“He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover. Borrowed time and borrowed world and borrowed eyes with which to sorrow it.”

— Cormac McCarthy, The Road

“Au milieu de l’hiver, j’apprenais enfin qu’il y avait en moi un été invincible/In the midst of winter, I finally learned there was in me an invincible summer.”

— Albert Camus, “Summer in Algiers”

I. From the ashes

According to The American Biology Teacher, giant sequoias, or *Sequoiadendron giganteum*, are the largest living organisms on Earth; the General Sherman, the largest living giant sequoia, is 275 feet tall and has a volume that is equivalent to eleven blue whales. The giant sequoia’s thick bark, ranging in color from grey to reddish-brown, acts as a shield from fire and other environmental hazards. Not only is the giant sequoia able to resist intense heat, but it actually utilizes it to survive and thrive. The primary way a giant sequoia releases seeds is through its cones. This occurs when they dry up from the rising hot gases of forest fires. From the destruction of the burnt forest, the giants arise.

II. South Africa Airlines

The gentle hum of mechanized altitude goes on for hours, like a soft vacuum cleaner, only more soothing somehow. Many of the back seats are empty, and after striking up a conversation, I find myself seated next to an attractive young South African woman. Her cream
peach skin is the perfect complement to her crimson hair and peerless white smile. She is just coming back from her first trip to America, and she tells me excitedly of her adventures in the big city. I am captured by her sophistication, her style, and her elegant accent. She must come from money, I think to myself. We talk all night, we laugh together, like old friends around a campfire, gazing at the stars. After finding out why I am going to Cape Town, she becomes intrigued. For a brief moment, her chic designer hat and her perfectly applied MAC makeup come off, and I see her soul. Her emerald eyes become bottomless black pools, vacant caverns of bitter ice with desperate little flickers of flame that refuse to die.

**III. At Ian’s apartment**

Another rainy day in Tacoma. The six of us sit huddled around a glass table in the cramped beige apartment, each one longing for another hit. My turn comes. I inhale the smoke into my lungs, and they burn like dried cones. I escape into euphoric spectacle, as neon colors and synthesized beats blend into an ocean of pulsing life. I am lost in the current. The wounds are dulcified. My eyes are red from the salt of the sea.

Maddie deals out the cards, and I wait for the good hand. Seven of diamonds and two of spades, three of clubs and king of hearts; fold again and again, until all my chips are gone. Tonight, I leave a champion. The fresh gaping wounds that spill blood into my chest, these are my prize. I am the King of Hearts.

**IV. Arriving in Manenberg**

The white van picks us up from the bustling shopping mall with mocha marbled floors and luxurious hand carved African souvenirs. I cram in, between big J-Mo and Sophie, and we drive ten miles from the extravagant wealth of the fair skinned. Past the gated mansions we go, Burberry and Fossil behind us. We make our way through filthy diseased streets. They are lined with dilapidated flats, dusted with orange earth. It is an overcrowded shantytown, a cup overflowing with the crimson blood of colored orphans and widows. Here, the four horsemen make their domain.

The “Hard Livings” and the “Clever Kids” run the streets. The alleys are spider webs, waiting to ensnare their newest victims. Manenberg’s claim to fame: the highest rate of public violence in Cape
Town. Rape and domestic violence aren’t far behind. HIV spreads like rats through the city, and “tik” crystals are the children’s candy of choice. The gangs are families, welcoming the fatherless sheep home. They are refuge from the wolf.

We enter the city like aliens, the only white skin and blonde hair in a sea of brown. Starving eyes watch intently. We arrive at the tiny building hiding behind a barbed fence, the words Manenberg Apostolic Faith Mission painted bold red on the side. I am greeted by several church members, including Eugene, a bald and burly, yet soft spoken ex-gangster who now works to help the youth of the city. His eyes always seem to be laughing and crying at the same time. It is the mark of those who endure. He stays with us in the small carpeted sanctuary-turned-makeshift-guesthouse that night. I curl up in my sleeping bag, chilled by winter air and poor insulation, and tremble at the sounds of the city: the snarling and yelping of dog fights, callous, gleeful shouts, and the crackling boom of murder, witnessed only by a star-lit child. Eugene seems unaware, and sleeps like sequoia.

V. Agony

I wake up at 6 a.m. and grab my sweats, (the speckled grey ones with the purple Salinas High written down the legs), from the floor. I can barely keep my eyes open, and my body begs for just one more warm and cozy hour. I pull the faded hoodie over my mop of long, messy, black hair, and force myself out the door. Another chilly day in California. I was born in the ocean breeze of Monterey, but it gets colder (and hotter) here in Sacramento. I still haven’t gotten used to these frosty winter mornings. The cold stings my body, and soon it feels as though I’m running through an inferno of icy wind. Blazing lungs tell me to quit, but I will not. I finish my third mile as I run through the corridor of naked skeleton trees. They seem to silently empathize with me, like grizzled old veterans welcoming the new recruit. Old leaves must fall, making room for new.

VI. Jewels in the dark

Star
(n. noun)

A self-luminous celestial body consisting of a mass of gas held together by its own gravity in which the energy generated by nuclear reactions in the interior is balanced by the outflow of energy to the
surface, and the inward-directed gravitational forces are balanced by the outward-directed gas and radiation pressures.

From BBC Science: How do I take a beautiful photo of space?
“How can you best prepare?
Wait for clear, dark skies and try to keep away from artificial light.
Pick your location in the daylight. This way you’ll know how to find it when it’s dark.
Wrap up well. It gets cold at night, so you might need extra layers to keep warm.
Get your camera settings right.”

The blazing jewels wait to be unmined, hiding in unfathomable dark.

VII. Garden

It is my third week in Manenberg. My clothes are grungy, and my hair is greasy and matted. Showers are a luxury we don't get every day. I step out into the breezy dusty sunlight. My eyes are caught by an elderly church widow, in tired jeans and fraying top, tending the community garden next door. I do not know that she has lost her husband, and her brother, and both of her sons to the vicious jaws of the streets. I only know the vibrant vegetation that stands out like an oasis of color in a desert full of forgotten trash heaps and graffiti covered buildings.

As we walk to the field, I see a young teen smoking a blunt in broad daylight. At least it's less alarming then the disinterested boy playing with a six-inch knife. That day, we play soccer with the children, in the dried up yellow grass field. There are at least a hundred kids, but far fewer parents. They follow us back to the church, like a parade through the city. I notice one beautiful little toddler girl, with emerald eyes and coconut skin, that I had seen at the soup kitchen a few days earlier. I recognize her because of the dried food that was still around her mouth, and the same stained white dress from two days ago. She approaches shyly, and suddenly takes hold of my right hand. I am caught off guard at first, but understand as I look down. She is hiding from the wolf. Victorious eyes come alive, like seeds pushing through the ash. She glides through the streets, a royal princess before her subjects, Andromeda of the night. My eyes are red from the salt of the sea. I am the King of Hearts.
Works Cited

