much force, but she lands hard because I inadvertently undercut her. I try to rise as quickly as I can, shaky both hands on my stick, until a fire-headed nymph takes it from me and gives me a quick pop in the face. It hurts, but I'm already pretty numb. I flop, playing unconscious, waiting to see what will happen… and because I don't have the strength to rise.

If she wanted us dead, why talk with us in the first place? Why warn me the pond is contaminated…likely run-off from the agro-business from the high ground? Why risk being seen…

“Sockeye? Sockeye, getcha ass ova heah.”


“Wha-wha-whatchu gonna do with um, Holliday?”
“Shush. Trade ‘em maybe. Les see what mountain mama wons ta do.”

“Yeh, okey.”

I hear a tying of rope. Likely Winnie. A moment later, a blind fold, then pushed over on to my back my arms taken and bound. Not rope, leather straps. Tight.

“Dis’ll do” I hear the Wild mutter. Am I dreaming?

Then it is quiet. Only the crickets and the wind in the trees.

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“I’ll take da fat wun fer abit. You take dis wun.”

I can feel myself jostled, swinging. Tied to a pole… my pole? I float in and out of consciousness.

“We shudden gun so far dis late.”

“Weal… we did.”
“I got two stones – you got da one wrapped in hide. Fur stun…y’understan, fancy pants?”

“I don’t care… you don’t hit unarmed people! And stop calling me fancy pants!”

I can hear Winnie’s voice getting more shrill. Thank goodness – she’s all right.

It is day, midday. I’m in a bed with just my underwear on. A quilt pulled under my chin. It’s getting hot in this room. The windows are open. I smell flowers. Real flowers, not some scented air-freshener or perfume. I can see a few blossoms from the ivy covering the outer walls of the building.

I sit up on my elbows. There’s a brown wooden night stand next to the bed. There’s a candle and canteen -- an old round metal one – lying on it. Another single bed like mine to my left, and two more across pushing out from the opposite wall. All covered in quilts of myriad colors, shapes, designs. The whole room is old, peeling paint, high ceiling, hard wood floors with tall brown trim. A doorway but no door in the corner of the big room.
Winnie walks through it scowling. Her countenance brightens when she sees I’m up. I don’t know why, but I want to hug her, but hold back. There’s company not far behind. She sits down at the foot of the bed and takes my hand.

“We’re safe… enough,” she says with a half-hearted smile. A purple welt in the center of her head just above her hairline. She follows my lenses. “Courtesy of a Wild who sprung her leash.” She nods toward the door, “My attacker… Holliday.”

It’s the fire-haired nymph from the lake, eyeing me suspiciously, from its framing. She looks like she stepped out of the pages of one of my Arthurian legends. She’s no Wild, she’s woman – young and wild – but not a Wild. I smile at her without thinking. Winnie follows my gaze and shakes my knee. Her scowl is back – “do you see what she did to me?”

I straighten my face and shake my head. “Terrible.” I can see our new companion beaming as I say it. She walks over to the bed next to mine and sits down. “Welcome ta Hilltop. Mama sez ya both can stay da nite… maybe more.”

“She was going to trade us to the Golddusters.”

“What?”
“Hornets, fancy pants”

“Yeah, I know that’s what you call them. We call them Golddusters. Julio, apparently, there have been others.”

“Winnie, I don’t understand. Where are we? Where are my clothes?”

“On the line, dryin’, Jewelio.” She gives me a playful smile. My heart skips. While not bad looking, I have never been considered desirable by any stretch in Midwest. Too dark. Too poor. Too easy to hide behind my Eyes. I’ve never felt like an… object… of desire.

Winnie sighs and begins recounting what I’ve missed. I can feel Holliday’s eyes on me and I’m sweating again. I notice I don’t smell anymore though, not much anyway. Good - they must of bathed me, cleaned me up, last night. That means… someone had their hands on my naked body – I don’t know why that bothers me so much, but I feel nearly as vulnerable as when I would to open my Eyes each morning and assume my known U.S.E. identity. I try to focus on Winnie to block out Holliday’s gaze or thoughts of what she may or may not have been privy to.
Winnie tells me of my dehydration, the climb, the stars from top, and an old woman named Rachel, but she’s referred to by many names “Nanny” or “Mama” by most. She’s says they told her this place is called Hilltop, a school in the mountains for orphans and misfits. A home away from home to all who want or need it and who are willing to respect the community, its future, and their own. She tells me that we were lucky not to be picked up by either of the druglords that peddle their wares north and south of here. One named “Big Deal” and the other "The Silver King," small but mobilized operations since drones thin out any large gatherings of people that they find. Still the network of these druglords is rumored to spread all the way to El Cartel in the southwest.

A pale dumpy-looking older boy walks in during the Winnie’s telling. His eyelids thick, lenses small, set close to one another, not focusing on me or her. He hands me a bowl of berries, smiling. “Holliday said ya be hungry,” he says seemingly looking at the wall. I am… really hungry, but do I want to owe anything to this vivacious Valkrie? I haven’t felt this kind of excitement and trepidation since Dr. Compao’s but this is… very different.

I devour them. Fresh berries. Real berries. Not the plastic-wrapped preservative packed crap we buy at our local liquor stores in district C or even from the distribution center on the north end. No, no food desert here. Real food. I hear Sonny Day, “we’ve done it. From this day forward, no child will be left behind.”
A staggering claim to make white collars sleep better...maybe to make him sleep better. Is there a politician left who won’t sell his words for job security in future elections and some high-paid corporate post when his political career ends? As if Day needs help. He’s a legacy. Third generation politician. USE claims it’s a democracy but new blood is in short supply at the top.

As if sensing my uneasiness, Winnie brings her synopsis to a close. “I bet you’d like to get dressed...by yourself.” She turns and shoots a stern look to Holliday. “Start your day. Meet everyone. Sockeye, would you mind getting Julio his clothes while Holliday and I take a walk?”

“Yeh, sure, okey.”

I can’t help myself. The berries have only made me hungrier. “Sockeye, if there’s more food, I – I would really like some too. Would you mind...”

“Yeah, sure, ok, ok, no probum, Jewlio.” Hearing them pronounce my name is excruciating, but our current circumstances could have been worse. Much worse.

“Thanks.”
After putting on clothes that smell more like sun than smog, I am ready to meet this merry band of orphans and misfits. As I learn quickly, they’re not all happy. A hulk of man, named Hank nearly crushes my hand when we meet as Sockeye is escorting me to the assembly. He makes Scott or any other B-grade look like a shrimp. Over six and a half feet tall, and pure muscle, not a single slab of back fat, tummy blub, or double-chin. If I didn’t know what Golddusters could do, he would be the scariest man I have ever met. The students have been asked to gather in the town’s circle, an elevated slab where the remains of a large circular fountain can be seen. Holliday and Winnie meet us coming out of stone house I awoke in. Chickens milling about in the sun. Holliday motions for us to step up on to the town circle. Trees everywhere, growing right alongside the eight buildings that make up this little mountain enclave, the remains of several others visible from the town’s center. Tall, thick branches shading much of the circle and most of the buildings except for the one I woke up in and a dilapidated wooden barn beside it.

As we step on to the stone platform, students of all ages come running out of two shaded buildings, a few more appearing from a path behind one of them. A tall solemn man with a wide-brimmed hat, made out of reeds perhaps, with a graying beard, trailing the small company. They arrange themselves around the circle. While a wrinkled old woman, white hair pulled back in one healthy braid, is wheeled to the platform by a man that looks like a much younger and blacker
version of Dr. Compao. He has a kind face, and nods in greeting. I nod back, although the old woman doesn’t seem to notice. Her poker face could rival mine. Our perhaps she simply has so many wrinkles that they obscure her expression. I notice Winnie nervously looking around, taking everyone in. A girl of no more than six or seven, with soft leather moccasins painted bright red, shimmering when the sun touches them, runs over and helps the man lift the wheelchair on to the platform.

“Thank you Anson…hun,” she croaks. The man nods twice quickly. The girl blushes, “Yer welcome, Nanny” and runs back to her place.

The woman takes a deep breath. “Okay, Holliday, would you like to introduce our guests.”

“Weal, so um dis here’s Winnie and da boy dere wit’ da nice eyebrouse, his neme is Jewelo.” She’s barely trying to suppress her smile. I catch a glimpse of Hank, watching her look at me, nostrils flaring. Oh no, this is not going to end well. Why me? The first time someone really notices me without me having to say a thing and now already there’s another one and he is reminding me there are benefits occasionally to be invisible.
“Welcome Winnie and Julio. We invite you to stay as long as it takes to find your voice, tell your story, and maybe even see it in the stars. I am Rachel.”

“Mother of mountains.” “Wise woman of the wood.” “Nanny to new beginnings.” The crowd sends them softly, echoing with reverence.

“Oh enough. Rachel is enough for them, they don’t know me from a corpse or a cornhusker.” She turns her head to the side, appearing uncomfortable in her chair, perhaps with the compliments.

“I should tell you that this school is the education available for those in our region and those who choose it from beyond as well. It is not tracked, nor graded, per my whims or any of the teachers here. It is student-initiated and student-and-teacher negotiated. It is about knowing the world better, and not all necessarily the same parts at the same time. It’s about a revolution… in human dignity.”

The crowd is nodding.

“I wanted to meet you, but I am old and tire quickly these days. Anson Diarra, a teacher of languages and medicine, is going to wheel me to the Lookout. I spend most of my time there, listening and looking…writing and conversing,
sometimes even with someone besides myself.” A wry smile. “Please know you
can visit me there during your stay should you so choose. If not, so be it. Enjoy
the students and teachers of Hilltop.”

Teachers…here. Dr. Compao would have been ecstatic.

With that, Anson wheels her to the edge of the platform and gently drops the
large wheels to the ground. Taking her alongside a shady two-story wooden
building with a short bell tower and lightening rod on top towards a flat
rectangular log structure behind it. Everyone watches quietly.

“She found this place and made it possible for students and teachers to come
over a half century ago.”

Not all the students or the teachers sound like Holliday…

“My name is Pearl Krum, I am a science, agriculture, and cooking teacher here at
Hilltop. Over there is Nettie Oakes, our historian and arts teacher. Lil Foster,
inventor, smith, and mathematician, and ‘Fish,’ botany, aquatics, and outdoor
adventures. Although Anson – who you just met – gets out quite a bit too… he
takes a number of the students on a run with him each morning.”
With the exception of Anson who has just disappeared with Rachel, each nods or waves save the one introduced as Fish. Pearl has her brown hair in a bun, tall, gawky, brown-teethed and pale with a limp, possibly a club foot. Lil, by contrast, is short, stocky, dark, with close cropped graying hair, a fuzzy upper lip, boasting strong fuzzy arms and a swagger reminiscent of the men in the Tower district. Nettie has shoulder-length black hair, a warm and welcoming smile, with a quieter charisma than that of Lil, the most reassuring presence of the bunch. Fish, the bearded man in the wide-brimmed hat I saw before, is quite literally a man a part, hanging back from the circle, eyelids closed, bobbing to some silent song only he could hear.

Next the students introduce themselves, going in alphabetical order by first name to help us remember…Carp… Clarissa… Clueless Lew… Dice… Eva… Hank… Hani… Holliday… Hope… Huckleberry… Jazzy… Keiko… Marcus… Maya… Miguel… Sadie… Samba… Sasha… Sales… Sockeye… Sherman… Val… Zora.

Winnie and I exchange glances. So many names, faces, body types that feel so foreign. Like I feel all the time in U.S.E. Dr. Compao was right about the Wilds being teachable, but if only he knew they might have much to teach as well. Maybe he did. The walking stick. The manuscript. Maybe he knew there was such a place as this. Passed down to him by whispers on the wind.
Students with teachers - how many of them are there then? 20? 30? Less than 50 for sure. It’s going to be hard work remembering everyone.

As if reading my mind, the last girl introduced, Zora, a poofy haired young girl calls out, “Aw Ms. Pearl can we play da game awready?”

“Yes, of course. Why don’t you tell them how it’s done.”

Zora inhales deeply, dramatically, then steps forward into the circle. “This game is called circling. You are goin’ tabe asked a series of questions. Answer them honestly. For some, you’ll need to step inside. But what happens at Hilltop will stay at Hilltop. These are your brothers and sisters now, ya understan’? You learn with ‘em and through ‘em… or stumble without ‘em. Maybe fall down, rot, and die. That simple… got it?”

Winnie and I both nod. She steps back outside of the circle scrunching up a smile to keep it from tearing across her face.

“I’ll start,” Hank bellows. “If you have a girlfriend…uh, or boyfriend, step inside the circle.”
I pretend not to see him looking at me. Winnie and I cross gazes, both on the outside looking in.

Six students enter.

“Glad to see a few of you have found love,” smirks Nettie.

“That wasn’t the question!” snickers the boy who I think introduced himself as Sales. Some of the students laugh, a few of the younger ones turn red or look down. I look down too as embarrassed as the other children. Personal connection is awkward… really uncomfortable for kids raised in U.S.E. I take a sideways glance at Winnie’s cheeks; they’re flushed. This isn’t the kind of game she’s used to either.

“Okay, let’s ask some questions that will help them know a little bit about us... who we are and where we’re from,” Nettie offers.

A shaking of heads and she begins.

“If you’re eight years old or younger...”
Seven students step forward. “Please say your name.” Eva, Zora, Miguel, Samba, Sherman, Carp all proudly announce themselves. Sherman, Zora, and Carp with similar Wild talk as Holliday’s but not exactly the same. Samba’s speech comes in fits and starts – “Ma- ma- ma ne, umsorry, ma n- neme ees Samba” – and he nods with resolve after getting it out. English is not his native tongue, but it will not be foreign to him…not for much longer. Miguel could be me just over a decade ago. All of the students appear to be between six and eight, except one. She stands motionless. Sunken cheeks, nervous lenses. Quiet. Nameless. She cannot be older than three. She turns carefully away to look at Holliday standing outside the circle and then bolts for her. Holliday intercepts her just before she leaves the circle and walks with her closer to where the others are near the center. “This here’s ma sister – Hope. Still workin’ on da langage thang.”

Nettie nods. Eva walks over to Hope and pats her back.

“If you’re between nine and twelve…”

Keiko, Clueless Lew, Hani, Huckleberry, Maya, Val, Clarissa announce themselves. A silence, recognition, and they step out just as the group before. I can’t tell if Huckleberry is a boy or a girl, shoulder length hair naturally parted down the center, a dusty appearance but with a bright countenance.
“Thirteen and eighteen…”

Sales, Marcus, Hank, Sadie, Sasha, Winnie, Holliday, Dice, Jazzy enter the circle, taking their turns. Listening and looking after each one. I can’t believe Holliday is under 18. I would have bet she was in her late twenties.

“Nineteen and forty…”

Only Sockeye and I step into the circle. Again I am surprised. Sockeye looks so young, like a boy struggling through puberty with every cell and fiber of his being. We lock gazes. I finally see his lenses – he’s here, but not all here, somewhere…

“Forty and older…”

All of the teachers save Rachel. Anson has rejoined them.

“If you’re from…

Skater Alley…

from the Shepherds…
Growers and Gatherers…

Roamers or Gypsies…

the Masons…

Stargazers…

the Amish…

Hunters and Traders…

The Aquaducts…

Drug Wars…

the United States…”

Winnie and I finally step forward, but so do Sockeye and Fish. Sockeye sucks in his lips and looks like he is about to cry. Fish still has his eyelids closed, head
moving back and forth, to a tune on a frequency no one else can hear. I want to start with their stories.

So many communities I never knew existed in the Wilds. The few that are recorded, characterized, or satirized in the city-states must be those who have been used up and thrown away by the drug lords, lost or cast out, desperate enough for food or fresh water or human contact that they would seek them from what they perceive to be civilization -- the Walls, the superhighways... the Watchtowers beckoning them to a quick death.

Our circling continues. I am awash in connections and questions.

“If you’ve ever had to wonder where your next meal might come from...

Everyone, even Winnie, although she hesitated. We’ve all known hunger, even if hers happened for the first time yesterday. I catch Hope’s lenses...eyes really. Her eyes tell me she has known real hunger. So young...

“If there has ever been a time when you didn’t feel safe at home or in your community...”

If you have ever held a baby...
If you believe that the community, tribe, or territory you come from represents your identity…

If you were judged or labeled because of where you lived or were from…
…because of the color of your skin…
…because of your religious beliefs…
…because of who your family was…

If you know someone who was killed because of who they were or where they were from…

If you know someone who deals with an eating compulsion or drinking disorder…

If you know someone who has attempted suicide…

If there was ever a time you didn’t have someone you could trust in your life…

If there was ever a time you felt like you were without hope…”
Every time I step into the circle, I see my pain, my challenges in USE are not foreign to those on the outside. Every time I stand outside, I see something I’ve missed or not thought about before.

I have never held a baby, let alone seen one up close.

Seeing each other stepping inside the circle or holding the perimeter is like a strange cosmic dance of coming into awareness of others’ stories, a learning of their movements through space and time. I try to spend time on their faces, their smiles or scars, and other expressed emotions in each move. Moves that hint of stories unseen until now.

“If you’ve ever met someone who made you laugh so hard it made you cry…”

I glance at Winnie. Yesterday counts. I was really me…really me laughing…laughing from down deep… laughing because she saw me and did not turn away. Smelled me and did not cringe. But instead spoke the truth the way children do.

“If you will be observing…

Ramadan this summer…”
Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement…

Your first Autumn Brilliance Festival…

Christmas…

Other holidays in 2084 that you hold dear… please announce them…”

“May we respect the fasting and the faith those of you observing in the coming months. A world reflecting is a world at peace.”

Nettie steps into the now-empty circle and turns slowly, looking at each one of us. Remember what you have seen and felt today. Talk and walk and listen. We have new students to affirm as part of our school family… should they choose this as part of their future.”

“Now if I’m not mistaken, Sales has a big lunch planned for everyone today.”

“Miss Nettie, you know I got the Place Mat ready – with a little help from ma brothas and sistas.”
Some hooting and hollering of excitement. “All right then, give me jis a few ta get the bowls out. Miss Pearl, Marcus, Hani, Clarissa, can you guys gimme a han’?” Sales is smiling, a twinkle of pride in his eyes.

“What do you think some of those holidays were? Strange names… and what’s an Autumn Brilliance Festival?” Winnie looks perplexed.

I’m about to hazard a guess when Holliday steps in between us.

“Itsa Hilltop thang… everbody who ever dun gradgerated come back twice a yeah to ‘member whur dey been, whur dey goin’. T’other wun’s in da Spring. Dey caw it Spring Cleanin’.”

Zora chimes in from behind, “And there’s music, and stories, and games ‘til the wee hours of the mornin’!”

Holliday turns around and grins, “Yep, them too.”

Winnie and I raise eyebrows to one another and walk to lunch with our new companions. Zora is excited to show us the Place Mat. I’m still hung up on the idea of pilgrimage by the people from the surrounding hills and valleys to this place. I wish I could bring my father and mi tia here - to this place.
We’re on hallowed ground.

And that should mean Hank can’t kill me. Not here anyway.
Chapter 13: Hilltop

The days seems longer… fuller here. The nights so dark and so crystalline. This is not a life I could have imagined in USE – so many distractions there have us keeping our heads down or looking straight ahead…but never up, over, or around. It’s as though I’ve been anesthetized my whole life, until I got here.

The bugs and the bug bites still get to me, the rooster every morning, and not having a regular toothbrush or flushing toilets. It’s frustrating and inconvenient, but I also feel more alive than I’ve ever felt in my life. Seeing children interacting, laughing, fighting, but face to face, eye to eye. Finding and seeing real eyes, real depth, of human emotion, not the screens or visors we have been conditioned to believe as our own. That seems so simple now but other than Bridgie, I don’t remember anyone else’s…lenses…eyes, their color, their vibrancy... Bridgie would have liked this place. This is adventure of something so very different.

Over the past few weeks, I have studied animal anatomy and physiology with Anson from the game that Hank, Holliday, Keiko, and Huckleberry bring back, learned the constellations with Pearl and Fish, a very unofficial history of the States from Nettie, and learned to cook with Zora, Maya, and Sales. I’m still not sold on goat milk or cheese, but the fresh eggs, berries, soups, and breads are delicious. Nothing I have ever tasted comes close to the pies here though. Pies with fresh berries or custard, sometimes both, what an amazing invention. Julio and I have been eating them nearly as fast as we can cook them.
The strange thing is I’m losing weight. I feel more energetic. I don’t want to be as thin as most of the students and teachers... just too malnourished, but then again they all seem healthy and so full of... life. By USE standards I was just about perfect, but here I feel large. Still, the boys have been vying for attention, so I know I must not be too repulsive.

I don’t know why I was so scared of the Wilds for so long. I mean I still feel uncomfortable by some more than others, but they’re not wild animals. Maybe more animal-like, like Holliday or Huckleberry, but they’re people... people who have been run down in ditches. Discarded... demonized because they don’t look or act like we’ve been told is the “right” way to behave, the right way to get ahead. What is “right” is really weighing on me. What is right – what makes sense in Hilltop – would be considered “wrong” or anti-progress by USE standards. Education isn’t for a predetermined end-product here, not unless survival or interest requires it.

Some of them speak a crude English – Holliday especially – but Julio keeps challenging me to think how our words, our ways with words, must sound to them. But he could just be defending her. He does seem... captivated by her and yet avoids being alone with her. To her credit, she has gotten less rough around the edges... maybe since she’s seen me get my pants dirty. Maybe because she wants Julio to like her. She told him she would take him blueberry picking in a couple weeks when they’re ripe with Hope and some of the other girls. Says they haven’t missed a season since they came to Hilltop two years ago. Says they’ve never left, not even for the winter break. Unlike USE, Hilltop’s school year is March through November, but some students don’t have anywhere to go, and so they
stay the harsh winter with Rachel, Nettie, and Lil. Even Anson, Pearl, and Fish swim home for the winter to avoid the heaviest snow and ice. Holliday says she and Hope stay though… that this place is her family now.

Everything here is more like a family. I miss mine, but I’m realizing how little of a connection I’ve had with any of my blood relatives. My mom has a sister who died soon after her parents in the 50’s, and my dad’s family in B-2 doesn’t visit. We haven’t for years either. Then the question Holliday dropped at dinner last night.

“Winnie, I betcher your family’s reel fancy, ev’rbudy getz on jis’ perfect, huh?”

I tried not to show emotion, like Julio when he plays Ponce, he’s so good at that unless you really read his eyes. “Not perfect, Holliday, just…nice.”

But there it was. Damn her. The reason I could trust Julio’s idea to head east from MURKI. Something I needed to admit to myself: my parents had forgone a legal divorce in favor of an emotional one long ago. There was no creative life together, only my father’s decisions that everyone else had to live by. Decisions we were living through, whether trying to or not. Will is still trying to find an outlet to his frustrations through his war games, teasing, jokes… procrastination. He’s just a lost little boy, saddled with the bad decisions of adults. And it’s not like I’ve been there for him. I haven’t been willing to enter his world, because mine, and my Eyes were the only ones that mattered, until they were rendered useless.
I am walking to find Lil. She’s in her shop. She flashes me a gruff grin while heaving a box of newly-smithed nails into the corner. “Mornin’, Winnie, what can I do ya for?”

“Lil, what if I told you I have a pair of Eyes from USE. Do you think we could take them a part, get them to work, maybe even tap into Eyenet without being seen? Is any of that possible?”

She walks over to a wide wood table between us, and puts her palms down on its top, revealing solid, greasy arms. She takes a breath then picks up one hand and points. “Put’em here. We can take a look.”

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We are digging in the garden. Digging deep. I need to get my hands dirty… keep them dirty. Work through the discussion from yesterday. Julio and I had spent the afternoon with Nettie at the one-room schoolhouse, a two-story wood building with high ceilings, a balcony running along three sides, and large windows, beautiful wood floors, two fireplaces, and built-in bookshelves with old books in varying states of decay, a poor substitute for the well-preserved ones I saw in Dr. Compao’s office. We had asked for help putting the pieces together. How we came to be so guarded, so trapped, cut off from Hilltop’s sense of teaching and learning. How it was we came to lose teaching…”
Nettie had given me *Little House in the Big Woods* to get a sense of rural pre-industrial living in the States, long before the reforms and Restructuring. I told her I needed something interesting – that I like reading, but not history. It was a good pick. Fascinating and easy to read – Eva and Hope like to listen to me read it aloud. It’s so… tangible, reading from a book.

Yesterday though, Nettie told us that to answer our questions that we’re going to have to examine the long history of slavery in the States, and before that the colonies. Over 400 years in USE-America alone — 400 years of systematic destruction of black families – family members constantly being separated and sent to different plantations to work seven days a week from dawn to dusk for a cause they despised – and a constant, cutting denial of basic human rights.

When some equal protections under the law were finally granted in the middle of the 20th century, the expectation for them was to adopt white cultural norms and language that dominate government, business, schools, and mainstream community gatherings. Martin Luther King Jr., the man they named the holiday after, spoke up to help bring about many of these laws and press for more. At the same time, a group of risk-takers and revolutionaries known as the Freedom Riders, sprung up to inspire some of the most meaningful organizing, teaching, and learning for America in the coming decades. Teaching and learning for people from all backgrounds and abilities, teaching that wasn’t about answers on a test, but the questions people asked and the ways they went about addressing them.
Martin Luther King Jr. was killed for his risk-taking, the Freedom Riders bloodied, for claiming a voice for the voiceless of that time and the hundreds of years previous. Malcolm X, Medgar Evers, Robert and John Kennedy, and slew of other community and political leaders, were all assassinated over the course of one decade for lending their voices to the movement, as well as two teachers, Harry and Harriette Moore, who dared challenge the establishment to be more inclusive even before the movement really took off. They were fired from their jobs for their “activism” and murdered by a bomb that was placed underneath their bed three years before schools were finally ordered to desegregate.

Nettie also showed me a picture of 14-year-old boy named Emmett Till, who was abducted, tortured, and killed. She showed me many others—four girls burned in a church, and countless black boys in hooded sweatshirts and sagging pants who were shot by men who found their clothes suspicious or offensive. Those came over fifty years after schools had supposedly been integrated and Emmett and the girls had been brutally murdered. In each case, the killers walked free for most, if not all, the rest of their lives. I cannot get the eyes of Emmett Till or the girls of the 16th Street Baptist Church out of my head, nor the horror their parents must have lived and had to relive with those pictures going public. Or the fact that violence against children and childhood continued. That it does continue.

Too many martyrs, too much blood on the hands of overt racists, Nettie said. She quoted a woman named Ruby Bridges today in our class discussion who warned America that
“Racism is a grown-up disease we spread through our children.” While schools were desegregated during this tumultuous time of organizing for basic human rights, those teachings did not hold, lasting less than two decades before individual and institutional racism quietly re-segregated schools with policies aimed at rewarding past and newly-created affluent white communities. At the same time punitive “accountability measures” were enacted that disproportionally targeted and punished historically under-resourced schools and communities. As though twenty years of “trying” to achieve equality and equity in the country through our schools could address 400 years of segregation and slavery.

Good people—of all colors and creeds—could not organize again with the same… *chutzpah*, she called it. On one hand, there were more opiates for the masses conceived and distributed – drugs, entertainment vices, computers, video games, so many alternatives to capture, prey upon, and divert the imagination of the young – especially those without invested parents. On the other, the use of standardized testing – a practice whose roots intertwine with Nazi practices for measuring and categorizing intelligence, something once known as the eugenics movement, just a few decades earlier. Rankings, letters, and percentages became synonymous with school success, learning, and the worth and future of human beings.

And no one was more prepared to be successful than white landowners. They had reaped the social and material wealth of slavery and land-owner laws for more than 400 years while enslaved and discriminated peoples were further isolated, tortured, or simply
ignored. It shouldn’t have been a surprise but it was that then that when money got tighter from wars abroad and big business deals gone bad – deals that had been free of meaningful government regulation or standards – rankings were used to determine human value even more in schools. Deflect and distract. Walls were built. Districts redrawn… again. Even tighter, whiter, more controlled. Certificates were needed for everything.

And who was in the best position to pay for all of those certifications? White landowners who later partnered with affluent business leaders and the upper castes in Asia to create USE policies that protected the wealth and accumulation of resources of rich people world wide.

Nettie was emphatic though that not all rich or white people were bad, simply that they had been better served and serviced for generations, creating a sense of stability and trust that few others had known or had known for very long. Julio said that was just like being a C grade – that you have a very different sense of what is or is not possible for yourself when you’re not on top, not seeing people who look like you in leadership positions or more importantly enacting your values. Nettie told us not to necessarily take her interpretation of these things at face value, but to keep reading from the library. She suggested someone named James Baldwin, but showed us a whole bookshelf on literature and history from this period to choose from.

I asked about what all of that has to do with teaching again—overwhelmed by a history I feel like I am seeing—starting to understand really —for the first time. Nettie says things got contentious with the rankings—teachers stood up for flexibility and forgiveness with
young people and the way we understand each other’s efforts. But they weren’t
recognized as professionals -- or paid like it -- and so when resources, both human and
natural, became scarce, the Technocrats were able to convince the public the time was
now for a new beginning. They offered simple technocratic practices that reduced
teaching and learning to a set of instructional models. Bad business, banking, and
management models imported into public education. Who knows maybe they were good
models in business, but schools should be set up to allow a child to be child-like -- to
explore, question, make mistakes and learn from them, not to train a dog to salivate with
incentives or for fear of punishment.

“That is perhaps one of the reasons you have felt hemmed in your whole life, Julio”
Nettie had said to him and I saw his eyes water. He loves being here among the children
and the teachers. This is a dream come true for him – to know this place exists. To find a
home – this kind of support for his ideas. For me, it is beautiful, stimulating, but also raw
and unsettling. It challenges the roots of my very being and the person I was before I
came here. A person that will always be a part of me. A person that still believes I have to
go back. Even if it’s to say good-bye… to my family, to Bridgie’s dad. If... maybe bring
Will here.

What strikes me is that this, this place—these people—it is innovation. Not a
technological, but a social one. A scientific and arts community – a community of
experimenters – bounded by human decency and affirmation of how our experiences
shape the way we perceive, question, and make sense of the world. Subjective hearts
beating at different rates and speeds against supposedly objective cages built with patriarchal bones. Modern-day slavery shackles the mind and the body.

I am really sweating. It’s hot. I’ve got quite a trench of up-turned potatoes and carrots. Hope following quietly behind, placing them in a basket and then over to the wheelbarrow.

I had wanted to be alone this morning. In the dirt, do something quiet and repetitive to process it all. Hope’s taken quite a liking to me though. It’s really no problem to have her with me. She says nothing, and seems to like thoughtless work that lets her mind wander like I do. The only drawback is that it’s beginning to annoy Holliday, which means she’s always checking up on her little sister or just plain getting in the way. Here she comes again.

“Dat dere’s, Holden.”

“What?”

“Dat crow.”

I hadn’t noticed...
“Nettie nem’im. Sez his neme is Holden Cawfield. Sez he don’t like to be tied down jista Hilltop. Dat he can see things ‘bout where yer frum too. Things you don’t. Sez she named him that ‘cus he’s ornery.”

“I don’t like crows, they creep me out.”

“I kinda like ‘im.”

Why does this not surprise me: they share a bird brain.

“Nettie’s an odd bird herself if ya as’ me. Always got a book in her hans, like it’d blow away if she din’t. Know what she said ta me t’other day? Sid I should read a book she’s got about Holden with…yew.”

“She did?”

Holliday’s face hardens and turns disgustedly away. “I wuz jis sayin’ what she sid.”

She wants to. She wants to spend time with me – this, what was it that Julio called her the other day? Amazon. This Amazon sees something she likes or wants in me.

“I mean, sure, Holliday. Sure, but you’ve got to promise to take me with you to the blueberries with the girls and Julio.”
Her jaw loosens, “I dun tole ya I would – I don’t go back on my word, got that fancy pants?”

I let it hang there for a few seconds watching the edges of her mouth curl up ever so slightly.

“Got it. And stop calling me fancy pants, I can’t get the dirt out of them and I’m going to need a belt to keep them on much longer.”

“C’mon, Hope. Yuve had nuff time with ole fancy pants, don’ wan ya gittin’ soft on me. Les go hear da band.”

Typical. Just typical.

The Hilltop band consists of Sadie, Sherman, Miguel, and Maya on banjo, fiddle, drums, triangles and shakers. Sometimes Lil plays too and Zora sings when she’s been appropriately showered with attention and begging from her admirers. This afternoon she is being coaxed to the Place Mat by Sales to sing before dinner. She chooses “I Wish I was a Mole in the Ground,” a favorite of the students. As soon as she assumes her new identity, lifting and dropping her voice through rock strata, bobbing up and down with a soft southern intensity, I am instantly transported to a people and a place unlike my own, but with similar concerns about what progress will mean...at what cost. I feel her words...
hug the hills around us. It makes me feel like I’m, in some way, from here even though – until recently – I had only known boxed, cropped, and combed interpretations of nature amid concrete sprawl. I sound like Julio. He reminds me – smiling at the smile the song has brought to me – my whole world no longer.
Chapter 14: Fish Out of Water

We take turns telling stories each evening after the school day ends. Everyone gets a turn but there is always the dignity of choice and some choose to pass or write their story down for someone else to read or for a willing group to enact. Plays are allowed and there have a few that would have made my father smile…so Quixotic. Marcus even does a stand-up comedy act. Some of the stories are in many languages, some in only one, and some are only half-baked – in search of leavening – while others are more like spoken essays or poems reflecting on educative experiences. Besides Winnie and me, only Hope has never told, written, or acted out a story. Then again, Hope is the youngest and she still hasn’t said a word.

Tonight it’s Fish’s turn. If there is another person at Hilltop nearly as tight-lipped as Hope, it’s Fish. The most experienced outdoorsman anyone here has ever met. He knows the mountain, forest, and streams better than Holliday. He routinely holds his classes on hikes, fishing, or checking the water sources in the area for contamination. One of his past students, who came and fished his days away at Hilltop with Fish, started a new community called the AquaDucks, who have expanded those checks, dug wells, and transported fresh water to people in need throughout the region. Sockeye tells me that Fish is from everywhere and nowhere, that he’s “trapped inside the wind.”
Sockeye also tells me that Fish was the one who found him in the forest after being left beyond the Wall of USE-Southeast when he was a young boy. He says Fish didn’t say a word, just gave him water, patted him, and pointed the way to Hilltop. Apparently his real name is Aaron Fisher, but no one knows him by that name at Hilltop...at least not anymore. Took six years of Sockeye peppering him with questions only to find it out from Pearl right before they got married. The only teacher wedding ever at Hilltop. Sockeye was the best man, something he is very proud of. I can see why Fish asked him too. Sockeye is the ultimate ambassador for Hilltop, friendly, always willing to work, and inquisitive. He’s never afraid to admit what he doesn’t know and ask more questions. Likely for this reason, Fish and the other teachers occasionally refer to him as Socrates.

Everyone is sitting now, either in their rocking chairs or mats at the Lookout behind the schoolhouse. Fish, hat on, walks off the porch and on to the cliff, then turns, the rolling green mountains and valleys spilling out behind him. His eyes nearly closed, he begins as if reciting...

The Highlands are home to three great waterfalls. The largest lives in the steppes of our mountain here. Most of you already know it. The snow white giant known as Frost Falls. Our region is forested with hemlock, pine, birch, and maple and in
its midst are dark green canopies, soft brown paths, and lime colored moss.

Large boulders and slabs of siltstone intermingle with lush rhododendron and thick exposed tree roots that cover the forest floor. A powerful river cuts through all of it and fills the surrounding forest with an ancient, cool air courtesy of the falls.

The longer I'm alive, the more I'm struck by how much we can learn just by listening… listening more to the primordial forest here or anywhere we find ourselves swept. What I hear here is an area alive with energy: the energy of the river, the energy of the falls, the energy of you and me, and forces beyond.

Most of you know I don’t like to talk much—students need all the time they can get to find their own voice, make their own path, maybe even a tributary to one of our rivers. When I do speak, I prefer to focus on the land, the water…or the wildlife. Today, with the help of many of you, I am honored to try to speak of that human energy – mine and yours – that mingles with our natural world.

There are many days here when voices can be heard laughing… shouting… whispering. In the spring, some of you fearlessly brave the river’s rapids. In the summer, you splash and play at the base of frothy waterfalls. In the
fall, rustic reds, yellows, and browns accompany the green hemlocks and pines in a colorful farewell to another brilliant season that you refuse to let go of; so you rake it and wrestle in it until the 11th hour, until the school year finally comes to an end. In was a dead day of snowy winter, when all other human energy huddled in its homes around fires, a wind-swept man tried to make the most of second chance by proposing to a curious woman who on a thin, secluded bridge just above the mighty Frost. The falls were silent that day... and frozen as my memory of that time.

I cast a glance in Pearl’s direction. She is smiling, tears in her eyes. This is a kind of love that seems so foreign. So beautifully foreign.

The man knows this region is a haven to many small communities, but unknown to the great populations beyond. Those who are familiar with it, though, know it as a very special place. It holds something society has forgotten. It holds... perspective. For me, it is the spiritual center of my universe.

Through all of my travels, studies, and professions before sticking here, I have found Frost to be my “Mont Blanc” or “Tintern Abbey” – “Enigmas” of the
universe made powerful and plain. It is what I think of when I think of Nature’s energy. It is what I think of when I think of life’s meaning. Shelley, Wordsworth, Neruda each found a muse in nature. I, a refuge in mine. I am continually grateful and vigilant for the clean air, the reflective waters, and the inspiration. With it, I have a place of peace, a place of love and imagination, a spring of wonderment.

My question to you is does everyone need a place like this? I ask this because there was a time when I knew nothing of Frost Falls, Hilltop, or its valleys. I harbored a restless and anxious spirit. Growing up before the 1st Great Reform, I felt endlessly constrained, labeled, and directed by people, miserable people. I mean they were both miserable and making miserable decisions. I kept feeling like I was missing something important. The Reforms and the Restructuring made it worse, so after 18 years, I left my hometown in the Midwest looking for a place that was more apolitical, that had more opportunity and less judgment. Looking back, I think I still believed that humans could achieve perfection and I was determined to find it.

I ended up in the Southwest, surrounded by jagged mountains, where land is flat and straight on the basin floor and cities are mapped out on a grid to make
getting around a thing of ease. I studied archaeology there and saw firsthand how ancient cultures lived and thought about life. While tribes of the Southwest differ greatly from each other, they share a notion that life on earth is but one stroke of a larger mural that splashes across space and time, an ongoing narrative not bound by a corporeal death. A narrative we are a part of whether we acknowledge it or not.

The Anasazi, an ancient tribe, built great kivas to always have a place to find spiritual refuge. These circular structures, dug down into the earth, acted as a place where the past meets the future...where memories meet dreams...and the rhythm of life is to be realized. They were places of reflection. They were centers of the community and for the community. They offered sanctuary from confusion and busy work. The idea had a profound effect on me.

I realized that while I found my studies highly stimulating, for all its beauty, opportunity, and convenience, the Southwest had its problems just like the Midwest. Both the university and the city prescribed to the notions of ‘bigger’, ‘better’, ‘faster’. Its pursuit of perfection in the name of progress frightened me. This was not the utopic vision schools were intended for. We used to subsidize
public education because we believed in preserving a place for childhood, for wonder, for taking our time to think deeply about how things used to be, how they are, and what could be. They were not intended as manufacturing plants.

Everywhere I looked in the Southwest... Midwest... in America, billboards and advertisements lurking and lording. Radio stations and Eyesites blaring loudly for my attention, telling me what I needed, what I should do. Shoe companies said ‘Just Do It’ and millions of people adopted this as their life philosophy, as their identity, because it was easier than thinking...easier than caring... easier than reflecting on what life is about and the responsibility we bear to one another and our environment.

The seeds of economic growth had bloomed in the Southwest, just like the non-native plants that had been introduced by Easterners years earlier. It had changed and redefined priorities...boggled the mind, with its ornate stem and its striking flowers. But they had a problem. These new foreign plants, with all their beauty, lacked healthy root systems. For all of their above ground wonders, they were not made to survive lifetimes upon lifetimes in the desert. It was simply unnatural. But city officials and business leaders refused to see. These non-
indigenous plants were fed constantly by water the desert did not have to spare. Ultimately the depletion of water supply was so severe that they began bringing in water from city-states to the north to meet their needs. An elaborate aqueduct was established to keep the roses, palm trees, and green lawns on an artificial life support system for years to come...that is until the Western city-states ran out of fresh water all together. There was no reflection, no urging or planning for the future...for future generations. Just do it. Think later...if at all. Self-proclaimed and elected leaders refused to relinquish what we have achieved in the name of progress. There is only one way forward and it is to achieve more wealth, more power, more amenities.

This destructive mind-set afflicted the Southwest and it afflicted me. It afflicted the country and it afflicted the world. In some way or another, we were all plagued by the greed and propaganda of old rich white men. We’re steeped in hundreds of years of it and this was just the latest installment coming down to us from Wall St. and our political leaders. Big banks and their bad business practices and buy-outs of politicians had made us weak, fat...vulnerable. Economic crisis after economic crisis followed, and when money was tight, these men hatched a
plan to target teachers and other public sector workers to keep the focus, regulations, and accountability off of them, off of their bad decisions, and heap it on those who fostered revolutionary ideas. Teachers took the fall for the banks’ bad decisions. Mounting debt from wars and warming could not curb America’s desire for money and power, at all costs. I realized that Manifest Destiny was indeed alive and well in the new millennia.

However, in our world so awash in human energy and too often driven by fast-paced, savage competition, and very deliberate reification, there runs an alternative paradigm: one that speaks to collaboration, acceptance, patience, and spiritual exploration. Here is what I know: no one has all the answers, nothing is perfect, nothing is only good or evil. That includes the banks and rich white men. It took them to get into this mess and it will take them to get out. And we are complicit in their plans on both sides. There are always consequences to our actions and our inaction. Unfortunately, many people believe accepting these assertions means accepting that we are living in a world of chaos and so they cloak themselves in a closed, controlled, material world… oblivious to children in
sweatshops, schools run like sweatshops, and the sludge of human pollution on our shorelines and city streets.

So this is where the need for a special place comes in for me. It provides sanctuary from busy work and manipulative, reductive paradigms. The falls allow me to accept the fact that there is more to life than you or me and our arbitrary wants and needs. They force me to realize that we are not the only ones with power and we are certainly not always in control. At the same time, they give me an opportunity to be part of something meaningful by focusing on simple things. Whether it is a sense of community with students and teachers, or communing with nature, or stretching the imagination, the secret to a rewarding life is all around us. Nature is both humbling and inspiring. A special place helps me see these secrets. In many ways, it acts as a gateway to contentment.

Like kivas were to the Anasazi, I seek the shade and energy of Frost and the Hilltop to both reaffirm and explore my place, our place, the Earth’s place, in a seemingly infinite and chaotic universe. The term ‘kiva’ literally means ‘world below’. In other words, it is a root system that can nourish and sustain us. It is the grounding, saving grace of humanity, a hint at where we should be looking.
Disengaging from the material world, a monster we have created, can yield something much more important. I believe something much more meaningful. It can give a lasting sense of purpose and direction.

Smelling the old, rejuvenating air of the falls and this place from our lookout, our little corner of the world, I realize I have not been the same since I found this place and am never the same when I leave it at the end of each year. That is the essence of a special place to me. This is why I speak this evening – to share my kiva. Find and share one. Cherish and protect nature’s goodness, the way Rachel began, so that future generations may find strength and alternatives to combat the destructive ideologies of the day. Falls are always just around the corner, may they continue to provide new learning opportunities and a way home.

He smiles and then wafts away. Without hugs or handshakes as often is the case. Not once did he look at a single person, despite everyone’s eyes wide open, trying to see the waters from whence he came. A man now trapped inside the wind. A wind of great force and distance. His story has been a bridge between what I knew and my recent studies with Nettie. His past -- the opposite of mine, but we’ve reached similar conclusions although I can’t say I reached ones of his
depth or insight. He can help me connect my places. Help me decide which voice I want to share when I have the opportunity to tell a story next week.

Clueless Lew leans close to Huckleberry, “I don’ know whut that wuz, he jist flew right over ma head. Whaddaya make of it, Huck?”

“Dat man’s ben livin’ in a lotta places at once, ben pent up in his head uh long time with all uh it. He’s gotta gud point – whar we live, how we live, and who we live with makes uh big differnz.”

I see Lew give a puzzled nod as I leave the Lookout.

It takes me over an hour to find him. By the falls – I should have started there. But when I do ask him questions about the Southwest and the Midwest and where else he has been and how he got here, he just gives me a far off smile and pats me on the shoulder. “Julio, my suggestion would be to find out why you’re asking me these questions in the first place.” He puts his right hand in his pocket and produces a small pencil like the ones Nettie keeps at the schoolhouse. “Erase as much as you need to. Writing is thinking. What is it that you really want to know and why?
I take the pencil but keep my eyes fixed on him and when he says no more, I focus on the falls. The rhythmic tumbling.

“I want to know... I want to know... I can make a difference. I want to know how to bring teaching back to USE. I want to know that my dad and mi tia will know this place. I want... I want to know... what love is... and how to make sense of it in an insane world.”

I didn’t mean to say all of that. Or maybe that’s exactly what I meant to say. My mask has been hard to find here. I am open, perhaps too open. Excited to the point of throwing up. Everything feels raw, alive, surging.

“Then write that down, write until you find the source of each of those, and then don’t forget to involve others and nature in the organizing.”

This has to be how the AquaDucks got their start. A ridiculous name for important work, the opposite of most things in the States that have great names for ridiculous work. Fish is somehow both infuriatingly cryptic and insatiably compelling as a teacher.

His words matter and he gave more than usual today. If writing is a key, then I will retrace my steps, head to the Lookout, and see what it unlocks.
Chapter 15: Tributaries

We’ve been playing “Eye to Eye” almost every day… or perhaps its “I to I.” Each student gets to take a turn suggesting an issue for debate. The schoolhouse or the courtyard gets split into two sides. The case is read aloud usually by its author. Everyone must then pick the side that most closely represents their views and only make the case for that side. A talking stick is used to respect only one speaker at a time. We remind each other to question the other side’s reasoning and evidence, but never them personally. The focus in “Eye to Eye” is on ideas and words and how nuanced and slippery they are. This becomes apparent after one side has gone through its initial explanations of reasoning and evidence, and the other side gets a chance. Each side then gets an additional turn to meet and rebut the other side’s argument. As with storytelling, each student can choose whether or not they want to hold the talking stick and speak, introduce it to a peer or their group during meeting time, or not speak at all. Julio’s walking stick has become the new talking stick since our arrival – the other students love the look, feel, and weight of it, as though it were a magician’s wand capable of creating complex arguments out of thin air. Sometimes it does.

This helps inspire and extend the writing that we’re doing, Eye-says or I-says, as some call them. Nettie has journals for each of us and a cache of Hilltop letters and poetry by students and teachers chronicling the varied kinds of learning experiences they’ve had here. It captures moments of dialogue, debate, or reflection on both a personal and a community level. Even though the pencils still feel awkward in my hands and my
handwriting as much chicken scratch as Holliday’s, it has given me the ability to formalize my curiosity and my frustrations in a way holographic screens and prescriptive protocols could not. It has helped me see that USE’s problem isn’t just about racism, classism, or sexism; it’s about a love of things – our materialism – and the fear of losing those things perpetuates discrimination.

I was wrong about history—I just never knew it could be more than names, and dates, and wars. I didn’t see the relationships. History matters because it’s living in each one of us and the decisions we make. Not paying attention to history is not paying attention to ourselves. Learning individual, communal, and national histories is giving me an understanding of what it means to be human in this moment in time. That things can and will change, it just depends on people putting their stories together. The stories I’ve read of freedom fighters, Freedom Riders, Freedom Writers and Rocket Boys remind me of Hilltop—stories that inspired a nation, at least for a time. Stories that fuse new stories together or help inspire new ones that need to be seen and heard and affirmed if we are going to more forward meaningfully together. That does not mean we have to agree, nor should we, but it means we are willing to respect and support disagreement and have that be a valuable part of the story too.

My story began with guilt but has come to responsibility. My voice is valued here. I am of as much interest as what I want to study, a person first who enjoys learning and teaching science and seeing its relationship to other forms of knowing and discovery, but someone who likes learning new things like country cooking, tending gardens, and being
entertained by artists of all kinds, dreamers, and improvisation. I was wrong about the Wilds, wrong about Holliday, wrong about Julio. My first impressions suck. I admitted that last night – the guilt and the judgment. I admitted that I have much to learn about people and our diversity for the rest of my life. I admitted to missing home but not sure if I wanted to go back even though I know I need to. I admitted to bringing my Eyes to Hilltop because I still believe there are things in USE worth fighting for and Eyes offer a way in if now that I have firm grounding to keep me centered. I could tell Julio was hurt and skeptical, but I felt like I needed to say those things to move on to a new chapter, perhaps a whole new story, of my life. I told the story of who I was before I came to Hilltop and who I have been since.

It was made easier by a poem Julio found at the schoolhouse; he’s been pouring over poetry there. There’s hardly any taught in USE schools and instructional modules and what is appears as tokens to apply a prescribed formula to. There it’s about focusing on identifying form, structure, and literary components not about content, multiplicity, or possibilities. He said the poem reminded him of my story and of a song from his childhood.
The poem was “Brueghel’s Two Monkeys” about a narrator dreaming of final exams and facing two monkeys chained to the floor but with enough slack to perch on the windowsill. Behind them, turbulent waters tumble and thrash as lightning flashes in the distance. Unable to escape the monkeys’ features and movements, the narrator is left groping for the right words for the moment. In its final image, the poem ends with one of monkeys prompting the narrator to speak or act by jingling its chains.

It struck a chord in me that I knew was there but had never heard. It prompted me to face our evolution and devolution, our connection with all living things. It helped me state with focus where I’ve been and where I am now. Where I am headed. I didn’t know poetry could do that.

The ferns sway at our legs. So much good time for thought in this forest. So much missing in USE – the simple beauty of syrup in the trees, honey from the bees, and the deep blue of blue berries. Holliday kept her end of the bargain – took me to the blueberries with Julio and the girls. It is the best feeling to pick and eat blueberries. Fill a bucket for baking. Pearl and Sales say my pies are nearly as good as Rachel’s now. I’ve been trying different recipes with spices that Fish and Holliday have led me too. Nettie says I’ve got the ability to Other Mother the way the teachers at Hilltop do. Says I have the love of learning and experimenting that every good teacher needs. It’s one of the best compliments I’ve ever received, that and the smiles the kids give me when they eat my blueberry pies. Julio and Holliday too.
We are returning for more blueberries, just Holliday and me. I asked her to just take me. I am working on writing my wrongs. I want to make sense of her fearlessness and fun-loving. She is feisty and beautiful and Bridgie would have liked her.

“Holliday?”

“Snowstorm.”

“I think I liked fancy pants better.”

“I don’, you’ve earn’d uh new’un.”

“How’s that?”

“Yer Hilltop neme—like Fish or Sockeye…Clueless Lew…Jazzy…Dice—ya know itsa signuh respect don’ ya?”

“Why Snowstorm?”

“Yer reel neme’s Winter, ain’t it? Nuthin’ says Winter likea snowstorm.”

“Holliday, I wanted to say thanks… for everything.”
“Huh, you lost yer merbles?”

“Lil and I did it. Got my Eyes charged and have rewritten their EyeP address. If I get close to a USE city-state, I should be able to link in without being identified… at least for a while.”

“So whut? You tellin’ me you leavin’? You tellin’ me whut we all already knew, that you wuz too good fer us and ya needta go home?”

“No, just that you’ve made me a stronger person.”

“Oh.”

She won’t look at me and she’s picked up her pace, red hair flowing, bucket swinging. I follow quietly – she’s tougher to titrate than one of the solutions Pearl and I worked on last week. At the edge of the blueberry bushes now, she goes straight to picking. I taste a few – delicious. Only another week and they will be gone until next year. I start picking.

“Ya know daddy wuz a hunter. Useta be good ‘un. But weather gave us a lean season. Got his pride hurt, couldn’t bring home da ven’son. Ends up gittin’ hooked on suma Silver King’s silver. Drugs ‘n booze blitzed‘is mine fer a long time. Chased off mum who dun lef’ wit’ da gypsies. Lef’ me womun of the house – left me alone… a lot. Jis’ me an’ the cat and da crows. One day comes back with a new gurl, not much older’n me. Sez he
goin’ straight – that she’s werth cleanin’ up fer. It lasted a coupla munths, jis’ long enuf fer me ta start believin’ in ‘im agin. She wuz pregent, not a munth under ar roof. Then ‘is demons start comin’ back. Had to fight’im off her wun night – told hisself she wuz the devil keepin’ ‘im down. He tole hisself all kinds uh lies den. Dat baby wuz born wit’out a daddy. He ran off too… maybe joined Silver’s lords ‘cause his hans too shaky ta shoot, trap, sling – any uv it. I brought dat girl inta da worl. Namer Hope, ‘cause dat whut she is. Da only theng I had worth livin’ fer. Daddy prolly neme me Holliday ‘cause dat’s whut he always fel’ like he needed. Anyhow, got word two winner’s ago dat da lords wuz comin’ in – takin’ more terrtory. I knew they’d be comin’ fer ar place af’er da Sullivans got hit. Started packin’, warnin’ Hope’s mommy, but she say she ain’t goin’ nowhere, that she ain’ afraid uh no ghost stories. Truf wuz she dint have da strength er da stamina ta run. Loss her will ‘for she even brung new life in da world. Sat around lettin’ me keep things goin’ fer Hope’s furst year. I tell ‘er I’m leavin’ an’ she oughta come wit me. She waive me off. I wait ‘til she gone down fer the night then tole Hope we was gunna hafta go. I wasn’t leavin’ her like no lamb ta slaughter. So we left, her on my back, dead uh night. Not an hour too soon. Saw da far’s git der frum da ridge we wuz on. Hurd shouts ‘n shots and saw da lords movin’ in up fer more. Dat’s when it start comin’ down like I ain’ never seen. Snowstorm heavy and howlin’, push the’em back down fer the night wile me an’ Hope kep’ movin’. I knew these hills better ‘n them. I knew thar wuz a Hilltop daddy wuldn’t lemme go to ‘cause he needed da help keepin’ things tagather. My Hope wuz gonna know Hilltop, and she did on a day all quiet – day after a snowstorm ain’ nuthin’ prettier ‘n that. Everything ta a halt. Jis’ peace. Dat’s when I knew I wuz home. She’s gittin sumthin mos’ kids don’ and for me it’s… alluva it, it’s jis’ gravy. I ain’
tellin’ ya dis ‘cause I wantcher simpthy, jis’ wanted to tell ya where Snowstorm came frum ‘cuz ya as’d.”

I drop my bucket, cut through a row of bushes, and touch her picking arm.

“What? Whaddya wan’?”

I hug her. Hold her warm, well-coiled body.

“I knew you wuz soft.”

“Shut up. I need this. You’re one of the bravest, smartest people I have ever met.”

“Me smart?”

“You know the plants and the animals, how to hunt, cook, survive…”

“How ta kick yer ass if you keep huggin’ me.”

“Yeah, that too.”

“C’mon, no fawnin’, I daught you’d grown outta dat.”
“You never grow out of needing people who make you see the world differently.”

“Oh I ‘spose ya do dat fer me too, but I don’ need ta hug ya ...”

“Settle down, you’re like my sister. I just wanted you to know how much I’ve learned from you. Plus, human contact’s not so terrible is it?”

“Not if it’s like las’ night,” she launches back with a gleam in her eyes.

“Holliday, you naughty fox, what did you do?”

She smiles a smile I know only means one thing. My breath catches in my chest even before her words wash over me.

“Made out with Whoo-lio.”

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We are on the second ridge, two more then we’re home. Can’t get there soon enough.

_Caw._
“Der’s Holden… he don’ seem half so miser’ble as da boy we’ve been readin’ ‘bout. I’m with the crow, too many people with too much money makes too many prob’ums.”

“Well not enough can too if you’re boxed in.”

I can’t be mad at her, but I am, and Julio too. First time in my life I’m the third wheel. I’m the outcast. I’m… I’m jealous and it makes me want to barf. Sales and Marcus both would go out with me in a second, but Sales and Marcus are nice, funny friends, but they don’t understand where I’m from or where I need to go. They just know they like hanging out with me. And I do with them, especially Sales. He’s got a dream of having his own restaurant and teaching others to cook. He already runs the Place Mat better than most and keeps his cool doing it. Maybe I need to loosen up, see if he wants to stargaze later, just the two of us… the way Julio and I do. Just talk and gaze.

“I think me and Sockeye got the right idea, jis’ don’ chase it. Jis’ don’ ever chase it… hey, I ever tell ya how Sockeye got his name?”

“What? No.”

“He’s my brother, that’s what I tell ever’one. Red hair ‘n all. Dat use ta be his name – Red - ‘for his Hilltop name. Some uh da kids think he’s ma relation fer real. Pearl sez he spen’ most ta time the first year jis’ fishin’ or checkin’ streams with Fish, wouldn’ leave his side. She says he was cast out ‘cause he was too ‘gainst da mainstream in Southeas’.

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'Tween dat, his red hair, and wantin’ ta find fresh water all da time, Fish told ‘im he was like the mighty Sockeye on’ day when he wuz real down. Since then, like he wuz reborn, they say. I only know ‘im as da friendliest fart in the win’ I ever met.”

“That’s gross. He is the heart of Hilltop though, you’re right.”

“Don’ know what da place be like wit’out ‘im. Wants to be AquaDuck when he gradjiates. It’s comin’.”

We crest the plateau that nestles Hilltop to the mountain. Finally.

Sockeye heading this way, making his rounds. A big smile, genuine happiness to see us.

“Hey sis’, hey Winnie. Need a han’?”

I drop my bucket at his feet and hug him. I know I startled him, but he hugs back.
Soy Julio Milintinca Luchar-Tlaloc. Vengo de una familia de filósofos y guerreros. Soy quien soy y tratando de ser la persona que quiero ser. Debo lograrlo, sin importar los obstáculos.

Anson, Maya, and Miguel have been good teachers. I am learning one of the languages of my ancestry, of Quixote, and it is a wondrous thing.

This is my journal. Nettie gave it to me after my conversation with Rachel at the Lookout. I need a record of what I’ve seen and heard. A place that I can go back to... to move forward. A floating kiva... a site for reflection and connection. Its pages - like open doors - welcoming those who hope to do the same.

I found Rachel rocking and writing quietly from the wide, deep wooden porch of the Lookout. Every so often, she would stop and look into
the green mountains - locate what she was looking for - then write more. I told her I was here to rock, listen, and look with her. She nodded and asked if I was finding my way at Hilltop. I told her I was - that it is a truly special place, a place I wish could sweep over the planet, bathe it in hope. She smiled a sad smile.

“The quake, it sprung ya?”

I nod. “Yes.”

“We felt the reverberations of the quake here too. USE, the sea, the druglords pressing in, taking land that doesn’t belong to anyone. We are trapped between the tides and Technocrats. Our days are numbered here.”

“Rachel, but... Hilltop?”

“Hilltop won’t disappear, it will just take a different shape. It isn’t this beautiful mountain or the valleys below that make us marvel at its peak, at its perspective. It’s the idea for how to treat people and build a meaningful education with them.”
“But everything you’ve worked for will change?”

“When the country picked its winners, all I did was show those people who had been left out that there was a place for them. A place for reading, writing… singing…disagreeing and playing. A place for stories of all kinds to come together, clash and merge, and mend our wounds. Telling stories saves lives, ya know?”

She squints one eye, the other scouring my features for understanding.

I nod. “Stories kept me and my family alive on the inside.”

“I could tell ya had the taste. It’s an organizin’ force for the outside too though. Gets stronger by people sharin’ and questionin’ each other’s stories to form a community of learners and caretakers. In our case, it’s the school narrative that keeps evolving; that’s the foundation of Hilltop… not the mountain itself.”

“But it’s a beacon of hope for everyone in the region. You see how much it means to everyone.”

“Mm, the lives of the communities down the mountain from us are often desperate… but hope comes from people not mountains. Mountains may help us
realize it, may even help us revel in it, but the mountains aren’t hope, just a symbol of it.”

“They helped me see how USE has such a strong... strong...vision? What’s the word?”

“Regime of truth.”

“Yeah, that’s... that’s not it, but that’s it. Their regime of truth is so narrow, so dehumanizing...”

“We all have our regimes of truth that we cling to. They’re embedded in our stories and games here at Hilltop and run counterculture to USE, but they’re here too. What truths do you cling to, Julio? What makes them better than another?”

“Well, for one, no one is a number, a letter, or a label here. We choose our values, and the way we enact those values as long as those values don’t put someone else’s health or wellbeing at risk. We choose our names – like Clueless Lew – who kept the name he was teased with back home as motivation to show everyone in his community how much he has grown when he returns. We take mistakes, frustrations, and personal interests here and turn those things – those things that most in USE education consider to be negative – we make them into
positives. We write, speak, and listen to each other. We work… not for a
certificate or gold star, but for love of people, nature, and learning. Everyone
here is assumed to be competent and creative or talented in some way; and we
all know we each have something to teach and all have much to learn. Hilltop is
a bridge where homelife and upbringing meet school and possibility. The way
I’ve come to see it, the Possible is tied to the personal and the political in
education. They’re inseparable and yet… we try to break them up, deny their
interconnectedness. In USE, school… school is humorless and heavy-handed, it
reinforces progress in spite of people, not for them.”

“Mm, school is the first and lasting reflection of what society thinks of each of
us” she reciprocates. “We cannot afford to get it wrong, Julio. In my many years,
I’ve come to discover teaching and learning – at their very core – are about
relationships. Relationships with people, nature, and the tools we make from it.
Some people are loners, wrapped in ivory towers, but even they stand on the
shoulders of giants and the abundance and diversity of nature. Somewhere along
the way, they found, formed, or inherited a relationship with thinkers and places
gone by or once imagined. Yet they refuse to acknowledge what those people
and places have given to them. The denial of the truth of one’s
interconnectedness is a frightening proposal. For then man becomes his own
god, and bends others and nature to his desires…everyone’s senses get skewed,
and the earth trembles beneath our feet. We lose our bearings.”
“Mine are shaken. There are times here that I’ve had to question who I am, what I want, where I can go… or should. Fish gave me a pencil…Nettie a journal and…and so many amazing books… Anson is helping me with another language, and so I’ve come to you… for…for perspective, I guess. On all of it. On this place. On if this place can, or should, be shared with many many more inside and outside the walls… and beyond the waters too.”

“It sounds like you have been reading and speaking to many, but have you been writing…listening to yourself?”

“How?”

“Julio, writing is philosophy. It is like a tree, a shaky sapling that takes time to develop. If roots take hold because the tree is watered and well-nourished, it grows a strong bark, tall and in many directions. When leaves sprout each season, they do so greater in number and size, and when flowers bloom – when writing becomes creative, inventive, those scents are picked up by other life nearby. They pollinate and propagate far beyond the reaches of their branches. Even when the flowering takes a rest, and the petals drop from the limbs each season, they fertilize the soil around the base for future ones.”
Writing, like trees, deserves more attention in education or we risk losing generative, sustaining forces that without them can cause a withering felt across the world. You come from the withering, but you have not withered. We must write and write and write some more, write to each other, and write in the margins of things. You write to form a community of learning and of care, one with a strong but flexible foundation capable of expanding and contracting… without cracking. Too many homes are not safe havens for our children, so school must be that safe haven for them to grow, question, explore… a place to discover their world and consider their place in the universe. The more requirements we heap on them during that time, the more we stunt their growth. We suppress the abilities of committed teachers who have the power to change their community for the better. You have been freed from the narrow strictures of an invansive and controlling society that you adapted to, but now you are able to chart your own course. That takes time, walking… talking… rocking with others, and then writing to see what grows.”

What am I looking for and why?

I want to make a difference for my family, for every C grade, A and B, anyone who is bent by our current system. For Dr. Compao. I am trying to become a teacher, not simply a willing learner, but I don't possess
the talents that I see plainly in so many at Hilltop - I’m not a musician, I’m not a great outdoorsman, I don’t have an ear for languages the way Anson, Maya, and Miguel do. I don’t possess the humor or need for attention that Marcus does. I can’t cook like Pearl, Winnie, or Sales, and I have little aptitude in MEATS fields, at least the way I understand them. I like to read, listen to, and tell stories...and I like to explore, wrestle with, and embrace ideas. But is any of that a talent? Is that enough, that and an ability to mask my thoughts or control my emotions when facing uncertainty? Is that enough to draw on to be a teacher?

Why make a difference? Why care about love?

Love was stolen from my father and me. I see it stolen from so many others. The world filled with loveless people stumbling around... and schools only making matters worse. Is it really so hard to care? To show that kind of care?
But then, I don’t really know much about love. I know the kind a family has for one another... the kind needed to rally against the storms and rising tides. To hold ideas and actions dear that no one else knows, but I don’t know the other kind. The kind that makes you capable of sustaining a relationship with someone who knocks you off your feet... who makes you feel alive and naked and unsure of anything you ever thought you knew.

Until two months ago, I didn’t know that love was possible, not for me. Only some ugly mixture of loathing and lusting for women dressed in the trappings of USE progress and vice. Now there are two women that make me feel something that I want to explore. Very different feelings. Feelings that I want to know and understand more deeply. It’s as if a part of myself buried itself deeply from the very beginning, only to reveal itself after I was free of USE authority... or maybe just until I met each of them.
I was kissed passionately for the first time... she snuck up unexpectedly while I studied the night sky - hair blazing, even in the moonlight. I liked it but I don't want to hurt... either of them? Me? They're both so real, so alive, and so... different. But they're both beautiful and strong... both capable of much more than they realize.

It feels awkward to write about this. USE men aren't supposed to care... just take what they want or what they can get. Still... I'm not in Midwest anymore. At Hilltop, even the most virile, like Hank, are respectful, at the mercy of wondrous women. A strange phenomenon here.

I'm not going to figure it all out right now, but I can start to piece together what I do know, what I think I know and have learned in my short-time at Hilltop:

Connection #1 - The Matter of the One-room Schoolhouse
Winnie and Pearl have been gushing over quantum physics a lot since we arrived. From what I gather, atoms consist mostly of empty space...that matter does not exist with certainty in a definitive place but has tendencies to exist in particular places at particular times, such as when it's measured. Otherwise subatomic particles apparently exist spread out in a web of interconnections through all of that empty space, but only when measured do they collapse into one small point. But even that doesn't hold, not for more than a moment. Nature will not allow its subatomic particles to be boxed in. Quantum tunneling also takes place at the subatomic level that allows particles to be in multiple places at one time—both in the present and jumping or borrowing energy from the future. What I think that means is that perceived reality and possibility are always inherent in every part of our being, in all beings, in all matter in the universe.

Hearing this, it occurs to me that our one room schoolhouse is like the world and the world like a one-room schoolhouse. That the world is but one atom in a galactic cell, a cell that contributes to the matter
the substance - of the universe. Like a song or a story or love, they exist...they make their presence felt through their relationships, not isolated and divorced from their context. There is scientific precedent for multiple, shared selves - that we help fill each other's empty spaces. That we can.

Connection #2 - On Love's Transience

Love seems to need a shared sense of passion, purpose, and place.

Opposites can attract. Look at Fish and Pearl - they both teach and stargaze and love Hilltop, but one prefers the comforts of classrooms, the other those of the wild. One likes to talk, the other listen. But it's deeper than that - according to the other students, Fish's speech the other night was the first of its kind in both length and the lived experience he shared. Time with Pearl must have played a part in that...time at Hilltop too perhaps. They believe in the power of love, that it can transform lives, like education.
I want that and what my father would speak of in his tender moments between drink and sleep about my mother. A companion. But one that will last beyond either of our deaths. I don’t want to walk like a man missing half his soul if she goes first. I want to believe that love spans this life and the next, that it makes an energy that once set in motion can never stop, never be blighted out. I want to believe but love seems so fragile. Perhaps it’s like what Rachel said about writing, philosophy... a tree that can burrow, branch, and bloom, strengthen a forest, when it meets another digging deep down and reaching high wide out.

Connection #3 - Words mean what they mean, except when they don’t

There was a time when I assumed people didn’t speak because they didn’t have anything to say, not because they had too much. So much so that words got in the way. That saying “school” to an A grade means something different, has very different connotations, than saying or using that word with a C grade or a Hilltopper. Or the word “love”... or “science.” Hearing Winnie tell her story last week, a story I had made
assumptions about, even silenced in past walks, I realize she is a

scientist the way mi tia spoke about. She sees it as a process of

exploration and experimentation - about a kind poetry and possibility I

had ignored, built walls against. Hilltop encourages us to share our

origins, and that includes the way we have come to use and understand

language. We connect and learn from those perceptions to see more

possibilities for ourselves in life. My ways with words matter, and are

no more or less justified than those who use language or languages very

differently. There’s a poetry and science in all of it if we remove the

stigma of status associated with it.

Connection #4: Nanny Rachel’s Hilltop Ingredients - 20 for 2084

After my conversation with Rachel, I told Winnie of her warning that

Hilltop could eventually give way to the tides or Technocrats. That if it

is going to survive, it will depend on people – teachers, like those Dr.

Compao believed in, but was unsure how to find or create. I asked

Winnie to bring her cooking prowess to bear and help me brainstorm key

ingredients of the good teaching and learning we’ve encountered here.
Since the recipe changes from year to year with new students and new teacher learning and interests, the ingredients are only ever partial and require updating. New ingredients or new amounts of ingredients and preparation needed to make something... not just tasty or filling, but memorable, like Winnie’s blueberry pie. Here’s what we came up with in our brief moment in time...

1. Write to know, question, and connect; write a lot; write together.
2. Lead with and through an ethic and community of care.
3. Respect learning...be open-minded...weigh multiple perspectives and don’t be afraid of what you don’t know or what you think you do.
4. Share a passion for supporting people in achieving what they want to achieve.
5. Share a passion for challenging people, including yourself, to see the world differently (or more deeply) every day.
6. Attempt to understand the role of place and culture in learning
7. Travel or take journeys – literal and metaphorical – they make memorable learning experiences.
8. Respect student choice and voice while exploring multiple options with them.
9. The curriculum (like graduation at Hilltop) should be student and teacher negotiated.
10. Start curriculum construction with student lives, strengths, and interests and build out with teacher expertise and exploration, (instead of top-down from an office beyond the classroom).
11. Read, listen to, tell, and explore origin stories of people, places, and ideas as a community.
12. Names are sacred. Treat them as such; beware labeling.
13. Teach and learn across disciplines and in spite of them; find or create interconnections.

14. Trust teacher knowledge, instincts, and leadership, even if it is abused. Both the possibility and the pitfalls that will come from recognizing teachers as professionals with special talents will challenge students to think about what kind of person and "professional" they do or do not want to be.

15. Be patient with students. All of them learn, but few will learn as fast or as much as you want when you want, especially if the end-points are already pre-determined.

16. Find or build a place with porches, rocking chairs, or fireplaces... forests, streams, or ridges. At the very least, provide food. Provide time and space for people to walk and talk and learn each other's backgrounds, ages, and creeds, without high-stakes competition.

17. Be able to make fun of yourself. Hilltop holds follies at its Autumn Brilliance festival each year. The follies are a time for students and teachers to satirize each other and the world. Spend time laughing at oddities or frustrations as part of a learning community. Writing, performing, and condoning a sense of humor in school seems crucial to making education meaningful... even transformative.

18. Consider Fish's catch: "lead quietly...tread lightly... always lead by example and try to give the benefit of the doubt - you never know where your students have been or where they might be going."

19. Consider Mahatma Gandhi's quote (given to us from Nettie Oakes) - "be the change you wish to see in the world."

20. Work, play, and fight every day to make Yeats' idea a reality: "education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire." Never ever stop asking questions and following where they lead.

Education then comes down to spark and flame. That is fire by the friction of forest wood brought together and in doing so they transform their properties forever. Wood from trees that have
burrowed, branched, and bloomed - lived and died, but are still capable of
burning brightly - even brilliantly - and leaving ash to fertilize the soil
for future trees and fires.

Here’s what I hope for:

To learn and teach from hilltops and trees the rest of my life. See
what grows...and burns.
Chapter 17: Lightning Flashes

The colors are healing. Burnt red, orange, yellow, brown leaves and the green of pine waving in mountain wind, beckoning us to come together to see the science of a special season. They cover the hills and valleys as far as my eyes can see. The days are getting shorter, but more intense. The Autumn Brilliance Festival has everyone buzzing. It takes so much preparation which is mostly precautionary as USE drones target large gatherings. It’s hard to believe looking at it – that this natural brilliance is threatened by the hyper-securities of U.S.E. and the lawlessness of the druglords. It’s easy to believe that this forest is a world away, that all of us here are beyond reach. Holliday says not to trust it – that she’s been caught between hornets and Lords before. She said the States look at it like hairs in the drain. A few at a time slide through without issue, but get too many in one place at one time and it can clog things up. USE won’t take a chance of having its drains clogged.

We’re less than two weeks from the festival and Fish has guided all of the older students on a water walk. It is new only to Julio and me. We hike and camp for a week while checking clean water sources and distributing provisions in well-sheltered areas of the surrounding valleys and hills. This preparation allows Hilltop alumni to have a safe place to stay that is within a day hike of Hilltop. Pilgrims and current students intermingle, rotating through these camps and Hilltop itself over the course of a week to engage in old and new songs, games, and stories, and to avoid too many hairs in the drain. At least the detection of one large gathering. The same holds true in the spring; although the start of the new year sounds more serious and focused.
To bring in each new school year, during the Spring Cleaning, Hilltop sets and reviews expectations and proposals for the year based on everyone’s expressed concerns, which get submitted anonymously as students – past and present – cycle through Hilltop for that festival. The students and teachers who stay read, think through, debate, rally, and vote on proposals as a whole community, which then get recorded and put on display at the Schoolhouse. Many a song is sung during Spring Cleaning. Autumn Brilliance is about selecting the best stories, skits, projects, food, and games of the year and sharing them with past generations. At the same time, everyone engages in the most memorable tales and tastes of former Hilltoppers.

Six days in and Holliday has reminded us of the importance of attending to the plants and trees, and which ones can do what each day. Fish defers to her a lot on walks of any kind in the forest. She is more at home among the trees than anyone, even Fish. Her pace quickens, eyes narrow, she moves through the woods like a wildcat knowing just what to look for, to pounce on, or wait out. The fun-loving Holliday melts away when leading large parties in her native habitat. She respects the woods, what they can do, and acts accordingly. We’re in her hands here. No one in our party second guesses her instincts or knowledge of the land. It’s far more reassuring than the security-laden world I came from.

It’s no wonder Julio admires her. His stoic, now bearded face given away by those liquid brown eyes, awe-struck. She is a survivor in the face of cruel and unfortunate events. And she never complains; she either does or she doesn’t. She lets you know where she stands
and where you stand with her. Even when she’s not moving, red hair always flowing, always bouncing, always swinging through breeze and still-air alike. Eyes always gleaming like an owl in the night. Her power an extension of the Earth, like its core reaching out to touch us with a human face, warn us of our insatiable hunger for what lies beneath, what boring holes in our foundation means for the future. Bridgie would have admired her spirit, her courage, and consistency too. Hope is lucky to have her as a big sister. In some ways, she’s like a big sister to us all.

The shelter we are camping at is in good shape. The well still works and tests potable. Stone overhang should cover up to thirty. Surrounding pine, rhododendron, and ferns give it a cozy feel. It is our resting place for the night. This is the first night Julio and I have had the same watch on the same side of camp. Always watch in pairs, always two pairs at a time, unless the party is less than eight. There are twelve of us – Fish, Sockeye, Sales, Dice, Marcus, Hank, Julio, Holliday, Sadie, Sasha, Jazzy, and me. This is the longest I’ve spent with this group – so many of our days spent in intergenerational dialogue, apprenticeship, investigation, or upkeep of Hilltop and the world.

I know Sockeye, Sales, Sasha, Jazzy, and Dice all pretty well from collaborative projects, cooking, or games afterward eating at the Place Mat. Sadie keeps her distance from the other older girls though. Most of the boys think she is pretty with her pale skin, blue eyes, and near-white blond hair. She is in a way, but so thin, emaciated really, not to mention temperamental and territorial. Her airs have captured Hank’s attention, much to Julio’s relief. That or he gave up when Holliday told him where he could take his “huffin’ n’
puffin”’ act. Marcus mostly avoids me after we went out one night over a month ago, although he’s still friendly enough. I did it because he makes me laugh. He makes all of us laugh. It’s attractive, but he is too unrestrained when it comes to me. I could tell he wanted to move too quickly—dropping innuendos and sweeping my questions aside with the subtle grace of a showman, but not that subtle. He was seeing past me without seeing me. People, like life itself, are one big joke to him… he projects an image of not taking any of it too seriously, of floating above it. It’s his way of coping with demons of his past and present, I’m sure. At the end of our date, I knew I didn’t have the energy or ability to help unpack another dresser. I have issues of my own I need to tend to, unpack and go through… they’re going to require patience and deserve my attention so long as I am able to give it out here.

“Winnie?”

“Julio?”

“It’s good to see you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I… it’s been awhile since we’ve gotten to talk… just the two of us.”
“That’s because you’ve been wrapped up writing and reading with Nanny and Nettie…that or gallivanting around with your girlfriend.”

Even in the moonlight, I can tell he’s blushing. Holliday may know how to press my buttons but she’s shown me how to do that to others too.

“She’s not my girlfriend. Just…”

“I’m only teasing.”

“I… okay.”

“What do you want to talk about?”

“Winnie, what do you want? After all of this – say we stay and graduate next year – then what?”

I don’t think I can stay another season or I will never go back.

“I thought this would be your home, Julio. That you would teach here. This is what you’ve always wanted, right?”
“Yeah, it’s, it’s like dream – an ever expanding one. One that keeps filling out with more color… more vibrancy. I see a hopeful future for myself for the first time in my life. I don’t want to leave…but I want to make contact with you. I want my family to know I’m alive, maybe even arrange their escape… if that is possible.”

*He knows what I plan to do with my old Eyes.*

“I… I can make contact for both of us, Julio. I will find your family if I find a way to make it back inside. You can’t risk it.”

“Me? You’re the A grade with everything to lose. Do you have any idea how much good you could bring to MEATS? Be part of a movement that shows how it can be hopeful and accessible to the masses? Make a case for equal commitment to the social, emotional, and environmental needs of people in MEATS teaching. That would be a kind of innovation in itself… one that is focused on interaction… that puts people first. It’s the only way to drive more humane technologies and their use. Advances in MEATS – or away from them – that could benefit all of us. Not built on the backs of people, but with them, eye to eye. Not eye to screen or checklist or label or percentile.”

“Julio, I’m not sure I am who you think I am. I’m one woman, without a college degree, without the major I want… I don’t even have a community that I know would be interested or could understand what Hilltop is… what it could mean.”
“But you know the system, you’ve been successful in it, and that means you have keys… keys you don’t even know you have. Keys that are credentials from A district schools, keys that will lead to a degree if you want it, and much more… including the ability to work the power networks in USE, at least in Midwest.”

“And what if that isn’t what I want? I’ve had to face my fears here – in this place. In the Wilds, more feels… possible here. I’m not sure I’m ready to face USE the way you’re talking about. The responsibility…”

“I’m sorry.” He looks at me, brows pushed together in concern, and shakes his head.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m putting what I want… what I used to dream about every day, every year, on you. A way to access and change a system that is so cruel to so many, Winnie. Just because you weren’t always happy in it, doesn’t mean you feel the same. It doesn’t mean you have to dedicate part of your life to it.”

“But I do… if I were to be a teacher.”

“A scientist?” he volleys back.
“What is a scientist really worth if she can’t teach… and what is a science teacher worth if they don’t engage in meaningful experiments and conversations in science?”

“Your perspective… it’s really refreshing.”

“What? What do you mean?”

“The way you question and connect your worlds, with a level of precision and care I’ve only seen in people answering and dividing for their own sake, for their own safety. You… I…”

_I’ve missed him too… I will miss him._

“Julio, did you see that?”

“What?”

“The lightening. In the distance. It used to scare me. I remember my dad telling me that Weathershield would keep it out. Stave off this random, unpredictable fire and light. Now I’m not afraid. I actually think we can be the better for it. If we could harness but a small part of its energy… channel it into sustained light and fire.”
“It is beautiful. It triggers something primordial, you know? How long have humans and other animals been studying the sky? Not just those stars – searching to connect and make sense of them – our place in them, but the absence of them when that light is blotted out by storms, redistributed in an electrical current searing earth and air alike?”

I nod. “A reminder.”

“Hm?”

“Like the sea…of what how fragile life is, especially in the midst of the grand plans we make for ourselves.”

“Mm hm, tread lightly. Winnie, you know you sound like a poet more and more everyday…”

“And you’ve taken quite an interest in science…”

“So I have.”

_The soft smile he gives with those words is what I will fall asleep to. What I will take with me._

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Eyes coming into focus, Sockeye’s head greets me upside down, burnt and beaming. His poor skin ravaged by the sun on the ridgelines we have hiked this week. It’s as if the sun itself has set in his chest. And yet, it’s as if it doesn’t even touch him. He smiles right through it, right through all of it.

“Wake up, seepy hed.”

“Mm…good morning.”

“Redy ta go home? I’m redy.”

I raise my head and look at the camp. Everyone else is already up and packing, except Sales and Dice who are talking while prepping some breakfast by the fire.

Julio is helping Holliday cover a long pile of firewood that was exposed to the wind and rain last night at the edge of the overhang.

“Yeah, Sockeye, I’m ready too.”
Chapter 18 Autumn Brilliance

Autumn Brilliance is at its end and I feel like I am at the beginning of so many things. At the cusp of so many new questions.

Food for my journal tonight. Today is clean-up and cover-up though. Small parties of four do day-hikes, each party out to a different camp below. Holliday, Hope, Huckleberry, and I are headed out to camp three near Frost Falls, it’s one of the shorter treks from Hilltop, and the only one without a tenured teacher. Jazzy could have gone instead of me with the group, but stayed to tend to Nanny Rachel while Anson tends to a pilgrim at camp six who is suffering from dehydration, possibly dysentery from an unchecked water source on his trek to one of our camps. Jazzy’s going to be a good doctor one day.

“What wuz dat paypuh you show’d las’ nigh’?”

“The one with the plant designs? It’s called the Voynich manuscript.”

“Ya keep it in yer walkin’ stick? Dis whole time?”

“Yeah, I just felt like the festival was the right time to share it. It wasn’t mine to begin with... Dr. Compao, who I told you about... I wanted to tell part of his
story...the commitment he had to the past and future. Tim X -- the old man who said he was an ex-con, ex-addict, ex-husband all before he turned twenty…”

“Yeh. Wun frum Skater Alley.”

“…and that Hilltop saved his life when he got there desperate and dying. That he knew a strange old woman I knew a long time ago.”

“Da wun ya sed taut ya dat song ya sing ta Hope sumtimes?”

“Yeah… Sassafras. I thought she was crazy old woman when I was a kid. I mean you live in USE long enough and everybody is. But it turns out she volunteered to try to make in-roads between USE and the Wilds decades ago. Her people – she was from the Growers and Gatherers – were getting squeezed for land and resources. They had some early Hilltop grads who thought they could try to enter into a partnership or treaty with USE even though they were pushing Watchtower borders... try to protect themselves from the druglords and other violent groups on the other side. He said it backfired.”

“Cud da tole ya dat.”
“She and a handful of others were taken, deemed inferior after testing… she must have been dumped or discharged in a C district and forgotten about.”

“So why can’t this Dr. Compass, tell his own story? Where issy anyhow? Why dinn’e come?” Huckleberry has been listening. A real wildcard. Probably ten, routinely dirtier than everyone else, foul-mouthed and fun-loving, known for playing practical jokes that even get under Marcus’ skin. Easily expulsion or alternative school material even in a C-district. I respect that. Huckleberry likes to linger – around Holliday and Lil the most – but never seems to be in one place for long. A tough kid… especially for ten.

“He’s dead, Huckleberry.”

“Oh shit. Well, it’s gonna get us all.”

“He was killed by a USE drone.”

“Wuna da wuns frum da quake dat brung ‘im an’ Winnie.” Holliday gives Huckleberry a hard look not to be so flippant.

“What I meant wuz, I liked that poe-um ya read more than a buncha squirrelly lines an’ sum kinda alien flower. That’s all.”
“You were in my rotation at Hilltop, Huckleberry?”

“In da shadows, J… don’ go blowin’ ma cover.”

“Hurd ya gotta standin’ o’vation. Dat’s whut ya bein’ writin’ dis whole time?”

I can’t hold a straight face. “Thanks, Holliday… no, but it’s the first thing I’ve written that I will give to Nettie for the Schoolhouse stash. You ought to think about writing something for it…”

“Why? Whut good isa coupla lines frum a wild girl in da woods gonna mean ta ‘nwun?”

“How many wild girls in the woods have you read about? You have a lot to teach. Why do you think Fish lets you take the lead on overnighters? Why do you think you’re leading a party today?”

“Aw, he gives ev’rbudy a chance.”

She’s blushing. Won’t look at me. She’s still not used to my compliments… but she likes them.
“Da Schoolhouse stash sez we was here. Sez we did sumthin’ that people cared about. Says we did stuff werth fightin’ for.”

Huckleberry feigns a glare at Holliday.

“An ya mean ta tell me, you rote sumthin’ fer it, ya lil’ wildcat?”

“I aim ta tell ya I did.”

I’m going to have to look for that one. Still, I should offer encouragement. “That’s great, Huckleberry.”

“Whooz side ya on? Why we all gotta write sumthin’ ta be sumthin’? I gerrentee peepul wuz tellin’ stories long ‘fore writin’ and will be long aftur. Stories ever bit as ‘portent as a Bible or sum schoolhouse stash. Ta dem anyhow. Ya write it down, peepul tryin’ hold ya fast, use it ta force yeah into a story can’t change, don’t have no more acshun … no more life.”

“Now thatsa point.” Huckleberry murmurs, mouth twisted up, eyes cast to the tree, nodding slowly. I look at Holliday. I don’t think she has any more idea than I do if Huckleberry is being serious.
“Writing is just a record of snapshots of your thinking, Holliday, or someone else’s – it can help us find out who we are in relation to everything we encounter…choose or find ourselves a part of.”

Holliday furrows her eyebrows.

“It is brillyent out here,” Huckleberry says still looking at the trees.

I catch an amused smile break on Holliday’s face. Nettie says Huckleberry is a lot like the namesake of a character from a book I haven’t read yet. Maybe moving it to the top of the list will help me understand the enigma that stands before me. Then again, maybe I don’t want to...

So much possible in every one of the kids here. So happy, ornery, curious, rambunctious...talkative. Even Hope is showing signs of speaking – squeeling, smiling, and laughing more, and using hand gestures of all kinds. She likes having me around to make ridiculous faces to coax her out of her shell or sing her to sleep at night. She’s been the biggest reason I feel like I have a role to play here...maybe in the world. Her hugs are so fierce right before she goes to bed and her eyes so appreciative when I sing to her. Hilltop is not how I imagined it.
Children are a liability in USE, another commodity, that saddles parents and gets saddled themselves by rules of conformity and regimentation without room for their voice or dissent. Just an overwhelming distrust of their nature and of nature itself. There is no believing in their creativity or imagination of the world or what it could be there, so kids act accordingly. In an era with no room for mistakes because they follow you like a mark of shame and impact future opportunities, there are two typical responses – get in line quietly or go insane.

I look at Hope following Holliday quietly, instinctively. Straight-faced, solemn. I know the mask well. When unsure who to trust or when a moment is needed to let your mind wander and not have your face give you away, wear the mask. It can come off with seasoning. The seasoning of Hilltop or people who care and don’t go anyway. With a community of support. I was Hope a long time ago and the Possible willing, she can lead a different life.

My fingers run back and forth along the folded up piece of paper I scrawled my poem on. I close my eyes and feel the words unfold…
I was born
Into a grey springtime
Eyes glazed bleak
Numb like city walls
Consciousness
Lulled to sleep and dreams
Held fast in thick cement
Summer spills golden rays
on the grey and grim
false light, beaconing in the fog
Consciousness
Cut and combed
Vainly paraded high
But sinuous summer
stains sepia and slow
To a stink, humid hot
Cities pave
and puff
and smoke
Yet for a few
a moment...a season
Blows in before all is senseless and stale
Wind brings a song
To the mundane
and the motherless
Now is the chance
To flash with brilliance,
A short time, to show one's colors
And sing with others
Now is the time for brilliance
Before being whipped away
by winter wind in the snow,
Finding a flame from the Fall
Now is the time for brilliance...
Camp three is in good shape. Well cleaned and covered by the pilgrims who stayed there during the week’s festivities. Holliday says this is usually the case, but occasionally there are messy camps from groups having to leave early or quickly on a return trip to their ways of life in the valleys and hills beyond. Either way, the perimeter camps of Hilltop need to be readied for winter and not reveal an obvious path or connection to our mountain’s peak.

“Whoo-lio, Hope’s tuggin’ ta see da Falls. Why’ont ya take ‘er, keep ‘er safe, ‘n Huck ‘n me will finnish dis hav.”

“You sure?”

“You an’ Winnie, ony wuns I trus’ wid her like dat. Only wuns she trus’ like dat.”

“Naw Hope, ya hole Whoolio’s han’ when yer by ‘um. We’ll meet ya at da bottom near da the Hole in the Groun’ – ya ‘member how ta git behind ‘um? Jis’ us ‘n da water. Go ‘head start lunch ‘hout me if ya wan’ when ya git down there.”

I nod. At the edge of the camp, I turn to watch Holliday work. So effortless in her movements here – hard to believe she’s so stiff and fumbling at the Schoolhouse
when she feels like she’s on the spot. I can’t imagine any part of her being in
Midwest. I wouldn’t want to…

But then her neck and chin snap to attention.

“Holliday?”

“Shush. Birds gone.”

I see Huckleberry slide into a dense thicket across from us, and tighten my grip
on Hope’s hand. Holliday’s left hand sliding back to retrieve her slingshot.

“We come in peace.” A voice, then a man, in a skin tight black suit covering the
entirety of his hulking body, except for military-grade Eyes extending out from
his face, and a black belt populated with small compartments for god knows
what kind of new technology.

Holliday loads her slingshot, and begins swinging.

“I’m unarmed. We’re here to help.”
“Better tell yer frien’ to stop walkin’ up behind me or he’s gonna wish he had sumthin’ to defend hisself with den.”

“Ranger, hold up, walk out where the red-head can see you.”

Their Eyes – so strange to see here. A cold grips me but my anger pushes through, “Flip your Eyes up. Now!”

“What?”

“Now! Are you Linked? Broadcasting? Get your Eyes up now or we will call others and you and your friend will not make it out alive, even if there’s an army behind you.”

Why are they here? So help me if they touch Holliday or Hope.

He flips them up. “Let me explain.” Another man dressed in an identical black suit emerges, although smaller in stature with a thin neck and slender head and legs despite holding quite a bit of weight around his mid-section. Holliday stares at him coldly, still twirling her slingshot behind her. He flips his Eyes up too.
“We have mutual friends. We’re with a sacred order sworn to protect those who preserve history so that we do not repeat its darkest chapters.”

Knightwatch.

“You’ve been a hard man to find, Ponce Lucas. We thought you were dead.”

My palms sweating. Struggling to keep a grip on Hope. As if sensing this, she lets go in favor of hugging my leg.

“Ponce? Who da hell is Ponce? Start talkin’ oil slick!”

“It’s okay, it’s… I think I know who these people are. Come over here slowly and take Hope. Go back… to our home. Tell everyone to hold tight. If I’m not back by tomorrow midday, I’m not coming back, but neither are they. Got it?”

She’s looking at me and knows it’s about Hope.

“Your word. You will not follow them.”

The lead ranger nods followed by his partner.

“Say it.”
“We won’t follow them.”

Holliday reaches me and whispers, “We’re goin’ back to our Hole in da Ground. Don’t forget ‘bout me.” A squeeze, then she scoops Hope on to her back and disappears towards a deer trail that leads to the falls. She won’t risk Hilltop. She’s always three steps ahead. But Huckleberry…

“Ponce, we know about the quake. About Dr. Compao… MURKI… your family.”

My heart is smashing itself against my sternum, throwing itself against my bones over and over again.

“And… how are they?”

“They’re okay. We’ve supplied them with water. We got word to them to not believe the State issued report about the disaster, but that we didn’t have anything definitive one way or the other. With Golddusters scouring the superhighway and roads to MURKI, we didn’t get a look at the site for a week. By then, any trace of your records or whereabouts had been wiped clean.”
“Then how did you find me?”

“You found us when you activated the secret compartment on your walking stick. It activated a homing device that let us know you must have felt safe enough to trigger it.”

What have I done? “Is it something USE can detect? What about your Eyes?”

“It’s okay, we take every precaution to not be seen or traced. There’s only one person who has access to what we see.”

“How is that possible?”

“Because our employer is a master of… special effects.”

“How long were you watching us?”

“Just a few minutes. Enough to know Winter Weaver is alive. Enough to know you’ve taken a new identity. Any other survivors?”
The lead ranger is so matter of fact. If they are Golddusters why give us time and information. Golddusters don’t listen and are always armed. The only person with connection to my walking stick besides Dr. Compao is Edwin Knight.

“Ponce. It’s okay. He knew your grandmother. He told us to tell you that he learned from her. Has a debt to repay.”

“What? Look, what is it that you want with me?”

“To take you home, of course. Help develop what Dr. Compao started.”

“His books? What happened to his books… his office?”

“It had to be disassembled quickly after the…accident. Most of the books were redistributed or destroyed by MU. Unfortunately, we do not have other contacts there that shared his vision…but if we bring you back… back from the dead. You can become an instant rallying point – someone who could capture the public’s imagination – a young man disoriented and left to wander the Wilds and survive. A man who made contact with them, even trained some. The story should appeal to USE if they are going to move forward with building new city-states. You can use your celebrity to streak across the states spreading a message of pulling yourself up by your bootstraps to get to college, survive in the terrible
Wilds, and champion the system... that is until we have the capacity to take it down, of course. You’ll be icon for all C-grades to aspire to.”

“And what if I’m not the lightening you’re looking for?”

“Then perhaps we need to look elsewhere or set up a partnership that you’re comfortable with…”

“This is my home now. Is it possible to bring my father and aunt here and then leave us be?”

“Perhaps Ms. Weaver or some of the others will be more inclined?”

“Maybe.”
Hearing Zora sing the song Julio taught us breaks my heart. Hope’s favorite…

*Kookaburra sits in the old gum tree / Merry, merry king of the bush is he / Laugh, Kookaburra! Laugh, Kookaburra! / What a life you lead... / Merry, merry, merry little bird is he / Sing, Kookaburra! Sing, Kookaburra! / Sing your song for me... / Eating all the gum drops he can see / Stop, Kookaburra! Stop, Kookaburra! / Leave some there for me / Kookaburra sits in the old gum tree / Counting all the monkeys he can see / Stop, Kookaburra! Stop, Kookaburra! / That’s not a monkey that is me.*

It reminds me of the monkeys in the poem Nettie gave me. We are those monkeys…chained to the floor, subjected to the maniacal laughs of plump birds looking down on us from the tops of well-watered trees. A-grades are no exception. Not really. A system of slaves holding slaves. Only the kookaburra able to take flight when they grow weary of our business below. Or take a nap… like I did on the flight to Northeast. The Kookaburra, like the monkey, alive in each one of us.

It’s been almost a day since Huckleberry returned. No sign of the others. No sign. And it’s almost dark.

Fish, Lil, Hank, Huckleberry, and I spent the day at camp three after they didn’t come back. I would still be there if it wasn’t for them. No evidence of a struggle. I brought my recalibrated Eyes to see if they could pick up a signal of others in the area. Only satellite
available and I can’t take the chance of allowing USE to locate our position. Perhaps I already have with these things that Lil and I have spent ours tinkering with. But that doesn’t make sense. Why strike camp three and not Hilltop itself? How would they know anyone would be there?

From my window, I can hear Zora start “Four Little Ducks Went Out to Play” in the younger kids’ dorm. Beautiful. Haunting. No more ducks to go missing after me.

I should have left before the festival, not after. But I didn’t want to send up an alarm right before Hilltop’s biggest holiday. Plus I needed to have the time to network with stargazers, the hunters and traders, roamers and gypsies… anyone who could help me find safe passage back to Midwest. And now that networking seems moot. Special forces of some kind have hauled away Julio…and Holliday… and Hope. Please don’t leave me. Please don’t be… with her.

Not yet. Not without a fight. When the candles go out, tonight is the night. And I will not stop walking and looking until I find them or the walls of Midwest itself.

Four letters to write. Sockeye. Pearl. Sales. And one to give Nettie for the schoolhouse stash. That should get me to everyone’s bedtime. Then check supplies and stop by the Place Mat to stash bread, carrots, and goat cheese for the trip.
I retrieve paper. Ink. Quill. Make them nice, nice as I can, like the look of some of the really old letters in the Schoolhouse stash. Concentrate – Sockeye, Pearl, Sales, the school.

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One to go, a letter of what Hilltop has meant to me. The hardest to write…concisely…precisely. The last hurdle to fling myself at before my race into night and through day until I run into something else.

“Caw caw”

Holden come for a night time visit?

“Caw caw”

I open the window. “Holden?” I whisper into the moonlight.

Pfffffffffffff!

“Ah! What the…”

A stone wrapped in leather between my feet. I crane my head out of the window.
Holliday. Unconquerable red-hair flowing beneath her up-turned face. She gives me a knowing glance with finger in front of her lips, looks around, and waives me down.

Thank you. Thank you God. Thank you Universe. Thank you.

The last letter will have to wait. I arrange the other three on my bed. Grab my pack and head for Holliday outside.

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The two of us made good time to the Hole in the Ground, even with stopping to pack food.

Holliday is smart not to have involved Hilltop. Especially with this. This is my responsibility to negotiate.

A partnership with the Knightwatch.

It felt good to see Julio, hold him close, if only for a moment. Hope too.

So much to process. Julio did have contacts on the inside, he was right. Contacts powerful enough that could get us back on the inside.
The black-clad rangers, called Gawain and Percy, sit at the stone table with Julio. Percy nursing a swollen lump on the top of his head. Holliday listening, fire in her eyes, dancing with the flames of the small fire blazing in the cave. Shadows licking the walls. The sound of the falls hypnotic tumbling obscuring our voices to the outside. Perhaps there’s more to mythology then I’ve realized. The stories we live by are all myths. Can we align the ones we believe in with the ones we go along with?

Gawain is adamant. “What you’ve done…building a partnership here with the Wilds. It’s better than we could have hoped for. We can help get you both back to Midwest. Lead a movement to bring back teaching…better than it was before. We can show you how to make it look like you’re Goldmining while you reveal a new innovation that will care for people’s lives and learning through schools. Innovation that isn’t dependent on technology or tests, but people asking questions and exploring their world. You know that’s why Eyes can be so insidious, right? It’s the use of random unpredictable rewards built into their programs – that stimulates addictive or compulsive behaviors in people. Those rewards get them stuck fixating on screens, beautiful sirens that slowly decapitate them until they are incapable of being present with others. These are paired with judgment apps to perpetuate a culture of disgust, mistrust, and instability. Eyes wrap us up in the ranking of things… the numbers, output, images. They create job and school situations that don’t allow you to let your guard down…that don’t allow you to make a connection with others…”

“But you have Eyes too, right?”
“Excuse me, Ms. Weaver?”

“I mean you have Eyes too. You have your own technologies that you run on or with them, but how do we know those won’t peddle a similar…”

“Regime of truth,” Julio offers.

I lift one of my brows. “I was going to say prescription for the disease of HAL Securities… and standardization. How do we know?”

Gawain looks at me injured. “Can’t you tell whose side we’re on?”

“And whose side is that?”

“The side of public ideas and debate… of people having a say in how their schools and jobs operate and the ability to change unjust restrictions or regulation. Not allowing that decision-making to be made by corporate lobbyists and Hammerheads gobbling up politicians, votes, and bills left and right. Too many politicians and corporations are in agreement that they make better decisions than the rest of us. We’re left to accept it, along with the rosy rhetoric and marketing.”
Julio is smiling. “He’s been saying things like this all day. All the things we want to hear. But then again a hit to HAL Securities could be quite a boon for Knight industries?”

Gawain is resolute. “That’s how USE is structured. At least there are still some men willing to take risks on behalf of the public. What about your own prescriptions here in the forest… with the Wilds? You have ways of surviving and organizing. What makes that any better than what we do? Have you asked yourself that question? Turned the microscope on yourself?”

“Yes, and we need to continue to question, but no one should have to feel like they are under a microscope…” Julio looks at me.

“Gawain, I’m not convinced that good things happen or social innovation is made better because you incentivize it with material wealth. Sanction it maybe, but the drive has to come from within people. There has to be something more. Something grounding.”

“Ms. Weaver, you are aware of Goldhammer’s plan? To keep people working until they die so there are no or few payouts for retirement, right? Keep people unhealthy so they are dependent on their district technological supports and die young. They’re something many of the companies invest in. It’s called Dead Peasant’s insurance. It gets a company like HAL paid for every pre-mature death of an employee, instead of the family. He needs loyal, dependent worker bees who can’t think for themselves. Can’t see how they’re being exploited.”
Julio interjects, “It’s hard to get a man to understand something when he’s paid not to understand it. Upton Sinclair, courtesy of Nettie Oakes.”

Gawain shoots him a puzzled look. “Something like that. Ms. Weaver, you and Mr. Lucas…”

“Luchar,” Julio corrects.

“Luchar. It’s true, you will have to use the channels available to us, not create new ones, not immediately.”

“Okay, let’s say we go along with you. You’re the knights paving the way, doesn’t that just make us pawns in another madman’s game?”

“What you two must know is that HAL breaks down family units it can’t control. It wants a society of longers, and it’s largely succeeded. We tout individualism in Goldmining and yet compete like everyone else to get more material comforts than anyone else, just like everyone else. But those with families are also controllable… through blackmail or payoffs to keep their family culture and comforts in place. Either way, we’re isolated from making real change.”

*He is saying all the right things. We have common concerns, but a common vision?*
“So how do you propose we hope to change that system again, Gawain?”

“One student and teacher at a time. Bit by bit.”

“Block by block,” offers Julio.

“Block by block. That’s what you are…part students, part teachers… you’re building blocks of a better community – at home and globally. Please…”

I glance at Holliday. She’s been so silent around the rangers. She is leaning against the wall of the cave. Cradling Hope in her arms. They’re listening intently, but not a word. She won’t interfere with this decision for me or Julio. I know she wants us to stay. Julio to stay.

Julio leans in. “What if our story comes with re-interpretations of your chivalric code? I mean, what if we don’t hold to Knight’s vision back inside the Walls?”

“But you do believe in it.”

Julio cocks his head to the side. “Part of it. But pursuing ideals you expect to see fully realized is risky business. It can lead to more harm than good if we undertake a journey assuming we will arrive at the same destination at the same time… or even that we’ve started from the same place.”
“So how is unity achieved, Mr. Luchar? How do we account for this kind of… diversity.”

“By embracing a story of diversity. Teams are stronger when the people who make them up bring different strengths to the table. Do different things.”

“And focus on strengths, not weaknesses,” I add. “If I am to be in partnership with the Knightwatch, we must rally around our diversity and our strengths. When this happens, we end up addressing some of our perceived weaknesses naturally as part of being in a learning partnership that has needs and relevance to us. Are you and your employer prepared for that kind of teaching and organizing?”

“Ms. Weaver, if you are helping to lead an alternative to USE’s instructional management paradigm, we are with you.”

“And you can speak for Edwin Knight?”

Percy comes alive from a motionless stare into the fire, “Gawain, the note…”

“Right, yes. Since you’re both here…the only ones left… I realize this is a leap of faith…”

He pops open a narrow compartment on his belt and hands me a small piece of paper.
Dear Dr. Compao and students,

A wise woman taught me never underestimate what a student can do. For if we lose our ability to be students, we most certainly lose our ability to teach.

She was my teacher, an eternal student, by the name Luchar.

Fight or die trying. I am with you, if you are willing...

~ a friend

“Winnie, it’s the same handwriting I saw on a note he left me before I met Dr. Compao for the first time.”

“And how do we know it isn’t a forgery… a trap?”
“How can we trust any story? I believe in the ones I’ve read, and listened to… and retold with my family for years. They are a part of who I am. Gawain’s right, it’s a leap of faith, but at least I know what stories are a part of me…and how and why I have come to believe in them. They are stories that ask me to question them again in light of new material…new evidence. This, this is new material and it overlaps with the stories that have made me who I am.”

“So if we leave…”

I see Holliday’s eyes blaze brightly at my words.

“If I leave for Midwest. How do I get back in?”

“There are twelve men rich enough to own their own space exploration operations in USE. Four of them are in Midwest. Our employer is one of them. It gives us cover and clearance coming and going beyond the Walls. It will give you cover too… close enough to be ‘found’.”
Chapter 20: In the Shade of the Falls

We brought it with us. The stench and disease of USE. Laid waste to a school that had taken decades to build up and out, like the Earth pushing up…pushing back, only to have Man flex his mighty technological muscles and squash any and every mother we had left. I remember reading about how Geoffrey Amherst infected blankets with smallpox and gave them to the native peoples of the Northeast centuries before. Winnie and I brought the sickness of Man with us.

I had actually believed Hilltop was a world away. That we could stay away and study and explore forever. That they wouldn't find us. That they couldn't.

I am left with no more songs for Hope. She hugs and sleeps and barely eats, softly sobbing. Three days that feel like weeks with no Holliday.

Gawain and Percy are split on whether their movements so far afield from Midwest alerted HAL, or if the druglords had been spying, planning an attack for some time. It doesn't matter. If we hadn't come, or even stayed at Hilltop, it would still be there. They would all still be there.

The attacks hit at the end of the second day of negotiations in the Hole in the Ground. Hope had taken a stick and drawn a small circle in the dirt during our
negotiations. Of course, we entered into games for understanding and took a stand. Saw where the other was coming from...began to trust it. Perhaps too late.

I knew Winnie would return with them, but I honestly still don't know if I would have... if it hadn't happened. All the reading and writing with Nettie, Rachel, and the others and I see there’s no solving what lies beyond the mountains, only valiant attempts at addressing it. Is it worth fighting a fight that will go on and on long after I’m dead... after all the children are dead? Even if they’re left upright... empty-eyed, glassy and hollow, simply reminders of what children used to look like?

The shuddering Earth woke us from our negotiations. Once we crested the ground above the Falls, we could see the peak that was home to so many. Drone strikes and guerilla gunfire lacing the trees and into the sky. Holliday took one look, kissed Hope and gave her to me and said, “backta da Hole, gowan! Now!” Winnie had tried to follow her. Gawain close behind. They re-emerged from the woods within minutes, Winnie’s face flush, chest heaving, eyes darting wildly. Holliday had been too fast. There was no catching her.

Gawain and Percy were insistent that we must leave if we really wanted to help. Winnie and I refused. Neither of us would allow the other to leave for Hilltop, not with Hope here. We must believe in Holliday and the others. We gripped
and held one another in indecision and fear for hours. The rangers pacing nervously, disconnected and uncomfortable without being able to use their gadgets for help.

Percy roused us from our trance when Huckleberry appeared – breathless, angry, crying, resolute.


Huckleberry handed me one package of poems and letters, bound by ribbon, all that likely remains now of the Schoolhouse stash, then slumped to the floor, waving off human contact. All I could do was say “okay, okay, you did good…you’re safe here.” Winnie said, “We’re here whenever you’re ready,” while she sat stroking Hope’s long hair. I took the package, rolled it tight, and slid it snugly inside the Voynich manuscript roll, then back into the baton, which suddenly felt much heavier as though it bore the weight of the world. None of us knew what to say. All of this was so much bigger than any of us. Man
moving mountains in an instant with his technology. Playing a god I don’t believe in, but too powerful not to acknowledge. Stuck to sit in awe and anger of. Our blood ran colder as the night progressed in the cave. Fire extinguished the moment we felt the first reverberations, but left burning in our chests while our extremities froze. Winter come early this year just as Holliday predicted.

Jazzy, Keiko, and Zora found their way to the Hole by the middle of the night. Half-frozen and shaking. Brought news of Hank and some of the others. Hank had overwhelmed one of the lords, and led a charge with most of the older students towards the heaviest concentration to try to give the younger students and teachers time to slip the edges of Hilltop. Nettie and Eva had been with their group, but when Eva was hit, Nettie stayed to help. Urged the others on. Jazzy knew what she had to do.

No one else made it to the Hole that night or the night after.

No one had much to say. To run as a group so soon after the Lords had moved in and USE began its annihilation, would be suicide. From the mouth of the cave, a small sliver of the sky could be seen along the right side of the falls. Drones visible in the daylight. Rachel knew…
We exhausted our food this morning. It was time to move anyway. There’s only so long one can sit without doing something, anything. Only so long one can hide away in a hole in the ground.

So it was decided to split our small party in two. Percy would lead Winnie, Hope, Jazzy, Keiko, and Zora to the rangers’ hoverjet cloaked under an outcropping in a nearby ravine. Winnie and Gawain convinced the others that the only safe option lay with getting to the Knight Space Center on the outskirts of Midwest for safety, food… time to organize. When Huckleberry and I refused to leave without knowing what had come of the others, Gawain offered to make the hike to Hilltop – offer us his protection while we search for survivors. We agreed that the rendezvous with Knightwatch partners will be at the Hole in the Ground tomorrow night to transport Gawain and anyone else who agrees to it out of the hills.

We agreed to these things, calling them Freedom Runs, in honor of the freedom movements that came before – the ones that Nettie and Rachel spoke of – that organized to help save lives, make them meaningful, and create new, more diverse communities and inclusive spaces. The kind that stimulate learning – quicken its pace. The name also pays homage to the exploration runs Anson would organize from Hilltop each morning and some of the poems that were
inspired by them. I just hope our Freedom Runs are the beginning of something and not the end.

“Julio?”

“Yeah?”

“You said you wanted me to see you before we left. We’re all ready. Everyone’s heading up.”

I nod and extend the heavy green baton. “Please take care of it.”

She looks at me a moment before accepting it. “We need you to be careful, Julio. Be quick, okay? Hope needs you to come back… I… I need you to come back.”

Winnie’s eyes were moist, brimming, but not breaking.

I am weak to my core. I shake my head and then it escapes…

“Winnie, I love you.”

She leans in close to me. I feel the warmth of her breath. The tender gaze of her deep brown eyes that believe in emotions and stories we share. Her lips softer
than I ever imagined. My eyes close and I give myself over to feelings too long denied.

An instant later, she steps back softly… smiling a concerned smile.

“Come back to me,” she says, nose crinkling up, and then she is gone.

It takes until well into the afternoon to make it back to the steppes of Hilltop. Slow going, having to keep one eye on the forest and the other on the skies. The peak and Lookout clearly blighted. Rubble and downed trees slow us even more.

“There’s no way, the guerillas stayed, not with the drone attacks. They had to have been flushed or focused on getting to high ground. Either way, I think USE caused this. Not you, not us.”

I look at Gawain, thinking about causation. “It doesn’t really matter how now does it?”

“Once they were exposed, they scattered. The druglords in the area aren’t nearly as well organized and equipped as El Cartel. In some ways, this makes them more dangerous. More unpredictable.”
“Why didn’t some of the communities in the valley warn us?”

“I don’t know. Maybe because they were hit hard and fast too. No one in their right mind would follow a small army.”

“War, work, and death seem the inevitables of life. War, work, and death. How do you make a place to sustain love? How do you do that?”

Gawain and Huckleberry look at me quizzically.

“I mean, that’s what Hilltop was. A place where that kind of life was possible… cultivated… cared for. That takes years to build and a bomb takes seconds to blot it out. In the age of press a button and pop a pill, it’s hard to get a foothold for meaningful learning, for communities of care.”

“You’re a man of deep concerns, Mr. Luchar.”

“Only talking out loud… to keep from screaming.”

“Lot bottled up. Like allotta uh us.” Huckleberry nods to Gawain matter of factly.
Yes. A lot bottled up and now that it’s been let out, I’m not sure I can find a cap that will close it.

We walk in silence until we find the first body.

Sockeye’s burnt red body slumped over a boulder next to the stream. The fingers on his right hand partially submerged in the flow. A man apart. A kind man chewed up by forces beyond his comprehension or control. A friend to us all. Huckleberry approaches the body and rubs Sockeye’s back, nodding.

“You knew this boy?” Gawains asks.

“The heart and soul of what we just lost,” I reply. Tears tread a well-traveled course down my cheek. Sockeye, I am so sorry. It was your world we were meant to inherit, not this one. I place my hand on his body.

“Come on, Huckleberry, help me put him in the river. Let the water take him. Get him all over.”

If I don’t make it back, at least I won’t have to tell Winnie and the others what happened to him.
Along our ascent are bodies of guerillas... weapons and packs. They were on the move. Huckleberry finds a small brown moccasin with wisps of glittering red paint visible around the edges.

“Eva’s.”

I nod, but we find no other bodies of our friends. As we reach the enclave and outcropping that used to consist of school and home, craters surround us. Remains of any kind are hard to make out.

“Stay alert. Stay behind me. Tap for the direction you want to go,” Gawain whispers, his shockwave drawn.

Every building gone. As if it never existed. Wiped clean by the wrath of the god of Man. On the far edge of the craters, near the northern outlet trail, a slew of slain guerillas.

Huckleberry tugs on my shirt and points to an ear. I tap Gawain in the middle of his wide back to stop.

“Hear it?”
A scraping or padding. Muttering. On the other side of a stand of trees that had been spared during the bombing.

As we approach, I recognize the voice.

“Cut ‘em down lyke un el’phunt. Pourin’ bullets down ‘is throut. Ain’ never seen no zoo, but dat’s what it was. Slaughter uh da zoo an’imals. Dat’s all we ar to ‘um. Animals. Dumb. Ugly. Beasts ta be put down when dey git tired uh lookin’ at us…”

I see the red hair floating before I see her face. Before I see the shovel… and the graves. She spins quickly. Eyes hardened by anger and determination.

“Where’s ma sister?”

“She’s okay… with Winnie,” I offer with a smile to try to break the shell.

“’Bout time ya got here. I dun dug all six ma self. Any make it back?” She nods an acknowledgement to Huckleberry.
As I get closer, I can see her eyes are ringed with purple bags. The rest of her is thin and parched. Fingers rubbed raw from shoveling, she’s exhausted, but heightened at the same time.


She nods and then points.

“Dis here’s Hank. Las’ one – took da longest tag it git im ova heah in da groun. Dat wun dere is Sa’cha… Marcus…Dice…Val…n’ dat liddle wun’s Carp. An nuthin’ lef uh moutain mama er Lil as far as I kin tell.”

I feel a lump in my throat that I cannot maneuver my tongue. I see Huckleberry shudder and can only offer a pat.

“Ya’ all find any wun?”

Huckleberry answers what I can not. “Sockeye. We foun’ Sockeye.”

I look at her, trying to make a connection…trying to tap into her fire, but all I see is the light in her eyes as it goes out.
Chapter 21: Kookaburras and Crows

I swear that crow on the end looks like Holden. There’s at least a baker’s dozen on the railing just beyond the glass. Observing. Cawing. Talking.

Likely marveling… and laughing at the elaborate cages we’ve built for ourselves. If most of the teachers are dead then I do hope they get to come back as birds.

I remember one day when Holliday, after listening to me and Pearl go round and round on the question of matter in the universe, said she knew the reason that dark matter makes up six times as much as the rest. Why the weight of all subatomic particles – the building blocks of the universe -- can’t account for even twenty percent of it. “Da weight uh sins an’ souls waitin’ ta fine da home somewhar else.”

Pearl and I had to admit it was just as plausible as anything we could come up with. That the universe is both empty and dark, and expanding. That we get recycled or redistributed, maybe not even on this planet or in the same galaxy, but somewhere else out there in the stars doesn’t sound as crazy as I would have thought six months ago. That’s the thing with science or how I’ve seen others think about it, especially Holliday and Julio. It has to come with a story, tap the imagination, an ability to wonder or create if it’s going to matter for most people. Holliday was full of stories, colorful language and characterizations for all sorts of things until we brought her here. Now she just haunts the halls silently. She and Hope somehow making rooms more aware of their own emptiness.
and quiet. The trivial conversation and the sharp swooshing of automated doors and drawers – just walls of another kind, a maze of material concerns. I’m embarrassed by all of it now, not that she cares. I thought she would be climbing the walls to get out of this place, but she seems distant like she’s not really here at all. Julio says burying her friends and her home is what wore her down, but it is really Sockeye’s death that did this… not coming here. Whatever the case, after being treated for her dehydration, she awoke in a stupor and has been there ever since.

“Holliday, look at those crows. You think that one on the end is Holden?”

She doesn’t look up. “Naw, Holden’s smarta nuf t’avoid uh big group.”

“Yeah, I suppose so.”

Gawain noted a lot of Hilltop tracks heading north. Rangers would be sent to look for the survivors to offer news, protection, and - if they want it - safe haven. Not that anyone can ensure that without building very big walls and investing an endless army of drones and clones. We’re afraid of living as much as dying in USE. A selfless act like the one Hank led would be unheard of here. In reality, it would be a marketing ploy, a made-up story to sell you something, get your information, or take your money. It wouldn’t be real people acting in an instant to help form a shield for others to pass between two mighty forces, tides threatening to spill over the sides and sweep them all away. But instead, many survived… to rebuild, I hope.
As for the attackers, USE drones returned to the west or south while Gawain said most of
the guerillas looked like they pushed east in an attempt to avoid further assault from the
drones.

*Swoosht.* Julio walks in. I still can’t get over his clean-shaven face, or the branded
clothing the rangers have provided us. I had gotten so used to the feel of handwoven
clothing… even got used to hide.

“Winnie, are you ready?” He eyes my new outfit, and I catch one side of his mouth turn
move out and up. The side not visible to Holliday.

“Yeah…” I raise both eyebrows and try not to smile. “Holliday? You and Hope want to
come?”

“Naw, I’m gunna stay ere whal Hope drahs on da table.”

I glance at the virtual strokes on the surface of the DeeZine Table 3000. Holliday peers
into it as if trying to discern the future.

“Ohkay, be back soon, I hope.”

“I’m sorry to have kept you and your friends waiting as long as I have.”
He is even more bizarre looking than the Talk or other gossip sites make him out — round and wobbly with wiry strawberry blond hair turning white exploding from his head and face. Other than his wide, yet pointed nose, not much else is visible between his beard and thick black Eyes. He taps the ground with a short, stout cane after speaking as if checking for hollow floorboards.

“It’s okay. The food… the protection. It’s been appreciated,” Julio offers.

“Over a week. I would say I have bad manners… but in USE we must, above all, keep up appearances. Wouldn’t want Goldhammer or Day to get wind that I was protecting Wilds so close to the capital, hm?”

I smile politely, but it feels put-on. We have been waiting for days for news of any kind. On Hilltop or on re-entry. It’s been slim pickins (as Holliday says), quarantined to one side of one floor of the complex. The Knight Space Center is circular with T-shaped wings that spoke out from its exterior walls. Our hallway faces the interior courtyard curving around immaculate gardens with spaceship-shaped hedging meant to greet visitors interested in learning more about space exploration tours. More like joyriding. No one takes space exploration seriously. Not after the first few private shuttles never came back. No return on space mining investments. At least that’s what we were told. Maybe more is happening somewhere but we’re led to believe its only purpose is to afford Towers residents yet another status symbol to lord over the rest of us – Oh you haven’t taken a trip to space? Oh, I had no idea. I mean it really puts it all into perspective, you
know. If there is more going on, this has been good cover for Edwin Knight and his interests as well. Who knows with only privatized space operations in existence.

“It’s what I should do. Your grandmother was one of many teachers who taught me that you know?”

“How?” Julio asks.

“I was in high school and she was my English teacher. I grew up in the Southwest… before there were blockades. Invisible walls were in place…being built up, but they could be pushed through then, if you knew where to find their soft-spots… exploit the cracks.”

Bridgie. Walls I couldn’t see even though they were there, that’s what she told me. Walls I couldn’t see until Hilltop. Now all I see are walls… everywhere. Physical, virtual… emotional. I want to knock them down. Replace them with ladders…and bridges, but that will take time. Maybe a lifetime. Maybe more.

“Miss Weaver’s father built the first walls that do not crack. Not rising waters nor the Earth’s convulsions have been able to open daylight in them, not in a single city-state he has overseen construction in the past two decades.”

“Edwin, if you’re going to insist on us calling you by your first name, please use my first name…especially when you’re insulting my family.” I raise an eyebrow.
He flips up his Eyes and squints at me to see if it was meant playfully or not. I hope he can’t tell because it was some of both.

“Winter…” He taps the ground with his cane, then clears his throat. “You’re a curious case you know. Of all of the students Dr. Compao chose for cohort, I understood you the least. It was an opportunity for us, getting an advanced A-grade in the group, don’t get me wrong, but a major risk. If you could not be convinced in one year’s time that this world, our world, needed teachers and more meaningful schooling then you could do the most damage to what we were attempting to build. When the earthquake hit, I thought I had lost all of you, the tenuous foothold Dr. Compao and I were attempting to find in a sea of superfluous concerns and crooked old men.”

“Like yourself?” I ask delicately, nodding towards his Eyes.

He turns red, looks at Julio distractedly, then the ceiling. I’m making him uncomfortable. My fearlessness? Attractiveness? Hopefully both. I wonder how many women he’s ever had to negotiate with at the top of the Towers.

“Yes and no. Yes, I am old… and crooked when it comes to dealing with crooked old men. Men full of themselves and what they have accomplished… or built.” He coughs, glances at me, and continues. “I play poker with many of them, you know, every month. Goldhammer too. I play the game, because if I don’t have a seat at the table someone else will who never had a commitment to public spaces. That’s what this center is… it is
about space exploration and space creation, just not in the sense my crooked counterparts think. But it is quite literally on the fringes of our society. To be a part of a new schooling paradigm with more humane purposes and intentions, the way we could in Mideast, building something new and old that wouldn’t conform to current constrictions… that, that would be something.”

“Edwin, I… I didn’t mean to put you…”

“No, no, my dear, how nice it is to feel alive and have to answer for something. To be prompted to go places I might not think to go, want to go. But you see, I can go there because I don’t have to worry about losing my way back. I have the technology and the buildings to back me. I have more resources than I know what to do with. Not like the rest of you trapped in districts of despair or disdain, wondering if you could ever trust anyone or anything to support you… and an ability to be something more than they say you are. More than we say you are.”

“Oh good… in that case, remind me where your women rangers are?”

Julio interjects, “That opportunity’s possible… we saw it. We were a part of it at Hilltop. I don’t know if it’s possible to have it—have it on a wide scale in USE, but I’m willing to try. Without your support, I never would have been able to go to a well-resourced university, meet Dr. Compao, or find Hilltop.” He looks at me. “And I believe in her to help lead it.”
“And you trust her to stay true to this partnership about affirming and sustaining the voices of teachers and students in education? Even when A-grade amenities come calling? Even when the Towers take an interest and attempt to seduce her back?”

“Yes.”

“I trust your resolve, Julio. What you and Winter lack in experience, you make-up for in passion and perseverance. If you will trust me, my old eyes and new, we can send you back in to advance Dr. Compao’s work.”

“Our work?” I question.

“Our work.” Edwin nods and taps his cane.

“These Eyes you speak of, how are they not accessible by HAL Securities?” I ask.

“They are on their end, but we’ve reprogrammed them for a random entertainment feed. My business is entertainment and special effects, you know. I have used that and many an actor and hacker to infiltrate their systems. We have Eyes that Link, but can only be traced to fictional characters we’ve made up. Handles with no doors behind them if you will.”
Silly to think I was the first to try something like that. I offer, “One of the teachers at Hilltop and I tried to do something like that. I think my old Eyes can’t be traced actually…”

“Really? Fascinating. I’ll have one of my programmers here take a look if you’re willing?”

“Sure, if I can be present. The learning needs to go both ways.”

He nods. “And now what else did you learn at Hilltop that you will bring back with you? What will ground you and those you meet once back inside? What will bring and sustain your work?”

Julio is quick to pounce. “We learned that most innovation isn’t necessarily new or needs to be. That our relentless pursuit of technological innovation and Technocratic accountability are not the answer to our problems; they only blind us to the problems that those pursuits have caused. If we want innovation then we must start it and sustain it socially. It must depend on the particulars. Flexibility and adaptability have to be key ingredients. A shared commitment to supporting community and individual needs. We learned that creative ways of communicating and dreaming are needed, and a way to share leadership. We’ve learned that a commitment to dialogue is critical for collective problem solving and the development of new learning opportunities. We…”
“Let me stop you for a moment, Julio. That’s quite an analysis. Important ideals, but how do we craft a message that allows the public to understand it? How can these values and the actions they require get translated without becoming scripted?”

“Because you let people define how they have come to understand and meet the values and goals they helped set in the first place.”

“Trust?” Edwin poses with a smile.

Julio nods. “If we treat teachers and students like they are competent or talented, or even capable of being competent or talented some day, then we have to trust them to help craft the vision, question it, and make contributions towards it. They are an active and reflective part of the planning, the teaching, the learning, and the evaluation. It would be clear to them and others if they’ve accomplished what they negotiated. At the same time, they’ll get the opportunity to see what else was found in their attempts towards understanding and learning. That’s all education really is when you think about it… attempts. Essay after essay, a series of attempts of questioning and addressing those questions, to better understand ourselves and our world… to make it meaningful. Teachers see how their attempts, and their questions, their collaborations yield change and could change to support the concerns of both individuals and the community.”
“Yes, yes, I like your vision. I share it, even if I don’t fully practice it. But I need more capacity in USE to realize it. How do we build capacity for this kind of schooling and… and social change?”

I catch Julio’s eye. His mind is awash with ideas, but boiling them down is not always easy for him without a pen. I open my mouth and he closes his. My turn.

“Gentlemen, here’s what I would suggest: what I’ve learned from history is that we are a story-telling species, and story-starved at that. Our livelihood – our very survival – depends on being a part of stories and the ability to create new ones that give us purpose, meaning, direction and, most of all, connection. They require listeners and tellers, singers and writers, even actors and designers. They build communities of questioning and care. Stories provoke dialogue and build relationships. They make us wise and wary of what we think we know. Stories also need other stories to survive so they know when to adapt and when to stand firm. We must tell our stories – stories that matter and that we believe in – so that we can know our past, present and future possibilities.

That is where we need to start and return if MEATS is going to have substance and make a meaningful impact in the lives of most people. Just touting MEATS for the sake of the economy… or progress… or our entertainment demands is not the same thing as a story; it’s an excuse. A faceless one meant to hold our heads down, keep us busy or depressed…or both.”
“Lightening,” I hear Julio whisper.

Then, Edwin’s cane tap, tap, tapping excitedly on the ground.

“Yes, yes, that’s it. Hah ha! Stories… a means to organize, affirm our diversity, our dissent… our unity. An alternative to standardization and empty MEATS rhetoric. Magnificent young people! On all things our decisions should depend! Now come, let me break bread with you and your friends. Tell me more about this Hilltop… the people, I mean. Tell me the stories… I want to record them. Salvage all we can from what was lost. Forgive me, but I feel like I am somewhere I have not been since I was a boy…”
Chapter 22: Blinking and Believing

Zora put on quite a show for Edwin and the rangers as the snow came down steadily and quiet on the ground above us. A nice send-off.

Tomorrow Winnie and I start preparing for re-entry. Holliday, Hope, Zora, Jazzy, Keiko and Huckleberry bound for the new settlement. They were bound and determined once the rangers found Anson’s party fifty miles north of where Hilltop used to be. Fish and Pearl were with him, along with ten students, including Sales and a lot of the younger kids from the sounds of it. They have already welcomed new students and teachers into their midst, although more out of necessity than choice. Other people driven out when the druglords made their run. Edwin is supplying them with clothing and basic tools as per their request, nothing high-tech that could be picked up by drones and put a target on their back. Anymore than any of us already have.

Jazzy and Holliday have taken the younger kids to their dormitories. Just two of us now. Fire burning in the hearth of the Underground. A room I have come to love nearly as much as Dr. Compao’s office, reminiscent of it too. This large secret room beneath the Center’s courtyard has been a place for stories and healing with Edwin and his Knights. Even Holliday managed a few smiles here at Zora’s antics or at Hope laughing at them. Hope squealing with laughter at
Zora’s impressions of Hilltop teachers tonight is something I don’t want to forget, something that will keep me focused. While we still ache, remembering fallen or missing friends, we do so together and with moments of frivolity. Stories and games with children around a fire—hilltop can exist anywhere. I hope.

I realize Winnie is studying me while my mind wanders in the flames.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” she asks with a kind smile.

“Yes. This is what I had always dreamed about. By having people I learned to depend on – who depended on me – Hilltop made me question that dream, and yet, in the end, it strengthened my resolve. It quenched a burning thirst for me. I don’t fear the flames anymore because I bring more water with me than I could ever hope to drink in. I have new reasons… new ways to resist. How ‘bout you?
Any second thoughts?”

She bursts into laughter, eyes brimming and streaking, “thousands, but I know there is no one better suited to stopping the machine that tore our friends a part.”

“Win, if it’s not what you want…”
“I didn’t say that... I know what I want, but I’m afraid it will endanger everyone I care about... everyone I have left.”

“Were all endangered,”

“More like at-risk.”

“It’s because I’m a C-grade isn’t it?” I attempt to flirt.

“No Julio! I’m saying that because caring about others makes us that way.” She leans from her red-backed chair, shaking her head and blushing.

She’s been so restrained since we arrived. I can feel her energy and excitement to see me, her care and concern too; but she won’t make a move that would encourage me to make a decision I wouldn’t otherwise make. I don’t think she wants extreme circumstances to dictate what either of us think we feel. Maybe it’s something else. Still, I think there’s a kind of love there, even if the word has never crossed her lips to me. Then there’s Holliday...

“So you guys gonna kiss er whut?”
My heart stop a beat. I bolt upright. “What the hell?!?” I turn and look behind the couch – only a long end table. I walk around it to find Huckleberry – Huckleberry, not Holliday, thank god – lying straight below the table, motionless except for one hand raised slowly painting an imaginary image on its underbelly.

“I thought you went to bed with the others?”

“Nope. Slept ‘ere da other night. Kinda like a reel nice schoolhouse an’ Place Mat all rolled up inta one down here, ya know.”

“Or a kiva…” I offer, remembering Fish’s story.

“Needs sum rockin’ chairs… an’ windows and sum fresh air, but it’s pretty good all things considering. It’s kinda like sumwhar Nettie’d would read ta us ‘til reel late…words jis’ hummin’ ‘er chest and flowin’ outer mouth, smooth as da glass top uv un icy pon’, yeah kno? Anyhow, if ya’ll wanna kiss go ‘head, don’ bother me none unless yeah make sum kinda gross noises with it er sumthin’. Don’t need ta hear no lips smackin’, kay? “

Winnie is nearly as red as the chair, one hand on her forehead shielding her eyes, lips pursed.
“Huckleberry, you… I, look, we’re going to miss you. We miss Nettie too. If you want to read a book in here, just say it, you’re not bothering us. We were just talking.”

Winnie looks up, lips sucked in, forehead crinkled up, nodding softly…sadly.

“I wunt what’s in da walkin’ stick. I wanna hear what we wrote. An’ I wanna look at that crazy plant wun ya brung with ya too.”

“Sure, Huckleberry…. the Schoolhouse stash never would have made it without you. You know that, right? And it’s not going to grow again without you either. I’m sending the original stash back with you guys. I could ask Edwin to make a copy of the Voynich manuscript to send back with you too if you want?”

“Yeah, that’d be awright.”

“You want to come out from under the table for this? We could all sit on the couch and read them together.”

Winnie joins in, “Huckleberry, there is one piece of pie left, if you’d like it.” She didn’t just… I give her a feigned glare. That last piece had my name on it, even if the berries here have a lot less taste.
Instantly the child becomes a prairie dog, head poking above the table.

“I don’t need ya gittin’ all touchy, but da pie, sounds, well, it sounds jis’ brilllyent if ya as’ me.” Huckleberry shoots me a wily grin.

The pie is slowly savored in front of me as I read. Poem after poem - from past and present students and teachers at Hilltop - until they pull us into them and wrap us in a quilt of quantum leaps and connections.

Huckleberry’s poem is one of them, one that Nettie helped with, one I have never seen nor copied in my journal. My poem is there as well. Winnie reads it with conviction. We rotate readings until we’ve read them all, ending with “The Race,” a poem Winnie helped write with me, Miguel, Clarissa, Nettie, and Anson this summer after debating the ideas in Martin Luther King Jr.’s letters and speeches. We put those studies in conversation with other stories, experiences, and histories we knew to question and build a common language.

“Huckleberry, I don’t know about you but this poem reminds me...like Anson...that we are always on the move, that we must keep running, but not on the same old paths, always an eye out for new ones or ones less traveled. Nettie knew that...that’s why she kept a record of our thinking and the connections we made by
reading, writing, and talking with each other. It’s why we’re headed in
tomorrow and you guys are headed back out. There are new trails to be blazed
and new runners to welcome…whatever speed they’re at and whatever
environment they find themselves in.”

“Freedom Runs?”

I nod. “Freedom Runners, conductors to Hilltop… to Nettie, Eva, Rachel, the
others.”

Huckleberry turns to the fire, as if looking for something in it. Winnie and I
exchange glances. It has been a long day. Holliday’s distance. The planning. The
dinner…stories…performances.

“Firs tyme I came ta Hilltop. I’uz scared uh ‘er. I din’t like Eva neither. No reason
bein’ dat sweet I thought unless ya tryin’ ta git sumthin from sum wun. I hated
‘em. Really. Longer ah stayed… I saw that hate wuz fer me…dat dey wuz
pretty…brillyent… an’ I wuz jis an angry liddle kid, a roamer taut not ta trust
any’un, git what ya can cuz no tellin’ when ya be there agin. Jis bleedin’ inside,
bleedin’ all over, but didn’t have no eyes ta see it. Not ‘til they kept show’en up
day afer day, intersted in whut I had ta say, whar I come from… whar I want ta
go. Thing is, I may never know whar I want to go, but I know sumthin’. I know whut I’m takin’ with me.”

Huckleberry pulls out a little brown leather shoe with traces of red dye. The shoe of the little girl who used to imagine herself like Dorothy and visit the land of Oz as often as she could. I hope she’s there now.

Eva’s shoe.

“Holliday sed she’d help me look. Look fer dem an’ the others missin’. Says we won’t stop ’til we find ‘em or I call it. That’s what she sez. Sez dese boxes and cakes we’re stuffed into here ain’t no place fer kids. Says no use swimmin’ upstream fer us. Look whut happen ta Sockeye.”

“Huckleberry, it’s fair for Holliday to feel that way, but we need people to swim upstream too. Try and get to the source of this madness. Try to learn to be children again, not force children to be frustrated adults. Bring back childhood – a time of dreaming, discovery, and divergent thought. You guys taught me that. And our world needs that… inside and out.”

Huckleberry is staring into my eyes, with a face hard as stone.
“Thank you, Whoolio. You are my friend.”

“And you’re mine.”

“I hope you come back. I hope ya bowth come back. I know Holliday an’ the rest feel dat way too. She jis ain’ good wit gudbyes, dat’s all. Wul, dat an’ she ain’ never wanna be a birden on no one.”

We shake hands and then Winnie comes over and sneaks a quick hug from behind. Huckleberry wriggles free and runs for the door.

“Mmm mmm, dat pie wuz fine!”

Shoosht. The door slides open in an instant and Huckleberry disappears.

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She won’t engage.

Spends all of her time with the children. Taking a back seat. Watching and listening instead of taking charge. Holliday assures me that this will not always be the case when she returns.
“Naw, thar ain’ nuthin’ ta worry ‘bout. I jis’ don’ wanna forget where I been, where I came frum… carry it everyday, an’ da load jis got a lot heavier after det leveled Hilltop, das all. When it gets too hevvee, ya gotta sit down ‘n take uh rest. Watch da kids – dey won’t steer ya wrong. They show me we all got more ‘portant things ta do right now, like tryin’ ta fix suma dis mess da bes’ way we know. Fer me, I need outta here – back ta da trees. You an’ Winnie gotta go do right by yer families…by dat city ya come frum. Hope’s gonna a miss ya enough. She don’t need to see me doin’ it too.”

“You have done so much for both of us. Taught us to see parts of ourselves we didn’t know were there.”

“Ya ever jis wanna give yerself over to feelin’…. turn yer brain off awhile? ‘Member dat dere’s life even without no students an’ teachers, jis’ senses an’ moving, an’ uh whole lot else in dis world dat doesn’t care ‘bout us. Doin’ what we like, an we can get away wit actin’ dat way in da woods where wur a part uv da lan’, workin’ wit it – not stompin’ on it, pokin’ it, or fillin’ it wit sum kine uh toxin er a’nuther. Ya try to give yerself over ta feelin’ here… in dis place, wit all its flashin’ lights, an’ it’s all jis’ sad an’ selfish if ya turn yer brain off an’ jis try ta feel.”
“I don’t. To give myself over to feeling without reflection here is...is really dangerous. There are so many vices, so many walls...”

“Well don’ git trapped in dat maze, ‘kay? You an’ fancy pants take care uh each uther. Do whut ya need ta do an’ don’ ferget about us.”

“You’ll use Winnie’s old Eyes to stay in touch? Edwin said the adjustments the Knightwatch made on them should redistribute the signal to USE operations... uh, make you invisible.”

“Dere gonna be fer Hope an’ da uther kids. Dey needs ta know dis stuff, so dey can ducide fer demselves sum day whar dey wanna be. Whar dey wanna make a differnz. I’ll take uh peak every now a’gain. Meybe see whut y’all see.”

Shoosht.

Winnie holding Hope’s hand. Huckleberry at her other side, just beyond the doorway.

“It’s time?” I ask already knowing the answer.

“The Rangers are ready,” I can hear the shakiness in Winnie’s voice.
Hope lets go and I scoop her up in my arms. She throws her arms around me and buries her face and hair in my neck. A moment later, she pulls back, arms still around my neck and signs for a song.

“Kookaburra?”

She nods with a pensive smile. “Okay. You got it.”

I sing it as slow as I can, trying to feel each word form and leave. When I finish, she signs thank you.

“Thank you, Hope. Don’t grow up while I’m gone.”

She nods, and I put her down.

“Oh, and here, this is for you and Huckleberry to take back to the others.” I retrieve the green baton Dr. Compao once gave to me. I squat down on my haunches and offer it to her. “It’s the Schoolhouse Stash and a copy of that new species of cosmic sunflower… to light the way ahead.”
I open my eyes wide, eyebrows up, and undulate my arms as if I were that mesmerizing, mutant plant come alive, leaping off the pages of the Voynich manuscript towards the sun’s rays.

An embarrassed giggle for me in all my ridiculousness. She takes the baton and it pulls her arm down almost to the ground. She gives it a shake, and a firmer grip in the middle instead of on the end. She lifts it determinedly. I rub her head and watch Huckleberry suppress a smile and give me an eyeroll.


Winnie meets them at the door. “That day you hit me in the head. You saved my life. I never told you…”

“Save it, fancy pants, I may git tired uh teachin’ in da woods sum day an’ join da Knitewatch… maybe be a ranger an’ save yer ass again, so don’ go gittin’ ahead uh yerself.”

“Because you’re so good at following orders?” Winnie quips.
“Naw, cuz I’m so gud at given ‘em… weren’t ya jis complainin’ thar ain’t any women in da rangers? Gotta start sumwhar an’ I’d be da fittest wun uv um all.”

“Yes, you would. But teachers lead many lives… like students and rangers. I imagine you would do all of them well and each will likely make you better at the other. It’s not like you to sit still too long anyway.”

“Dat’s right, I’m uh Freedom Runner. Got places ta go, so if ya don’ mine…”

Winnie and Holliday exchange nods.

“Headache.”

“Snowstorm.”

Winnie crosses the threshold into the room as Huckleberry and Hope leave it. I raise my hand to wave goodbye. Holliday taps Huckleberry’s back and they turn to go down the hall. Hope, both hands now on the baton, looks back sweetly – as though posing for a photograph and hoping to take one at the same time – just before the door slides shut.

Shoosht.
Shoosht.

A little brown shoe, streaked red, left for us.
Chapter 23: Little Fingers

The waters are rising, fresh water and salty sea alike. Winter rains and wetness replacing the early snow. The storm’s winds pull the golden waters up and back, spilling the bodies below. Seas of human remains, lost to time and now only a brief glimpse revealing mass graves of slaves long forgotten or never known, deep below the surface – reminders of a species slowly exterminating itself beneath seemingly placid waters. A dream urging each of us to make a choice.

I have made mine.

Running among the dead does not scare me – something that needs to be done. It’s the living I’m worried about. How do I keep these moments of deep subconsciousness and conviction with me in my actions each day?

I know enough now to tread lightly on what we think we know, and respect just how much we really don’t. That we all build our lives on one faith or another…or many all at once and over time. Every educational discipline, like every profession, produces and perpetuates its mythology with borders that wall it with people into particular ages and places. To say this doesn’t necessarily make me a skeptic, but it does make me a scientist. So what is it that we’re willing to put our faith in? Which truths are we willing to stand up for? Why?
Examining the myths or stories we tell...believe in...cling to serve an important purpose in schooling as well as in organizing ourselves beyond it. But is that really enough to start a movement on? Teachers and students partnering in classrooms and partnering beyond school walls through stories of you, me, we, and the future.

What is it that this focus on people and processes offers?

For one, it invites particular stories, histories, experiences to come into contact with each other, as well as with the contexts and needs of the people who make up a particular community. A community of inquiry... of scientists, artists, educators, all. They build it as they converse and question.

For another, it provides the foundation of a community, one that occupies physical and emotional locations, even virtual ones... one that bridges the disciplinary divides we’ve devised, spanning space-time, land-sea, science-art... teaching-learning. Borrowing from past and future to make sense and meaning in the present, not unlike the dance of our subatomic particles.

Lastly, it is one that requires consistent and creative forums for people of all ages and backgrounds to come together to talk – eat beside and across from each other – for the purpose of exploration, not capital gain or technocratic reproduction. People and processes instead of predetermined outcomes and prescriptions for how to achieve them is a very different way of doing business... and education.
But developing public forums like this – that support learning, care, and meaning-making – seems as daunting as waters threatening to crash down or dry up entirely. The system is heavily corporatized, so image conscious and outcome obsessed, so saddled with slick Willies above and submerged bodies below. How to get people out of their suits and safe routines? How to wake them up? Ask them to roll up their sleeves and get dirty in this messy thing called education, on which so much depends?

I must run with courage and as much honesty of purpose as possible given current constraints. To enter a wasteland on false pretenses seems to send the wrong message to the bodies or minds that may be left. My name is Winter Weaver and I survived the Wilds and learned from them.

After greeting with hugs and tears, Dad’s been agitated, uncustomarily uncomfortable, in his own home. Not just because I asked him to house Julio, in the basement no less, until Midwest opens in January for spring semester. No, something else, something he actually regrets. He’s been present without actually being present since I stood my ground with him. His distance saddens. Mom and Will, though, have been very excited to spend time, hear stories, and ask questions. Mom just keeps repeating that she is so proud of me, and Will offers to do things he never used to—making and bringing me food at all hours, like he’s not sure I’m real and need to eat to prove it. He may be lingering to because he seems fascinated by Julio and tales of C-grade survival. Not that anyone knows Julio by his real name. Not that anyone will for a longtime.
We’ve been fitted for new Eyes and Links. Ponce Lucas lives once more. Their weight feels so much heavier now and we’re both quick to remove them at first opportunity. At least the Knightwatch Eye-scramble allows us feeds and freedoms that precious few have ever known. Today they feel particularly heavy.

I have set my new Eyes to “transparent,” a setting few use, for my meeting with Dr. Penelope Janus. A professor of MEATS CIM and Articulation, and someone who Edwin describes as being a “subtle” supporter of Dr. Compaño’s work. She also serves as an educational policy advisor to Governor Day. Ed says she’s really hard to get a read on, but her past is not unlike many of his Knightwatch rangers or hackers. A B-grade orphan, who climbed out of her hole on the lower Westside near the border of C-4. Apparently, she had a penchant for drawing and design from a young age and plenty of time to realize it with little to no social life growing up. She holds a stoic countenance quite well. I know the look. It’s reminiscent of Julio before Hilltop. Of Ponce, but Ponce doesn’t look like Ponce anymore.

Still, Julio cannot lead with his true name, his real self. To tell his story openly and honestly comes at too great a risk, so we must be satisfied to work inside and out of the system at the same time. Not just above it, but deep below it too. Julio’s mask is integral to his safety and the safety of the project, at least in the short term. All of Ed’s precautions and planning made re-entry possible, but it is our ideas, words, and actions
that will create and sustain a public trust and presence in teaching. Ed understands that he
doesn’t like what he sees…even though he’s been a part of it.

He’s a strange concoction of old and new, really. Taking in people who aren’t going to be
missed, orphans who finally get a family of sorts. Kind in a way, but it comes with an
expectation that each must share his vision or purpose of promoting the arts at all costs…and
his version of the arts. He uses acting with his adoptees to help them channel their
pain and learn the discipline needed to work in the Knightswatch. Mutual trust is built as
smaller projects are done well, which in turn lead to bigger jobs that involve more
visibility and risk-taking. Not surprisingly though, Ed has refused to walk the walk with
women educators, just as with his rangers. Their only options are as hackers behind
closed doors or actresses on a very social stage. Either way, quarantined to a life of
screens and machines and the men behind them. He has promised to make changes–
learn from the Hilltop accounts and what Julio and I have pressed him for in this
undertaking. We have had more reason to believe him since he delivered Julio’s family to
safety.

An electrical short was the official cause of what burned his house to the ground and of
their supposed deaths. Papa Luchar and Aunt Luci and their cache of books whisked
away with Ed’s special effects just before the fire erupted in the middle of the night. They
are kind people, tired and creased from survival in C-8, but brimming with happiness and
excitement at landing at the Knight Space Center and seeing the last of their family line
alive and still dreaming. Ed arranged for Papa Luchar to get treatments for his lungs and
cancer, but he waived them off. Saying he will die in the dirt, not on a concrete floor. He and Luci have been taken to the new Hilltop Sanctuary School. Julio has promised a visit a soon as he is able. I know it wasn’t easy for him leave them again, but they supported his decisions, asking only that he “follow his heart with his head.” I am glad he chose re-entry. I do not want to have to traverse damp dead earth alone anymore.

As Freedom Runners, we each have a role to play and corresponding code-name with the Knightswatch. I am “Lightening” and Julio is the “Conductor” on our runs. I distract or inspire with the connections I have in A districts and at MU. Meanwhile he organizes interested citizens at a new clandestine facility built and maintained by Knightwatch below the sewers of the B-8, C-4 intersection. Julio convinced Ed to rename it “The Kiva.” If citizens choose to become part of the New Underground, they are taken there and fitted with the same Eye-scrambling nanotech that is clipped imperceptibly to the inside frame of our Eyes. It allows a secure connection to Knight’s shadow network without detection by Hal Securities.

The media has been both a blessing and a curse in our organizing. Since we were “coincidentally” found by a medical cruiser along the superhighway, we have been hounded by reporters and Eye requests. Many we take begrudgingly to help get the word out about our survival in the Wilds and the games that we supposedly created to aide in teaching them. How we made peaceful contact. Our story has soared, capturing the public imagination, even trending on the top 10 lists of most sites. Not as high as Serena Cisneros and a few other celebrities, but not far off. However, it significantly hinders
moving around surreptitiously. I’ve taken the brunt of the attention as we agreed so that Ponce is less recognizable. Part of his re-entry story is that he is traumatized and timid about speaking in public, but that will change if we are able to build capacity.

One person at a time, starting with Dr. Janus.

She is polite in only the most formal sense, guarded. Hair cropped close to her head, square framed Eyes, a thickly-padded and angular pantsuit. She dresses and acts like man…has gotten ahead in a man’s world in doing so, but she seems capable of more…

“And what makes you think I can help you, Ms. Weaver?”

“MU and Governor Day would look heartless, not helping to get the STORYS project off the ground…in honor of Dr. Compao and the others who were lost, I mean.”

A slight tick of her head does not break the steely gaze I feel from behind her tinted Eyes.

“Plus, I would hate to imagine how much that might hurt polling numbers… get people talking if word got out that USE Midwest won’t support its first-found survivors of the Wilds?”

“How nice to hear of your concern for Governor Day. So you would like us… to do what exactly?”
“Support the Student - Teacher Organizing Renaissance for Youth-collaborative Schools …STORYS as a revision to MURKI. Work with us…students and other educators to craft policy around it.”

“I see. And you think you’re ready for that after your traumatic experiences? You’re still so…thin.”

“Yes, I need to get involved in something now that I’m back. Help support…our progress.”

“And your idea of progress is in the file you just shared with me?”

“Yes.”

“Is it progress if we go back in time? Revisit more turbulent times.”

“I guess that depends on your definition of progress. The current one doesn’t suit me so well after seeing what was possible beyond Walls.”

“Walls your father built, isn’t that correct?”
“He and I have had that conversation. Walls my father helped to build and continues to maintain. But I am not my father.”

“Let’s say MU backs this and Governor Day is moved. That this is allowed to get off the ground as a kind of boutique project. Perhaps just at the new Mideast as it is being built. Would you be content with this?”

“I think it’s a start…you don’t think Midwest is ready for how human the Wilds really are?”

Her gaze shifts to somewhere beyond the windows in her office.

“It doesn’t matter what I think. People don’t want me for my ideas, they want me for my loyalty… and confidentiality.”

“I want you for your care.”

“Hmm, and what makes you think I have this kind of capacity?”

“Because you’ve been a committed educator, and because everyone has a story to tell…to research deep within themselves, and connect with those of others and this world we share. Reset priorities, away from products, and around people. A people first future…that’s why.”
“Not everyone has a story they want to share, Ms. Weaver… or that others necessarily want to hear.”

I’m not getting through. Not really. Does she feel too complicit? Too cynical? Am I coming on too strong? I need her to see where my convictions are coming from…perhaps she will reciprocate. A take a deep breath, thinking of Zora.

“Dr. Janus, what would you say to a story about USE drones trying to kill me and Ponce Lucas? Do you think that would sell? Make people want to hear more, share their own instances of injustice and create a community of care?”

She leans forward. “What are you talking about?”

Here’s the opening. I lean in, “What I haven’t been… yet.”

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The Tower district is overwhelmingly tall, thick, and insular. Sheen on slick walls and the hair of Hammerheads everywhere, stepping out briskly in their suits with smug, superficial smiles, Eyes wide shut. I see what Julio does. I see it all too well, and I cannot turn it off even when I want to. So much rapid running from meeting to meeting for no reason other than to keep the walls up and the lavish homes and apartments superbly

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stocked. To feel special just like everyone else who has been properly certified and credentialed. Everyone who can afford it.

He’s right to fear this place, what this place has done with the human mind.

Statehouse Tower at 26 Broadway and Wall is now right across the street.

“Julio? Are you sure you want to go in with me?”

“I wasn’t going to let you go alone. Not when I have clearance for the first time in my life. It may be just my heart talking, but I want to see them up close…enter this grand illusion for the truth.”

He seems so out of place here. We both do, but Julio especially. He’s worn his C-grade uniform to be ironic and make the politicians and businessmen as uncomfortable as possible. The coverage of our story has given us an armor of sorts, but we don’t really know how much it can withstand in an assault.

“Dr. Janus said she hoped we would both come, but Ed was really against it.”

“Knight-errant I suppose you could say we are then?” He raises a dark brow with a playful smile as we cross the street. “They’ve had our names mixed up for weeks now anyhow.”
“Oh, so I’m supposed to be the Conductor?” I offer back.

“You are… the real conductor, one of a new generation committed to child…."

“Ms. Winter! Ah, there you are?!”

My blood runs cold as winter rain hearing a voice I have heard speak and echoed a trillion times before, but never to me directly. Emile Goldhammer is walking down the mighty steps of the Statehouse, bracketed by four imposing-looking Hammerheads, arms spread wide as though I were his long-lost friend.

“Ms. Winter, it is. In the flesh. How lucky I am to get to meet such a celebrity.”

He seems almost genuine. Too genuine. I feign a smile of excitement and surprise, and move forward, up on to the bottom steps, to shake his outstretched hand.

“Whatever brings you to the Towers?

“A field trip. We’re going to be meeting with Governor Day.”

He cocks his head to the side, “We?”
I feel the air constrict in my chest and turn to see two Hammerheads blocking Julio from following me. The street shimmers behind him.

At that moment, hands grab him from every side. I see fire blaze in his eyes and he shouts, “Winnie…Winnie, listen to me, if there is hope…” And a hand cups his mouth as he is dragged to the ground. Hundreds of boots and gold uniforms surround him. For an instant, I see his arm break the waves of the golden domes crashing down on him as he tries to wriggle free. “Hope!” One more word, his fingers outstretched. Then they disappear, along with the rest of him. Swept away by a sea of gold.

“Sounds marvelous, Ms. Weaver. Enjoy the sun and these soaring heights. Oh, and do give my regards to your father.” He takes his last few steps to the street where a gold Hummercraft awaits. A moment later, he and his henchmen are gone.

I am frozen in time. Long after the hornets and Hammerheads. Thunder rumbling in the distance. I stand alone and cold at the crossroads of massive towers of ignorance and ice. To look up is futile. Only worry about what’s right in front of me. But that’s what they want. Look straight ahead, don’t deviate. I feel myself walking – finally — to the empty cement where my partner once stood. And there something small and brown lying near where he was swept up.

An old wallet?
I make my way across the silent sidewalk to where it lies. I feel myself lean down and pick up a soft brown shoe, stained red once more. My head tilts to a tinted sky.
Voice

by Frenchele Hodge

Voice
To have a voice is everything
Without it where do you go?
What do you be?

Voice is everything
The voice you have use to spread it
To have a voice means to show everyone what you can do with it

Voice
Voice

What do you think voice means?
You say it’s this and that
But I’m going to tell you the real meaning of voice

Voice represents others when they can’t represent themselves
Voice means you speak when no one else wants to step up
Voice is power
Voice is you and me

It’s your choice to have it our not

But what I choose is…

Voice
Voice
Voice
Voice
**Talking Back**

An I-Say by Adama Diakhate

They say I am shy
I say
I am not

They say I only talk when I am with a few people
I say
I know how to speak in front of the world
So
Don’t judge me by the way I talk

They say I am shy
I say
I am not

They say I’m not
A person with courage to speak
I say
Stop discouraging me

Instead
I’m going to use my voice
To speak loud and clear
Back Talk
An I-Say by Huckleberry

They say I am a hillbilly, a ridge runner
I say
I am from the mountains

They say I am dirty, lazy, and backwards
I say
I know how to survive
So
Don’t judge me by what you think you see.

They say I don’t care about my education
I say
I’m learning every day, but only have patience for good teachers

They say I’m not smart
I say
Stop judging me

Instead
I’m going to use my head
To find my voice and say
“I was here and this is where I am now.”
### The Race

*by Hilltop Freedom Writers*

We have a dream
one day we shall live as one
cure disease
that’s why this race
is being run

We’re charting a new course
for an old race
And some items we coulda used
The first few times around

Here’s a mirror
for acceptance
of your reflection
so you might affirm mine
along the route we run

You see
racers are racists too
diseased and degrading
split wide open
like a gunshot from the inside

See that in the mirror?

What lies underneath
inside coursing
toxic blood river flow
“makin’ it rain”
inside the body and beyond
soaking white robes
green money
yellow drinks of apathy

Here’s a towel
for the drenching
Sober up and see
the race you’re in

---

Imagine
how you dream
beyond a race and disease
you don’t see so well
Wondering why it stirs and surges
and clouds and shrouds
the turn ahead

Shoulder to shoulder now

Do you hear me
Do you feel my pace
Do you hear my feet
Do you feel that heat
We share

This race isn’t going to end
but it’s worth the pain
to you find your pace
and understand your place
and that *you must keep running*

For races mean nothing
without people to race
*against* was nothing new
But *with*
now there’s possibility

To each a new role (or a few) –
rabbits and risk-takers
rabble-rousers and re-constructionists
from the ripe to the ruined
Racers running
for a “new discovery”
In human dignity
And this is why we run
A race without end
Connections
by Hilltop Freedom Writers

So we thought we knew what we were getting into
A group of students and teachers
and student-teachers and teacher-students
We thought we could play
games for goodness
Sound off for social justice

Thing is, we didn’t know
We were saving each other
and a school
From losing its self.
Not just one school
A school of life
of Humanity
Our school is one of the arts and of activity
of facing one another
And talking and traveling,
timidly and tentatively writing
And of taking a stand...
New possibilities taking shape
And struggling to command
A power we hadn’t felt before
Or maybe we had
Some primordial need to connect
To tell stories, listen, and reflect
Some journey tumbling through this age
And space time
And here it stuck in our games and play
On a windy day at Hilltop

And the weird thing is
That on this October night
Our games don’t feel like games
They feel like might
A powerful speech about voice
One that echoes and bellows with delight –
We come from mountains and the rolling hills,
From dark night and winter chills
the city’s hard concrete
From not having enough food to eat
We come from pies and big skies
Fresh fruit and fried meats.
We came from Doors of No Return and Gates of Redemption still
We came for America
Just over that hill
A peak of hope we climbed
Side by side
Silly little teachers and students at play
Which was which not sure you can say
And we might just yet
Save the world
Learning (and teaching) this way
Seasoning
By Julio Milintica Luchar Tiłloc

I was born
Into a grey springtime
Eyes glazed bleak
Numb like city walls

Consciousness
Lulled to sleep and dreams
Yield fast in thick cement

Summer spills golden rays
on the grey and grim
false light, beaconing in the fog

Consciousness
Cut and combed
Vainly paraded high

But sinuous summer
stains sepia and slow
To a stink, humid hot

Cities pave and puff and smoke

Yet for a few
a moment...a season
Blows in before all is senseless and stale

Wind brings a song
To the mundane and the motherless

Now is the chance
To flash with brilliance,
A short time, to show one’s colors
And sing with others

Now is the time for brilliance
Before being whipped away
by a winter wind in the snow,
Finding a flame from the Fall

Now is the time for brilliance...
Epilogue

Spark and Flame:

STORYS, Education, and Our Future

A Proposal by Winnie Weaver

Dedicated to Julio Milintica Luchar-Tlaloc and the students and teachers of Hilltop

“Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” ~ W.B. Yeats

STORYS = Student—Teacher Organizing Renaissance for Youth-collaborative Schools. It reframes accountability by involving students and teachers in the design and negotiation of curriculum each year and in each class. They collaborate in the teaching of that curriculum and its evaluation. Storytelling of these processes – the designs and negotiations, the teaching and learning journeys, and their relevance to community concerns on local, global, academic, and professional levels – become the basis for evaluation, reflection, and change. Collaboration among the students, and between students and teachers, to engage in issues impacting them, their communities, and related disciplines allows for personal interests, imagination, diversity, and grassroots organizing to drive learning, not State and MNC business interests, standardization, and technocratic practices. Stories are at the heart of these processes because they are what build relationships that support learning and give meaning to education. They inspired learning long before there were schools, and they will help inspire us into the future. They help us reclaim childhood and reaffirm our democracy in a diverse world. The STORYS project is both a reminder and a goal to support the ideas, negotiations, exploration, and learning of students and teachers for a more hopeful and just society.
It is my contention that STORYS should not simply be an alternative; but that it become a part of all of our public schools and policy. For it is not only publically accessible, but publically driven in a way that reflects common roots for humanity—a time to gather round the fire, speak, listen, and study the flames and dancing shadows, and then emerge from that place with new stories and questions that make life worth living. Perhaps worth loving.

STORYS can and should take many forms. Here is glimpse into mine based on my experiences in the Wilds as well as within our Walls. As a student-teacher, my education is one of sparks and flames. By this I mean...

1. Sparks – connections must be allowed, made, and supported for learning to matter. But it can take time to make sparks. Collaboration and latent learning need to be affirmed within our system as children—natural scientists—experiment with their world and with each other. It takes patience to learn how to make sparks, and even more to cultivate them into flames.

2. Flames – the inspiration and intensity present in all that we do. They strike and burn with an excitement to explore, critically reflect and act on what is found or considered, and a consistent ethic of care in teaching and learning with others. Two new “I’s” in this age – one’s that served us well in the past – and that reframe how we evaluate each other and our work, as an alternative to a relentless focus on intellectual capacity and output in standardized tests.
A Call for Other Proposals:

We are at the dawn of a new age in America and in the world. With the instability of financial markets at home and abroad, especially for the people of B and C grade districts, the world must confront, discard, and redefine systems and systematic thinking that place the greed and hopes of a few far above those working below. We have an opportunity for lasting change to come about in a variety of public places, most notably schools. As a country, and as a world, we have been brought to our knees for too long by a rabid hunger to consume and pursue in the name of progress. In the name of economic progress, not personal, familial, or communal ones.

My fear is that USE-America has completely lost its identity—and more importantly—its soul. For too many years, we have wanted to believe that we can and should fix routines in a world that was changing drastically and dramatically. Economic routines, religious routines, political routines, and what has far too long been considered an extension of those—education routines—have plodded (if not stumbled blindly) along, patting each other on the back, reinforcing one another’s pride and confidence, compounded ignorance and shortsightedness, and above all – righteousness. The status quo became the expectation or safety net that all four systems employed. Finding new ways to manipulate the masses, the numbers, the statistics that confronted the pillars of American safety and comfort became commonplace (i.e. Leave No Child Behind). Our methods didn’t really change—they simply got a facelift. We became more discriminating as a society and I mean that in its most negative sense. We quietly promoted an inflated sense of self and material worth.
Output and end product are all that matter in our economic, religious, political, and educational routines. Taking the time to consider, reflect, wonder, inspire, and revel in the beginnings and processes of things has been devalued and misunderstood for too long. For the end products and outputs so many of us worship – or at the very least live by – have left us morally, spiritually, and intellectually bankrupt.

So here we are on our knees from pain or from prayer. Whether we begin to rise renewed and reinvigorated or whether we collapse enervated and empty, oblivious to the ingenious possibilities protected and promoted in our country’s original Constitution and Declaration of Independence remains to be seen.

With every new politician comes the promise of a new vision—one touting change but rarely modeling it, or enough of it, in practice. As someone who has been profoundly disappointed by what America’s public schools focus on, attempt to measure, and unwittingly convey to our youth, I hope to do my part in reframing the nature, purpose, and importance of our educational system. It is my sincere hope that we take the time, as the waters rise and the storms break, to look at the multitude on their knees on either side of us and not just stay intent (if not content) on what lies before us. For in taking the time to acknowledge and connect with those on either side of us, we may rise as a global family, with global stories, and stand again. This time together as we contemplate with caution, compassion, and courageous towards the horizon, no matter how shrouded it appears to be.

My role and goal for the American states is to illuminate what makes education meaningful and purposeful in an era Technocratic practice. I locate the purpose of American education as not beholden or subservient to our economic, religious, and political institutions,
systems, and routines, but as a unique institution that celebrates the stories of freedom, inclusion, perseverance, problem-solving, open-mindedness, questioning, dissent, and adaptability. There were once noble and epic quests associated with our education system...that dream should be rekindled as we are forced to reconsider our ways in the face of declining national and world populations and traditional markers of progress.

Teaching and learning from students who many would label “wild” or “C grade” I have realized the need and power for such stories. I have also discovered that America’s spirit, its undying optimism for what is possible, still exists—my partners in learning beyond the Wall have shown me that there is a soul worth fighting for, but it needs to be reawakened. We are tired, hurt, and hungry for a meal that took time, hands, and heart to make. Our culture reflects this hunger but it’s been redirected – this need for salvation and survival of the human soul. No Eye-books sell better than those of epic proportion. Epic narratives give meaning, hope, purpose, and perspective to life—education can and should do the same. Therefore, I propose that school return to its inception—its roots in story, both mythical and real. Students who are disenfranchised, don’t test well, or don’t act socially appropriate by U.S.E. standards are not lost causes and should not be discarded or left to their own devices simply because they don’t conform to the way our economic, educational, and legal systems may want. They are still a part of America’s children and future (whether many want to acknowledge their impact on society or not); they deserve more time, attention, and resources, not less. If anything, they are often waiting to be amazed or proven wrong about their beliefs about our schools and society. In the most important ways, these students are our barometers of just how unsuccessful we have been at educating all of our children.
My energies are focused on solving the inequities and ineptitude of much of mainstream k-12 schooling. I will propose that identifying, using, and creating school narratives, which emphasize journeys, new beginnings and new questions over a specific destination, is what will unite us. What will give us a greater sense of self and the world, and ultimately give us the skills to be successful in professional, personal, and civic endeavors. Someone very special to me, gave me a poem by Emma Lazarus written in America’s past, but with hope for its future. It begins: Give me your tired, your poor, /Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,/ The wretched refuse of your teeming shore./ Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me./I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

We need those words, that philosophy, for ourselves right now, for we have, in many ways, become the oppressors of our own freedom. We must again embrace what Lazarus describes as “A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame / Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name / Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand / Glows world-wide welcome...” We must glow again as a country, with a fire, a determination and excitement to lift each other up, inspect, question, and celebrate our different stories. In the process, we create the sparks and flames to life-long loves that will light the way ahead.

Now is the time for brilliance.
To join Winnie, save Julio, and expand Hilltop, please consider getting involved with the following organizations…

Education:
Freedom Writers Foundation
National Writing Project
National Council of Teachers of English
National Underground Railroad Freedom Center
Center for Holocaust & Humanity Education
UC Center for Hope & Justice Education
UC Action Research Center
Free Minds, Free People
Highlander Research Center
Your state’s Humanities Council

Media:
National Public Radio
National Geographic
Discover Magazine

Advocacy:
The Sierra Club
The National Park Service
The National Endowment for the Arts
Union of Concerned Scientists
The Environmental Protection Agency
Section Five

Reflections on Process of Interpretation, Writing, & Revision

On Interpretation

*I can only answer the question, “What am I to do?” if I can answer the prior question “Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?”* ~Alasdair MacIntyre

Before writing about the processes I explored and developed, I need to first clarify them. The following six stages of analysis were not always distinct – as the creation of notes on possible trajectories for the dystopian story and its characters undergirded each stage. The stages included:

*Stage One:* I interviewed each participant and took handwritten notes during the interviews and wrote memos after they concluded which included a fieldpoem related to change (e.g., a haiku) and six-word story (inspired by Ernest Hemingway and the Race Card Project) to get at the big ideas I was hearing from them. These are also activities I teach with to help students synthesize complex texts (or their difficulties with them) and make those texts more accessible.

*Stage Two:* After transcription, I listened to each interview a second time to make corrections on interview transcripts. I then created table to display interview questions and responses by each participant in an Excel database. I gave a copy of each transcript to its appropriate source. Then, asking for corrections or
additions, I shared my initial fieldpoems and six-word stories on each interview with the appropriate participant (via a printed copy) and conducted a structured ethical reflection activity at the 2013 Hughes Freedom Writers’ writing retreat. Participants were made aware at the retreat and via an email follow-up that they were welcome to submit a poem or letter detailing any theme we had explored or what the Hughes Freedom Writers has meant to them in their education to be a part of the writings from the fictionalized school – Hilltop – in 2084.

Stage Three: I conducted theme identification by color-coding responses focusing on the schooling histories/stories, values, concerns, and questions of each participant. The order of theme coding by interview was Adama, Frenchele, Karissa, Joyce, Chet, and Rich, which was not the order they were interviewed in, but was done to start with student voices and move out in the analysis. During theme identification, associations and connections were charted separately in comment boxes in the margins.

Stage Four: I re-read all participant responses related to identified themes and created a table for each participant to organize and display their responses according to theme. The tables included brief notes about each participant’s positionality, including my own. For example:

Adama -- 19, male, junior in h.s., Senegalese, moved to U.S. in m.s.

Frenchele -- 18, female, junior in h.s., urban multicultural upbringing
Karissa -- 18, female, senior in h.s., urban African-American upbringing

Joyce -- 40’s, female, urban h.s. teacher, rural white upbringing

Chet -- 60’s, male teacher educator-professor, white, rural upbringing with urban teacher preparation

Rich -- early 30’s, community educator, rural and urban upbringing

Mark -- mid 30’s, teacher-teacher educator, white, rural college town upbringing in multicultural family.

I then cross-checked each participant’s responses, which were now grouped thematically in tables, with my handwritten notes during the interview process.

Stage Five: Using the thematic tables by participant, I engaged in in-source and cross-source theme analysis. The connections and tensions that emerged alerted me to the need for new categories of analysis in each table, ones that focused on repeated and emphasized ideas, words, and phrases to identify frequently used and potentially important language for each source. The website, Wordle, assisted in identifying frequency of terms (as only participant responses were entered). I cross-checked those terms with the associations I charted in the margins related to important ideas and key words in the interviews during the second and third stages of analysis. The ways in which the participants referred to themselves and the HFW group required a new column in participant tables as did the key terms and metaphors they used. Once those were identified and paired with the responses to each theme, I wrote another round of memos with fieldpoems and six
word stories on the updated thematic tables. I cross-checked those with other
HFW artifacts (i.e., writing retreat, conference, and meeting writings) to build as
trustworthy a relationship as possible between the concerns of the group and story
being written. Then, I gave a copy of the thematic table I made along with its new
related fieldpoems and six-word stories to each participant to member-check with
the expressed wish for feedback, corrections, or additions.

Stage Six:
I created a table outlining twenty-four chapters of 2084 that would chronicle the
journey of two epic characters in a dystopian world, not unlike our own. I
consulted the tables I created to organize participant themes, stories, and
language, and put them in conversation with criteria for dystopian storytelling
(Sisk, 1997). I wrote the majority of the novel over six weeks in the summer of
2013, and then met with the Hughes Freedom Writers to updated them on the
novel and read excerpts collectively where they provided reader-response
feedback on the story, as per their structured ethical reflections. Participants were
made aware at this meeting and via an email that they were welcome to submit a
poem or letter detailing any theme we had explored or what the Hughes Freedom
Writers has meant to them in their education to be a part of the writings from the
fictionalized school – Hilltop – in 2084.

These processes allowed me to address my research questions by attending to the perspectives of
my participants about phenomena impacting them in education and provided the basis for
characters, landscapes, themes, and symbols in the 2084. The story itself became part of the process and the product of addressing the research questions. However, making explicit the processes that would lead to its creation and development, proved more challenging and required me to keep my teacher identity central in the research and interpretation process. Because access and understanding are driving concerns for me as a teacher, the tables, poems, and six-word stories I created provided both clarity and conciseness for the participants to comment on and keep, as well as for the ways in which I could access their concerns and convictions for the writing of 2084.

With guidance from Norman Denzin’s work on the interpretive process in qualitative inquiry, I was guided by the notion that research is “influenced by interpretive inquiry” of which there are three assumptions – 1) “in the world of human experience, there is only interpretation, 2) it is a worthy goal to attempt to make these interpretations available to others. By doing so, understanding can be created. With better understanding comes better applied programs addressing major social issues of the day.” 3) "all interpretations are unfinished and inconclusive" (1989). Because of the highly subjective and interpretative nature of this work (and acknowledged partiality) within action research (Tolman & Brydon-Miller, 2001), as well as in related circles of qualitative and practitioner inquiry (Pinar, 2012), then, interpretations of data had to be shared with Hughes Freedom Writers at each new stage of interpretation of their voices. This practice attends to trust and authenticity among the participants and for the study itself (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). These methodological guides address the research questions around educational partnerships for social justice because so many of them organized through metaphors and/or stories. These methods are grounded in the belief that “human beings live
storied lives” – that is, that stories are the way we make sense of the world and our experiences with it, as well as how we locate our ourselves in relation to those experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

*On Writing (through Teacher-Student-Writer-Researcher Identities)*

“If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees all things through narrow chinks of his cavern.” ~William Blake

2084 became a way of questioning what I think I know and feel about the current states of education in relation to the students and teachers I have sojourned with in urban, suburban, and rural educational contexts. The varying voices I carry with me into my interactions with students, teachers, and other educational leaders have led me to consider how best to highlight the importance of point of view (POV) and perspective taking. These are abilities that the teacher preparation program I am a part of has agreed are very important for our future teachers, as well as a part of each course I teach. While Winnie and Julio are our lenses to the future, many other characters speak for themselves, not simply through the two narrators. I spent hours developing dialogue that could echo voices of students and teachers as well as their relationships and the learning those relationships support. There are times where my training as a teacher educator and educational action researcher clouded, crowded, or interfered with the dialogue I was writing or with the narrators’ thoughts themselves. I created Eric Blare, not only to pay homage to George Orwell (whose real name was Eric Blair), but to stake a claim for a writer identity that could help cushion or quiet the noise and frustration I feel regarding many current trends in public education, something I study each day in my current position.
As a student, I have loved novels that teach history, language, and culture in ways that make me see their impact and possibilities in new ways. For these reasons, I included books or allusions to books in *2084* that were a formative part of my reading history, learning, and social justice orientations. The books that Julio and his family keep below the floorboards of their kitchen are literal and symbolic thanks to families who have cherished reading together. That the kitchen is a place for not only the acts of cooking, but of creation and care. Evaluating education and educational research is often conducted through business or medical models and metaphors that have been extended to educational contexts. The Luchar family kitchen, like Hilltop’s The Place Mat, is a place to reclaim healthier, more community-based metaphors that can help us talk about and evaluate learning and teaching differently. The role of food and breaking (or making) bread together in learning and in supporting community-building has not only been an element of the Hughes Freedom Writers, but of the epic genre that helped to influence dystopian writing. As a student of epics, and later as a teacher of them, I was drawn back to the origins of my actions and values around memorable stories. This influenced later characters and conventions in the novel.

I should add that am hesitant to explain the novel for others, in part because it cannot be done – simply changing in depth, breadth, and significance each time someone re-reads (or even re-writes) it. I include myself in that. So while the work is full of my interpretations and listenings of students, colleagues, and myself in education, it is also a work of art, and, as a work of art, it should be experienced by others without all of my interpretations, associations, questions, and connections made explicit and hanging over it for future readers. I welcome what others will bring to it and how they may make it part of their own story. For this reason, I will
remain as broad and general as possible in discussing the work, and focus on the origins of things rather than the meanings I might assign them.

As a researcher, I felt it important to get at the origins of things for they can hold great significance about how and why things come to be or how we might change them. I have attempted to enact these values in my own research. For this reason, I delineated my positionalities in Section One of the dissertation, and while they bleed into this section as well, my points of emphasis here is on my findings related to the process of creative writing as an method of inquiry on both personal and collaborative levels.

On a personal level, the creative writing about the Hughes Freedom Writers partnership has been exhilarating. It has been a source of hope for me – hearing the care and urgency with which young people, teachers, and educators take in talking about education to improve it. Writing a dystopian novel to synthesize their stated concerns and ideas with my own experiences demanded care and precision to the ways in which we have discussed and written about values, stories, current issues, language, and learning. I welcomed the ability to give myself over to the people who keep my teacher-educator identity grounded. While I constantly doubted what I knew or thought I knew, I wrote those hesitations and tensions into the characters and story itself to better understand them. The text was quite literally questioning where we were going in education and where my teacher and student experiences were in all of that. That forced me to confront where I had connections or tensions with characters and actions in the story. For instance, the thought and dialogue between Winnie and Julio – when they first find themselves in the forest beyond the walls – is a feeling out of two very different worldviews, in part because of
their family lives, geographic, economic differences, but also because their schools and technology have emphasized things about what and who society values.

From that moment on, their journey together into and beyond Hilltop is guided by Hughes Freedom Writers concerns. For instance, Karissa’s imagery and expressed need for “digging deep” for meaningful learning to take place, as well as the overreliance of technology that gets in the way of this digging, offered an alternative paradigm to USE’s prescription for schooling. Digging became a motif and organizing metaphor for the characters after reaching Hilltop, especially after hearing how other participants spoke to the depth and meaning the Hughes Freedom Writers group provided them.

As the teacher in the group, Joyce’s likened the work of the group to a “lightning rod” that was grounding for her in her teaching. Her hope was that its influence could spread like “little fingers” or tributaries into other classrooms in the school. Both of these images became driving symbols in later chapters of the novel. Joyce used other water metaphors multiple times in her interview that inspired me in early chapters to explore their significance to education through Julio and his family’s appreciation of author Rudolfo Anaya who has written deeply with and about the symbolism of rivers. This also influenced my decision to characterize participants as “sources” rather than as cases.

Meanwhile, the importance of games and play in learning, as well as having “an escape” from the violence, drugs, and “drama” in her community were themes that Frenchele brought to Hilltop’s creation. Adama spoke to the importance of being able to find and tell his own story in school, especially after moving from Africa, as well as having people who could act as guides, showing him a new path, direction, or language, but not making or taking the journey for him.
Those notions of support and challenge between teachers and students, and the journey each student must make at some point by themselves drive the two protagonists as they struggle to understand the place and possibilities of being in an educational partnership with others in 2084.

Community and teacher educator perspectives in the Hughes Freedom Writers also served as important sources for inspiration, Rich’s teachings and concerns with motivating young people to face history and address racism spurred the creation of Nettie Oakes and the histories that Winnie begins to learn for the first time. This history becomes a meaningful part of the learning she takes with her from Hilltop and drives her actions and commitments in the second half of the novel. Chet’s voice contributed to this too as he emphasized the importance of reflecting on cultural and racial identities for teacher education students and teacher educators themselves, both individually and collectively. His quote that “teaching is really about relationships” became a driving theme of the 2084 as that truth was echoed time and again in different ways by each of the participants and in my own experiences. That idea related to assertions of other Hughes Freedom Writers and initiated a focus on out-of-school factors that undermine relationship building and meaningful learning in classrooms and through schools and their communities.

Finally, the stories each participant told related to Hughes Freedom Writers activities opened up other themes and symbols for exploration in the novel. For example, Chet told a story of a teacher who was a single mother in the early half of the 20th century and who lived in constant fear of being found out for having a child out of wedlock and losing her job. She wrote her fears and the truths she lived that no one saw or spoke, and, twenty years after her death, her son found those letters – a stash of letters speaking to him from beyond the grave – painting an
intimate portrait of who she was and what she struggled against. That story provided the impetus for the Schoolhouse Stash – a collection of poems from the Hughes Freedom Writers – words attributed to past and present students and teachers of Hilltop. It is a snapshot of who we were and what we wrestled with individually and as a group.

Other cross-source connections revealed that all of the participants interviewed spoke to the need for more student and teacher voice, empowerment, and agency in directing classroom learning, school organization, and community change. For this to happen, each participant spoke to the importance of having places in school or that are school-sanctioned that are hopeful and which offer listening and inspiration. Each voiced a need to grow the Hughes Freedom Writers – to have a stronger sense of community and a safe space in schools where people of different backgrounds and ages sustain a space for listening to and accepting others on their own terms, without labels or judgment, while still being able to be critical of the world beyond the group. These commonalities became a part of the foundation for Hilltop. There was also a great deal of concern voiced with tests determining so much of their schooling and future opportunities. These concerns inspired Winnie’s collapse in “Chapter 3: The Test” and later the conversation she and Julio have in the forest. While there a many more points of individual or shared language from participants that influenced the writing of 2084, the aforementioned examples are among the most pressing for me and speak to the way voices were thought about, attended to, and integrated into a story about the exigency and possibility of partnerships in education. However, there were points where my own reading, writing, teaching, and learning histories were the key sources for particular characters and their decisions, such as with Holliday and Huckleberry. They are, in part, symbols of the wisdom I gained growing up and teaching in Appalachia. They rewrite two
icons of American mythology – one as a fiery young woman, a survivalist, with a deep connection and respect for the Earth and the oral tradition – values USE lost or rejected long ago – and the other as an androgenous pre-teen, respected and admired for the wit and wisdom too often found but ignored in young people today. Too many Eyes and Links distracting us from what we could be focusing on or how we can be present and learn with others when we take the time to unplug. 2084 is a collection and amalgam of multiple sources staking their claim for more enlightened and humane schooling and teaching. It is a story of subjectivities – of affirming our differences and, in the process, learning through them, even becoming more like each other – perhaps even creating a new shared Self through a sustained commitment to partnering – as its many characters mirror.

_On Revision_
"It is deeply satisfying to believe that we are not locked into our original statements, that we might start and stop, erase, use the delete key in life, and be saved from the roughness of our early drafts. Words can be retracted; souls can be reincarnated. Such beliefs have informed my study of revision..." ~Nancy Sommers

By 2084, even now, the delete key in life doesn’t work like it used to – for our structures remember; they hold fast our thoughts, missteps, and mistakes for others to judge and too often project out as an all-encompassing label of one’s worth and possibilities. 2084 reacts to how difficult it is becoming to re-invent oneself, especially young people, in an age of great technological expansion, much of which is openly embraced by political and business leaders and profoundly influencing practices in public education. As a result, Hughes Freedom Writers are awash in the material and political pressures – even expectations – demanding their attention
through a language of labeling in schools. The labeling of high-stakes policies focused on economic outcomes in education mirrors those of business and advertising, and it places a heavy burden on students, teachers, and teacher educators alike. It creates a distrust and uneasiness with schooling and teaching that each member of the Hughes Freedom Writers spoke to. As a result, we have spent time as a group writing, questioning, and revising our thoughts, words, and actions as part of Freedom Writers-inspired YPAR practices. The group sees the Freedom Writers story as one of possibility and affirmation – including celebration – of difference in learning and teaching. The activities and methods that Erin Gruwell and the Freedom Writers engaged in were teacher and student negotiated and created. The Hughes Freedom Writers adopted this stance and activities are adapted, created, and negotiated per the needs and learning interests of the group. Some of these activities serve as inspiration and revision material for the chapters on Hilltop in 2084.

As part of the Hughes Freedom Writers retreat and subsequent meetings on 2084, Joyce – the Hughes teacher in the group – asked questions primarily about how I was structuring the writing and chapters in relation to other dystopian literature she had read and taught, while students seemed most interested in the characters and the structures they confronted (e.g., What happened to Julio’s mom? What are Golddusters? Why so many acronyms? What’s with the districts?). Their questions and their commitment to community questioning and imagining became a source of hope and guidance in re-visioning and revising. At the same time the interview process and group ethical and story reflections on the project made me aware that even though I have spent time each week over the course of several years with the Hughes Freedom Writers, I still have only entered into one small but sacred space of their complex lives and
inspiring abilities. There is a profound respect for a place where we can see and hear some of each other assets. There is a respect for latent learning—that sparks and flame occur at different times for different people in different places. And there is respect in the group for having a shared sense of place, people, and purpose that not only protects but promotes shared imagining as an integral part of the learning process.

In future drafts, I will return to the interviews, tables, meeting notes, and journals to find the way forward. This may include the creation and inclusion of a poem or letter by a single mother and teacher from Hilltop’s past as per the story Chet shared about a woman who felt she was never able to use an authentic or authoritative voice with others in her own time. Also, in the epilogue, Winnie's proposal for initiating policy that would allow for locales to interpret, define, chronicle, reflect on, and report out as per their particular needs and collective negotiations requires additional attention. Perhaps it demands a more explicit call for curriculum constructed in classrooms and community centers, and not in board rooms. Revisiting and revising some of the more pedantic sections – meant to chronicle the internalization of learning, convictions, and concerns of the narrators based on educational research and partnerships – will provide possibilities for making the book more accessible to the public and not simply academic audiences. As a member of my committee offered, “more of Eric Blare and less of Mark Kohan.” That is where the road ahead lies – with Eric Blare, an I-We project about public education for the health of a just democracy, one under constant pressure from a capitalist system that too often demands just the opposite.
Section Six

For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.

~Paulo Freire

Implications

This study holds many implications for academic and community-based practitioners, as well as policymakers and the public. First, it is a new form of educational inquiry, in terms of both process (i.e., stages of dystopian fiction writing as interpretation detailed in “Section Five”) and product (i.e., a dystopian story); one that merges public accessibility and empowerment with expanded notions of academic rigor. Second, it calls attention to collaborative, creative writing as a trusted – perhaps even catalytic – approach within qualitative and action research traditions. Third, that story can be a central feature in organizing and evaluating educational partnerships for social justice and school-reform efforts. Taken together, these implications could unite diverse public and academic communities with an uncommon (and yet uniquely common) language to rethink the purpose of schooling and teaching, as well as to organize against high-stakes testing and standardization models in education. Lastly, it is a beacon for educational policymakers, researchers, and the public to help us find our bearings by learning from characters, actions, and symbols grounded in student and teacher voice and the current state of education. It is a prayer to make change before the last legs of public education are cut off and sold in the name of instructional management, leaving only the empty shoes of children who once knew how to play and learn… until corporate interests got in the way.
As a new form of educational inquiry, this dissertation chronicles a new research process and product immediately applicable for teacher action researchers, youth-participatory action researchers, and other arts- and humanities-based teachers. In a forward-thinking chapter on the possibility and potential of art-based research (ABR), Barone wonders if ABR can:

find its inspiration in the arts and [lead] to progressive forms of social awareness…I am envisioning educational inquirers who undertake the reclaiming and redirecting of history by communicating directly with the general public through research that is based in the arts…socially engaged and…epistemologically humble.” (2006, p. 218)

His hope is that it can be:

…a politically vital arts-based research, the kind that challenges the comfortable, familiar, dominant master narrative, not by proffering a new totalizing counternarrative but by luring an audience into an appreciation of an array of diverse, complex, nuanced images and partial, local portraits of human growth and possibility… at their best, socially engaged arts-based research projects aim to entice into meaningful dialogue. (2006, p. 224)

In harmony with calls from Lyotard and Griffiths (Griffiths, 2003), Dantely & Tillman (2010), and Milner (2008) to push back against dominant “master” narrative(s), Barone advocates for polyvocal works of art and thoughtful interpretation, as well as continued and deeper “activist artist” collaboration (2006). It is from this creative and committed understanding, that educational partnerships for social justice can be engaged in and written about in a way that is shaped by and for the public. The Hughes Freedom Writers, like 2084 itself, perform outlaw art
(Barone, 2006) through the poetry and stories they create and share. Their art is based on classroom and community-based teaching practices of humanities teachers and their students (Freedom Writers & Gruwell, 1999; Ganz, 2001; Gruwell & Freedom Writers, 2007; Johnson & Freedman, 2001; Romano, 2000; Smith & Sobel, 2010) talking back to the school and societal structures that challenge or threaten them. 2084 is a shared, polyvocal narrative grounded in those practices. Its rigor resides in navigating and synthesizing the myriad needs and relationships among participants, researcher, and the contexts and genres being considered. Put more simply, it is young adult fiction writing that is participatory, pedagogical, arts-based, and research, a combination of elements rarely emphasized in the creation of YA fiction or research on educational partnerships.

This leads to the second contribution of this dissertation: implications for trustworthiness in qualitative research. By involving multiple stakeholders of educational partnerships, as well as related professional communities and their interpretive practices, this scholarship strives for broad-based participation and capacity building among students, teachers, teacher educators, pre-service teachers, and community educators as they engage in processes to support and authenticate the work. One specific example is how structured ethical reflections may be enacted with high school student and teacher populations.

The third implication of this study deals with the centrality and possibility of story in organizing and evaluating educational partnerships for social justice. This is a complex assertion that requires researchers to ask and attempt to address the question—whose story/ies should take precedent in a globalized society (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994)? In researching and writing this
study I conducted review of the literature linking narrative inquiry with social justice education concerns and found three general conceptions emerged (although borders can and do blur):

1) Narrative as a transformative emancipatory philosophy and pedagogy (Ball, 2006; Bell, 2010; Davis, 2002; hooks, 1994)

2) Story as an organizing tool for social movements (Davis, 2002; Ganz, 2001, 2008; Gruwell & Freedom Writers, 2007) and structures, such as schools and classrooms (Freedom Writers & Gruwell, 1999; Goodson, Biesta, Tedder, & Adair, 2010; Hopkins, 1994; Johnson & Freedman, 2001; Loseke, 2007; Postman, 1999)

3) Narrative ways of knowing (Bruner, 1986; Lyons & Laboskey, 2002; Ricouer, 1985) and of being or inquiring in the world (Clandinin & Connelly, 1990; Lyons & Laboskey, 2002; MacIntyre, 1981; Sanders-Lawson, Smith-Campbell, & Benham, 2010).

These strands support educational partnership research because of the relationships they require to create benefits for not only the partners, but for the populations they serve. As discussed in “Section Two”, “educational partnerships” is a vague, yet wide-reaching term, full of possibility if participants and policy allow. As Boyer envisioned, educational partnerships can assist partners in addressing common problems, breaking down hierarchies, making a commitment to project focus, engaging in recognition and rewards for all, and providing leadership that values actions over regulations (Carlson, 2001). When that focus is sharpened to educational partnerships with social justice commitments, then partners need the freedom to define the particulars of their partnership through their relationships. Partners also require sanctioned time and space to act on shared commitments so that they can inquire about and address issues of
justice in schools and communities (i.e., a local, national, and/or global scales). At the heart of educational partnerships for social justice, however, are students and teachers who must have a primary voice in directing, storying, or agreeing to partnership projects as they are the populations most affected by the deficit perspectives, policy, and practices that currently dominate American schooling (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Thus, one way relationships may be fostered – and contexts and cultures can be bridged – in this work is through forming, sustaining, and expanding partnership opportunities that include students and teachers with other educational partners. By engaging in educational partnerships that include students and teachers and a focus on their empowerment in and beyond k-12 classrooms, change can occur in educational stakeholders, communities, and structures through storying activities (Bell, 2010; Freedom Writers & Gruwell, 1999; Ganz, 2008; Gruwell & Freedom Writers, 2007; Johnson & Freedman, 2001; Romano, 2000; Sunstein & Chiseri-Strater, 2002). In the process, stories of social justice make explicit the subjective nature of education that allows partners to build empathy for one another and at the same time locate current master narratives that require collaborative action. This process also allows new counternarratives to be created to articulate past and present partnership work as well as inspire collective imagining about future possibilities. It is for these reasons that a commitment to storying (i.e., storytelling, analysis, and development) in and beyond schools and educational stakeholders can reframe educational policy priorities. Priorities that can allow for more protected institutional time and space to promote collective exploration and evaluation for students, teacher, school, and community success as their work is intertwined even when policy ignores it.
In this vein, the fourth implication of this work is to assist policymakers and the public in understanding this work as social innovation (Tyack & Cuban, 1995). To be clear, innovation of any kind is not necessarily something that hasn’t been done before, but it is something that is not currently being done or supported in the same ways or on the same scale. 2084 and its related story-based activities illuminate a social innovation that offers both lower cost and more meaningful impact in schooling than the technological innovation that is so commonly the focus of political and economic rhetoric. Through the stories and storying processes involved in this study, educational partnerships can become social innovations that can directly impact schooling and teaching practices as well as the scholarship on school reform, educational policy and leadership, curriculum studies, teacher education, and professional development to make public education more equitable, inclusive, and inspiring.

This study reveals that students and teachers are starting from very different places and continue on in very different places throughout their education, yet all feel the weight of policies that emphasize testing, technology, and textbooks on their schooling and teaching. Students learn, maybe not exactly what some educators want them to exactly when they want them to, but that does not mean they are not worth taking the time to reach and teach, instead of label and leave. This requires all of us to support students and teachers where they are and work out into co-constructed curriculum. It also requires school practices that students and teachers help to dream up and direct if school learning is going to be meaningful or applicable to their lives and the health of public education, business, and civics in this nation. Educational partnerships for social justice can offer an important way to communicate with students and teachers across organizations and contexts more humanely, enable a shared culture of empowerment, share
resources and costs, and develop social innovations that are community-based and globally aware. At their best, they can remind us that we must proceed with a renewed caution and care in how we treat, talk about, and talk with people in public schools. Through a commitment to spaces for storytelling and listening, they remind us that we are grossly overestimating how much we think we know about education, each other, and our world, and what we do in the name of that knowledge.
Title of Study: Formative and Transformative Stories of Social Justice Educators and Students involved in a Community-Academic Partnership for School Change.

Introduction
You are being asked to take part in an action inquiry study that aims to address why educational partners (such as yourself) came together to be a part of the Cincinnati Freedom Writers Project and/or continue to work on these activities. The goal of this project is to inform an arts-based inquiry into the current partnership as well as the future of education. Please read this consent form and let me know if you have questions.

Who is doing this research study and what is its purpose?

Mark Kohan, program director of the Hughes Freedom Writers and Cincinnati Freedom Writers Project, part of the Teaching for Hope & Justice Network, will be conducting the research and its interpretation through the writing of a dystopian (science fiction) novel. The purpose of the research study is to explore the experiences of individuals participating in a school-university-community partnership committed to social justice, school and community change. It does this through the creation of dystopian story that directs attention towards recent trends as well as current and future issues with American education.

Who will be in this research study and how will it be conducted?

This study will involve past and current project partners from the Cincinnati Freedom Writers Project and the Teaching for Hope & Justice Network. This includes high school and college students, teachers, teacher educators, and community and cultural workers. The following activities are part of the study: participant interviews, participant artifact(s) representing their experiences, and focus groups to read, respond to, and reflect on the interpretation of the data as well as its representation in a dystopian (science fiction) novel. The novel will incorporate parts of participant perspectives and experiences. You may be asked to participate in any or all of these activities.

What are the risks and benefits to being in this research study?

It is not expected that you will be exposed to any risk by being a part of this study. Research records will be confidential, but not anonymous, as the principal investigator and his faculty advisor will be aware of the study’s participants. There is also the possibility that agents of the University of Cincinnati may need to inspect study records for audit or quality assurance purposes at some point in the future. If a participant does not want to share an experience that may be read by these parties, they should not share it or request that it be stricken from the data set. The benefits of being in the research study are that participants get to share stories and perspectives that helped bring about and sustain the Cincinnati...
Freedom Writers Project and the Teaching for Hope & Justice Network and which will help to inform the future work of these educational partnerships. When this study is published, the names of participants will not be used to protect their identity, unless otherwise specified by the written consent of the participants.

**Participation Rights**
You will not be paid to take part in this study. No one has to be in this research study. Refusing to take part will NOT cause any penalty or loss of benefits that you would otherwise have. You may start and then change your mind and stop at any time. To stop participating in the study, simply inform Mr. Mark Kohan (kohanmk@ucmail.uc.edu / 513-556-4209 or 304-685-4226) or Dr. Miriam Raider-Roth (raidermm@ucmail.uc.edu / 513-556-3808) if Mr. Kohan is unavailable. Nothing in this consent form waives any legal rights you may have. This consent form also does not release the investigator, the institution, or its agents from liability for negligence.

**Questions and concerns regarding this research study**
If you have questions about your rights as a participant or complaints about the study, you may contact the UC Action Research Center at 556-5108 or write Dr. Miriam Raider-Roth or Dr. Mary Brydon-Miller at 611 Teachers College, 2610 McMicken Circle, Cincinnati, OH 45221 or at miriam.raider-roth@uc.edu and mary.brydon-miller@uc.edu

**Agreement:**
I have read this information and have received answers to any questions I asked. I give my consent to participate in this research study as detailed above. I will receive a copy of this signed and dated consent form to keep.

I want to be interviewed. Yes ☐ No ☐
I agree to be audio recorded. Yes ☐ No ☐
I want my real name to be used. Yes ☐ No ☐

Participant Name (please print) ____________________________________________
Participant Signature ___________________________ Date __________
Parent/Guardian Signature ___________________________ Date __________
(if participant is under the age of 18)
Signature of Person Obtaining Consent ___________________________ Date __________
Researcher’s Signature ___________________________ Date __________
APPENDIX B

Interview Protocol

Interview Purpose:
The purpose of this interview is to explore the experiences of individuals (like yourself) who have participated in a high school-university-community literacy & leadership partnership committed to social justice, school and community change. (These responses will be used to develop a new dystopian story to theorize the importance of educational partnerships as well as future educational practices, reform efforts, and possibilities for American schools and society.)

Semi-structured interview questions:

1. How would you describe your role in the Hughes Freedom Writers / or Teaching for Hope & Justice Network (THJN)?
2. Describe what initially led you to get involved with this community.
   a. Probe: personal and professional interests or needs?
3. What kept you engaged in the project after you learned about it?
   a. Probe (if needed): For example, emails and links, meetings at different partner locales, Freedom Writers story, opportunity to affect grassroots school change, opportunity to meet and speak with Erin Gruwell and the Freedom Writers, other activities?
4. Were there experiences in your own life that were triggered by participation in this community? If so, and you feel comfortable sharing them, what were they?
5. What is the artifact that you selected (or would select) that represents (or resonates with) your experiences with the project? Why did you choose it?
6. What is the most memorable story or moment that you encountered from Hughes Freedom Writers or THJN project activities or events? You are welcome to share more than one.
7. What kind of impact do you see (or want to see) the Hughes Freedom Writers / Teaching for Hope & Justice Project having? Explain why that is important to you.
8. How do you see Hughes Freedom Writers or Teaching for Hope & Justice Network relating to your needs or issues with schooling, teaching, or learning?
9. What is the biggest change you would like to see made in schools? In teaching?
10. Do you hope to stay involved in the Hughes Freedom Writers Project and/or Teaching for Hope & Justice Network? If so, in what capacity or capacities? Explain why.
11. Is there anything else that you would like me to know about the Cincinnati Freedom Writers / Teaching Hope project?
Possible follow-up questions:

1. Have you been invested or involved in thinking about the Freedom Writers Project or Teaching for Hope & Justice Network since we last spoke? In what way(s)?
2. What allows you to continue being a part of HFW (or THJN)?
   a. Probe: personally and professionally
3. Why should the HFW or THJN be important to Cincinnati and beyond?
4. How do you communicate HFW and/or THJN work to your friends, co-workers, or others you are close to personally or professionally?
   a. Probe: Has this raised any notable moments or stories? If yes, how so, where, or why?

Member-check / Reader Response Prompts (for multiple drafts and interpretive community meetings):

1. Do you see your perspective (or story) in this draft of 2084? If so, where?
2. What questions do you have of this text?
3. Is the draft you read of 2084 plausible? If so, in what ways? If not, why not and where?
4. Is the draft you read of 2084 engaging? If so, in what ways? If not, why not and where?
5. If you were writing this story, what would you change, add, cut, or clarify? Why?
6. Did you learn anything about schooling and teaching that you didn’t know before? What?
APPENDIX C

Structured Ethical Reflection
Based on Brydon-Miller, 2012

Hughes Freedom Writers Identified Values and Actions Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actions =&gt; Values</th>
<th>Hughes FW Weekly Meetings</th>
<th>Collecting Our Words (novel 2084)</th>
<th>Analyzing Our Voices (novel 2084)</th>
<th>Member Check (novel 2084)</th>
<th>Reader Response (novel 2084)</th>
<th>Public Presentation (novel 2084)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Respect</td>
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<td>2. Creativity</td>
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<td>3. Leadership</td>
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<td>4. Humor</td>
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<td>5. Freedom</td>
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<td>6. Patience</td>
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