LETTER FROM BOSTON

THE FACTORY

At the Pacific Rim charter school, they make scholars.

BY KATHERINE BOO

The school day is eight hours long, and the academic year is eleven months. One student recently translated Snoop Dogg’s “Gin and Juice”
into Mandarin. The entire class of 2003 now attends a four-year college. Photographs by Reuben Cox.
A year ago in September, strangeness was afoot in Boston. A gorilla roamed the streets of Dorchester, and the Red Sox made the playoffs. Water droplets on the window of an ophthalmology clinic coalesced into the shape of the Madonna and Child, and forty thousand pilgrims came to marvel. A burly seventeen-year-old from Roxbury named Rousseau Mieze, a child of Haitian immigrants, welcomed any climate obliging to miracles. His family was poor, his high-school grades were mediocre, and he wanted to go to college.

Rousseau had felt burdened as a child by his unusual name. He was pleased to discover, not long ago, that he shared it with an eighteenth-century French philosopher who wrote of institutional inequity, lost childhood, and other matters about which Rousseau had some insight. As he began his senior year in high school, however, such knowledge left him less philosophical than glum. He was six feet two and two hundred and fifty pounds; adults sometimes crossed the street when they saw him. And yet some mornings it was an effort just to open the door to his school—two floors of a former Westinghouse factory in a landscape of rotting pallets and obsolescent gears. “Academy of the Pacific Rim,” a cardboard sign taped at the entrance said. His mother, Cazilda, who was a cleaning woman, had forced him to enroll, and he knew now that he’d been lucky. Other urban high schools greeted their students with pat-downs and metal-detecting wands. Pacific Rim, a charter school, opened up to a stairwell the color of canaries, on which his classmates had painted exhortations. “We are what we repeatedly do,” Aristotle said, apparently; on optimistic days, taking the steps two at a time, Rousseau would say those words, too. On other days, his own words drowned out Aristotle’s:

My life yo I’m thankful
On the real I feel I’ll tank though
I feel like death is hangin’ on my ankle.

Rousseau once wrote lyrics about money and girls, “your standard rapper concerns.” But writing, his English teachers insisted, was also a way for a person to listen to himself, and he was working with fresh themes. One was the regulation of desire. With prayer and self-discipline, he had found, he could suppress his yearnings for random female companionship and the FUBU jerseys that other kids wore. “Two-hundred-dollar shoes? Invented necessity,” he’d tell his friends. “Really, what’s the point?” But he knew that there was a difference between an expensive four-year college education and the one he could get at the community colleges and trade schools of Roxbury. In his journal, Rousseau had scribbled a list of reasons for coveting the pricier variety: “get good job,” “support parents,” and “experience life outside of the strain of being poor.” Long-term strategy was not his forte, however, and now his miscalculation became clear. His S.A.T. scores of eleven hundred were above the national average; he’d been class president repeatedly, and could discourse on Homer when required. But three years of nonchalance toward ordinary schoolwork had given him a cumulative grade-point average of C-minus. “Maybe you can’t make a new beginning to your life,” teachers sometimes said to kids in his position. “You can, though, make a new ending.” The kids, of course, knew the real-world proviso: It’s easier to improve your ending if you don’t begin so far behind.

“You know the stressed-out review period before the exams?” Rousseau said. “It’s like this whole senior year is one big review—your final opportunity to show colleges what you can do, to say, ‘I am more than my numbers.’ But, on some level, you don’t know what you can do yourself. Maybe your teachers say you’re smart, a leader, have potential, whatever. But you’re kind of wondering if the numbers might be right.”

If he was rich and able to write a check for tuition, Rousseau suspected, some college might take a chance on him. If he was a promising point guard, he’d be golden. As much as he loved pickup games at a court up the slope from his apartment, he was exasperated by the cultural assumption that the dreams of tall, black kids involved not B.A.s but the N.B.A. Pacific Rim didn’t care for competitive sports, anyway; it asked students to change their prospects by using their minds.

In the seven years since it opened, the Pacific Rim charter public school, which serves sixth to twelfth graders, has hopped around southern Boston, holding classes in a church attic, a former barbershop, and on the second floor of a parochial school called Most Precious Blood. Rising rents have driven Pacific
Rim ever farther from the hub of Boston; it now sits in Hyde Park, the city’s southernmost tip. Amtrak trains pass within a few feet of the factory it shares with two Hummer-driving white rappers, construction companies, and a metalworking shop. Train shrieks are something that the faculty have been learning to ignore, just as students have been learning, sometimes the hard way, that the abandoned coils of concertina wire behind the school are best stepped over, not on.

More than three thousand charter schools have sprung up in the United States since 1991, when Minnesota became the first of forty-one states to establish alternative institutions as competition for the nation’s troubled public schools. Of those institutions, Pacific Rim is one of the oddest. It was the inspiration of a Chinese-American dentist and father of three named Robert Guen, who believed that Boston’s black-and-white politics were leaving Asian kids underserved by public schools. After Guen was appointed to the Boston school board, in the early nineteen-nineties, he and another public-schools activist, Robert Consalvo, began to think not just about different school policies but also about a different sort of school: small, marked by strict discipline, character education, and compulsory Tai Chi and Mandarin Chinese classes. Its school day would be eight hours and its school year eleven months—time in which students who had been overwhelmed by large, sometimes lawless public schools might peacefully prepare for college. Guen and Consalvo applied for a charter, and in 1997, when the school they had envisioned opened, it proved more popular than they had anticipated.

In September of 2003, two of Guen’s daughters were enrolled at Pacific Rim. They were among the few Asian kids in the school. Given the grim educational options in neighborhoods like Dorchester, Roxbury, and Mattapan, African-American and Haitian-immigrant students had come en masse. And so Pacific Rim became an Asian-Creole-American stew—a place where kids studying Mandarin and Tai Chi were mostly black and poor. Cultural collisions were inescapable, and sometimes delightful: Rousseau’s friend Marcus McCorskey had recently translated Snoop Dogg’s “Gin and Juice”—an anthem to efficient sex, strong drink, and tribal loyalty—into Mandarin. More significant, every student in the school’s inaugural graduating class, of 2003, had passed the state math-and-literacy competency tests on the first try. (At the city’s public schools, only the famed “exam” schools, like Boston Latin, matched this feat.) The entire class of 2003 now attends a four-year college.

Pacific Rim teachers considered this success statistically meaningless. They had embarked on their experiment tentatively, beginning with a few sixth and seventh graders and adding a new grade each year; the class of 2003 was just eleven students. Nonetheless, this curiosity cabinet of a school enlarged. By September of 2003, there were three hundred and thirty students; the new batch of sixth graders had been selected by lottery from a list of applicants four times that large. The faculty absorbed this growth with both pride and fear. School achievement is the key to ending racial inequality, they’d tell college friends who were now writing legal briefs or bundling bonds. It’s the civil-rights issue of our time. Among themselves, they indulged in self-doubt. While many Americans and the politicians who serve them concentrate on what inner-city kids shouldn’t do—have babies, drop out, collect welfare, sell drugs—Pacific Rim emphasizes accomplishment, and not just in the form of a post-high-school job or a military enlistment. The school wanted to see every single student enter college, America’s escalator to the middle and upper classes.

Welcome to our awkward adolescent stage of growth,” Pacific Rim’s director, Spencer Blasdale, said one rainy morning last fall. Despite fashion pointers volunteered by his charges, Blasdale, a wiry thirty-six-year-old, was wearing wide-wale corduroy trousers that grew soggy as he paced the sidewalk in front of the school, shaking the hands of backpack-laden kids. “Nice to see you, Savannah. Good morning, gentlemen—and, please, your chains.” In response, jewelry that had been exhibited on bus and train rides across Boston—some students had been travelling for an hour and a half—disappeared beneath collars of the maroon polo shirts that the school required. Blasdale wiped the raindrops from the lenses of his spectacles and fretted. “I want to think that good things happen here, but I’m probably not the best person to wave the banner,” he said. “I’m always worrying about where we are weak. Take the Advanced Placement tests in English. Our kids are scoring very low on the essays—one of several signs we’re not doing enough to promote analytical writing. We’re trying to work on that this year.”

That, and a thousand other things. Massachusetts, like most other states, was in a budget crisis last fall, and in the state legislature support was gathering for a moratorium on charter schools, which were said to siphon money that the regular public schools needed. (Of the state’s eight-billion-dollar schools budget, the charters consumed 1.5 per cent.) In a white middle-class neighborhood just south of Pacific Rim’s industrial strip, opposition was simmering, too, as residents registered the presence of many young new neighbors. Meanwhile, although enrollment had surged, Blasdale had just been forced to cut forty faculty positions. In the days before school began, the remaining twenty-seven teachers had decorated the hallways with notices of internships at the zoo and the Museum of Science. Their own workplace had a fresh posting, too: a Times article predicting “one of the most austere school years in memory.”

Thirty years ago, Boston became emblematic of the futility of American efforts to achieve educational equity, when an attempt to desegregate public schools by busing children from neighborhood to neighborhood inspired riots and racial violence. In subsequent decades, many other prescriptions for improving the educational prospects of low-income and minority children have been hazarded: less bureaucracy, more funding, smaller class size, a computer on every desktop, back-to-basics, phonics. This decade’s fix is a federal law called No Child Left Behind, whose theoretical pillars are accountability and market competition. Passed by Congress in 2001, No Child Left Behind is seen on the right as the greatest domestic achievement of George W. Bush, and on the left as an underfunded, punitive assault on public schools and teachers’ unions. The law mandates “standards-based” testing across the nation, to expose schools
that are failing their students; it also supports the creation of more charter-school alternatives like Pacific Rim, in order to incite productive educational rivalries. Thus far, however, most charter schools are not like Pacific Rim: according to a recent, much discussed analysis of U.S. Department of Education figures, charter-school students nationwide score worse than their public-school counterparts. Although charters serve a more disadvantaged population, their unexceptional early showing has tended to reinforce the hopelessness that many Americans already feel about urban education.

"Everybody's looking for the hundred-per-cent solution," Blasdale said. "And when they find it call me, I'm there. But in the meantime, as one of my principal friends likes to say, I'll take a hundred one-per-cent solutions instead." Of the urban schools he admired, public and charter, he had noticed two not particularly cost-efficient consistencies. They were small enough for each child to be known, and staffed with smart, loving, relatively autonomous teachers. But how to find those teachers was something that No Child Left Behind didn't answer.

Blasdale's faculty, four of whom had advanced degrees from Ivy League schools, earned an annual salary of about forty thousand dollars. Calculated at an hourly rate, this wasn't much more than several of the seniors commanded working after school at Krispy Kreme. Blasdale's teachers worked in spite of, not because of, market incentive, and the effort to actually leave no child behind in the course of the 2003-04 school year would drive a few of them out of the profession.

Of the twenty-four kids starting senior year last September, Blasdale felt confident about the college prospects of, perhaps, six—all bright, motivated girls. The rest were not, in the shorthand, "givens." There was a sloe-eyed long-distance runner who was prone to moodiness and confusion, and whose mother had been forced to give him up because
you—and get ready for the challenge of college.

of her own mental state; a brilliant girl given to incapacitating depression; a spirited boy with acute developmental problems whose mother had sent him to Pacific Rim after he was robbed at a public school; another “special-needs” boy, who arrived at school just after dawn and sometimes stayed until nine at night, lingering in the parking lot with faculty as they discussed the difference between political and social democracy, before someone drove him home. On paper, he had his share of diagnoses; at school, he was an intelligent, iconoclastic kid intent on going to a four-year college in Maine. Blasdale suspected—correctly, it turned out—that this would happen. Children with sensational burdens weren’t necessarily the hardest to help; they often found a home inside the school and excelled. The students who made Blasdale panic were the resisters.

Of the seniors, the leading resister was Dwayne, a handsome kid with a wispy mustache who was cagier about his intellectual gifts than he was about his life in the streets. When not hanging with friends outside his public-housing complex, he crammed the margins of Orwell’s “1984” and Robert Dahl’s “On Democracy” with ideas about fairer societies. In class, though, he preferred to shrug and to sleep. “When there is no governmental authority, do individuals still have rights?” his government teacher asked one day, to which he responded in song. “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen, nobody knows the sorrow,” he crooned, one eyebrow cocked, as his classmates tried to swallow their howls. After six years at Pacific Rim, Dwayne was still unable to risk letting others see him striving.

Blasdale had studied at Princeton and the Harvard Graduate School of Education, where some child-development theorists suggested that by early adolescence many urban kids were already past the point of help. At Pacific Rim, though, he had seen his share of transformations. One of them was Dwayne’s friend Rousseau.

Emotionally troubled, said teachers in some of the schools that Rousseau had attended before Pacific Rim. “The cliché angry black boy,” Rousseau himself said. In his first years at Pacific Rim, his mother had summoned him to school for discipline conferences with such frequency that it threatened her ability to make a living. Cleaning houses and office buildings, she earned about three hundred and fifty dollars a week, with which she supported not just her son but a stream of family members emigrating from Haiti. (Rousseau’s father is a self-employed taxi-driver, and he and Cazilda are separated.) “I don’t know what to do with this child, but I do know I need to pay my bills,” she told the teachers. “Please, just do what you can.” And so they had.

One September morning, a local news anchor announced, “Five shootings, one stabbing, eight hours.” Rousseau made his way down Pacific Rim’s crowded, locker-lined hall to the library, an airy room of tables and books, most of them secondhand. At one table, a graceful, long-limbed girl named Sarabina advised a friend about the S.A.T.s: “You gotta do them mad fast, because they’ll be saying, ‘Put your pencil down,’ and you’ve got eight questions left.” Rousseau had a thing for Sarabina. Her father, an itinerant preacher, was strict, and she hadn’t chafed, as Rousseau had, at Pacific Rim’s regimented culture. Now she was interning at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, trying to decide whether she wanted to do premed next year.

“That’s a good—but-in—the-woods college,” Sarabina’s friend was saying of Hamilton College; they were “trading skinny” on the schools. “In my top ten,” Sarabina agreed, “but not my very top.” Rousseau surveyed the room. Dwayne was at one table, sleeping. Marcus, the “Gin and Juice” translator, was at another, turning raw data into frequency distributions and then plotting them on a graph. The morning’s lesson combined science and statistics, and required students to do the kind of independent research that might await them in college. Rousseau dropped his book bag onto Marcus’s table and settled into a seat. Having a “top ten” was a chance he’d already squandered. He just wanted one decent four-year college, preferably situated very far from Roxbury.

“Yo, my slow bro,” Rousseau said to Marcus. In response, Marcus raised his eyebrows into perfect circumflexes—his catchall rejoinder, that month, to slights. Rousseau used to be able to provoke him, but this was senior year. Everyone was trying to focus. Sighing, Rousseau set to work on what would be a yearlong senior project, a study of benthic macroinvertebrates and their substrate preferences. He kept himself alert by rapping a song he’d heard on MTV’s “Making the Band” the night before:

I’m way ahead of the game, thuggin’ runs in my veins.
My pocket’s chubby, so I went and got a gun in my name.
It’s just me, him and my blunt in the Range.

Soon Marcus was rapping, too; they were virtuosos at recalling lyrics. Today, though, Rousseau’s mind drifted. “Marcus,” he said, “let me ask you something. Have you ever wondered about the literacy levels on that show? There was one night, remember, where the one...
There's more than one way to be right.

Rousseau considered his very existence to be a question, and he had looked at the data. Four hundred times in four years, at least, his teachers asked him his favorite question: “What’s the point? You ace a test, then ruin your average by not doing the homework. Why the self-sabotage, Rousseau?” As the fall progressed, he'd been mulling a variety of explanations—one or two of which might be rendered persuasive in college-application essays.

“It’s easier to write an explanation when you actually understand why,” he said. The up-from-poverty narrative seemed to be what some people wanted from kids like him, but pride militated against this “pitiful” genre. Moreover, Rousseau believed in personal responsibility.

Taking a comic approach to his own story was more fun: the pudgy character with no-name clothes and crooked teeth who decides to devote his intellectual energy not to homework but to strategies of retaliation against his teasers. An alternate explanation came to mind during the Bible study he did at the church across from his apartment: his home had been inhabited by demons. But, whatever explanation he might use to justify underachievement, colleges might want a cure: the moment at which the right path lit up, and down you ran.

“It was then that I realized I had been lying to myself,” he typed one day. Another day: “That night, I made the decision to give my life over to Christ.”

Even after finding religion, however, the “state of being Rou” was a fluid condition, and he, like his teachers, couldn’t neatly account for the days or weeks when motivation drained away. There were only questions, like the one he asked one afternoon when he caught up with Patrick McAllister, his twelfth-grade English teacher, in front of the school. McAllister, a Boston-raised Irish Catholic with a sly sense of humor, was a guy with whom, students said, “you could go deep.”

“Mr. McAllister, it’s interesting about that play—reading it and then seeing it performed, you start to think about it differently. Like, what if Oedipus knew?”

“Knew what, Rousseau?” McAllister asked, folding his arms and leaning back as if he didn’t have a faculty meeting in five minutes.

“Well, we’re supposed to think he’s an innocent searching for an answer who gets destroyed by what he finds out, right? But maybe what he wanted wasn’t to discover the curse but to grab his mother and the other guys by the collar and make them admit what he’d already figured out, so he wouldn’t feel so crazy. Like, he just wanted them to stop denying things and say it: ‘Oedipus, on the real, the choices you were making didn’t count for anything. The way you were born, you didn’t have a chance.’”

One November day, the sixth-grade winners of the admissions lottery settled into turquoise metal chairs and mismatched desks beside a bulletin board adorned with their self-described academic goals for the year:

“STAY FOCUS.”

“PAST THE SIX GRADE!”

Ervens and Shawrod, Jewrisha and Ivanna and Ivelisse: eventually Blasdale and his colleagues would know the test scores and family situations behind those names. They would learn which ones possessed the social advantages peculiar to the sixth grade, like being champs at double Dutch, and which ones would react to a routine fire drill by collapsing, distraught, on the floor. For now, though, the children’s histories typically consisted of a few words on school-transfer forms—an absence of data that seemed fitting. Teachers at their new school preferred to begin with the exuberant, if untenable, assumption that every child thrown in their path could succeed.

As sixth graders scrambled into a classroom, some of them wearing khaki pants optimistically large, a regal young teacher named Elizabeth Weston rose from her desk and raised her hand, palm forward—the signal at Pacific Rim for silence, respect. The students responded in kind. Weston and her colleagues could occasionally demonstrate a vaudevillian vocal range, but the volume in the classroom was typically lower. Although class sizes were as large as those in nearby public schools, a student who disrupted teaching at Pacific Rim, or even turned his back on a teacher, faced parents, principal, and a round of intense behavioral instruction.

The emphasis on discipline was bal-
anced by a student’s closeness to his assigned “academic adviser”—the staff member whom students thought of as "belonging to me." This adviser followed a child’s progress from grade to grade, fought for his interests, got to know his parents, and helped him with his algebra. At Pacific Rim, teachers spent nearly a quarter of their work lives tutoring and counseling individual students. There were Sundays spent wandering the Museum of Fine Arts, or biking in the Blue Hills; there were late-night crisis phone calls. And for eight hours a day there was class.

Weston, who is an African-American, had studied English and psychology at Williams. “I love to read your independent-reading logs,” she told the sixth graders as she collected the previous night’s assignment. She paused to make eye contact with a boy in the back row who was removing from his earlobe a clip-on cubic-zirconia earring. “Your notes are examples of your thinking. This is how I know what’s in your brain.”

A hand went up. “I left mines in my backpack—can I get it?”

“Yes, you can. You also lose a recess break. Do you know why?”

“I said ‘mines,’ not ‘mine’?”

“That’s right. Now, people, tell me: what do I expect of you when you are reading? Steven!”

“Write down the main ideas as we read!”

“Yes! And what else?”

“Put down any questions and thoughts we have in the margins.”

“Yes! And what else? Can anyone tell me? Well, I see one big gap in this list we’re making. I see an abyss. I see a chasm.”

“Words we don’t understand!”

“Yes, When you don’t understand a word, look it up in the dictionary and write down the definition.” As she spoke, she sketched on the whiteboard two tree-lined cliffs with the letters “c-h-a-s-m” stretching between them. “The ‘h’ is silent in the word ‘chasm,’ isn’t it, Leonard?” she said conspiratorially. Leonard turned to his classmates to confirm.

W eston and the other sixth-grade teachers shed this unblinking authority at Wednesday-afternoon faculty meetings, when they sat cross-legged on the floor with Doritos, M&M’s, and a long list of “students of concern”:

“It’s not just that he’s angrier than ever this year, but I’m finding his explanations less comprehensible. I’ve tried what I can think of, and I’m at the point of thinking he needs special-ed testing sooner rather than later. Do we wait, see another trimester come and go, when he’s not learning and not getting help, either? Maybe they’ll find nothing, but what’s the harm in doing the tests?”

“But there is harm. You tell the family we want to do the testing, all odds are they tell the child, and there are consequences to that. The question is, have we done everything we can to figure out what’s going on—to watch, listen, experiment, try to reach him ourselves before we risk the label?”

On the floor below, teachers in higher grades were having similar conversations, agonizing first about the students who’d spent their summer vacations deciding whether or not to live another year:

“I don’t want to put too much stress on her to catch up, but where’s the line we draw? I can’t just promote her. Should we speak to the parents?”

“Her attendance problems are worse at home than they are here.”

“I found the mother to be an easier person to talk to than the father.”

And then they turned to Dwayne, perennial student of concern. To their surprise, he had recently produced an eloquent oral history of his grandmother. Shortly after writing it, he was among a crew of boys arrested for jumping a guy and stealing his cell phone. It was the moment, teachers decided, to put the press on Dwayne’s intellectual side.

“There’s more engagement with the literature than he lets on. It’s like over the summer when Mr. Berman gave him that book about two kids growing up in the projects. He was totally loving it, but he also made Mr. Berman promise not to tell anyone he’d taken it home. The interest about racial identity and class is something we’ve got to tap into, turn the anger into something literary, creative.”

“There’s this group of artists downtown who do interesting work with at-risk kids. I’ll make a call.”

The teachers had recently given up a much anticipated annual raise. While many charter schools rely on foundation grants and individual donations to supplement their public allotment—around ninety-six hundred dollars per pupil in Boston—contributions didn’t necessarily increase with good academic results. “B.F.P.,” teachers said to one another, shrugging—bleak financial picture, one not improved when some students broke into a classroom and stole three hundred dollars that parents had raised during a book fair.

For those teachers, the consolation—a considerable one—was the company of passionate, analytical colleagues. The dilemma at places like Pacific Rim was that people who loved to be with and
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- **F** Elephant-stomping-donkey subliminal voter-conditioning graphic. Should be kept visible at all times.

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**Florida State Voting Commission SEAL OF APPROVAL**

think about kids tended, sooner or later, to have some themselves. Once that happened, sixty-hour weeks for low pay were even less appealing. In October, Blasdale’s deputy, a brilliant and intuitive woman named Piel Hollingsworth, had her first child; during labor, she had called Blasdale twice to deal with student matters. After the baby was born, her priorities changed; with some anguish, she had decided that she would not return full time the following year. Blasdale’s wife wished that he could redirect some of the time he spent with three hundred and thirty adolescents in perpetual states of crisis to their two-year-old at home. Their second child was due in June.

Blasdale and his faculty spoke often about the balance between rigor and rescue. Demand a lot from students like Rousseau and Dwayne, and risk damaging their G.P.A.s and their chance at college admission. Demand little, and when the students get to college they’ll fail. There were times when rescue won out, and an ode to Tupac Shakur slipped by as literary analysis. That didn’t happen regularly, though; as a consequence, many students, particularly younger ones, were less than grateful to be there. While adolescent rage has infinite wellsprings, many complaints could be distilled to these: Pacific Rim stripped you of your logos and jewelry, your ways of speaking, and your means of defending yourself. Its teachers plotted behind your back, sometimes nosing into family things. Then, if your invaded, denuded self didn’t live up to the school’s high standards, they wouldn’t even expel you. They’d imprison you in the homework center at the end of the official school day—more hours, and even more attention, with people from the place you despised.

Pacific Rim did have one seductive treat—a chance to go on a trip to China, where all those Mandarin lessons could be put to use. But that was twelve days out of the fourteen hundred or so that a kid would spend in this place before graduating. Moreover—and this mattered to students, a lot—Pacific Rim didn’t look like a proper school. Not far away were several new public schools with high windows, smooth dark running tracks, and bleached-wood basketball courts. At Rousseau’s instigation, Pacific Rim had started a basketball team, too.
But the school day was too long, and money for transportation too scarce, for the team to compete seriously. Besides, the old factory had no gym, just a small, cracked blacktop outside. On even days, a rubber ball and scuffed orange traffic cones would be set out on the blacktop for recess.

Another respite from academics came after lunch, when students pulled on rubber gloves and scoured the tables and the floor in the cafeteria. This was both a cost-saving measure and one of several ways that the teachers conveyed to the students something crucial: that the school’s existence depended on them. It was not, however, fun, and many Pacific Rim students shirked with relief at the end of the day. Packing onto public buses, they joined contemporaries from what they called “normal” schools, or from no school at all. One day, as the bus wound past Haitian groceries, autoparts stores, and several evicted families trying to sell off the goods that marshals had piled on the sidewalk—such “flee markets” were frequent in gentrifying southern Boston—a toothless young man in a skullcap struck up a conversation with two Pacific Rim girls. “Well, I gots a diploma, too,” he told them. “My diploma said, ‘Get the Fuck Outta Here.’” One of the girls looked at the other and laughed. “If only our teachers would kick us out.”

To begin their Pacific Rim school day, the middle-school students said a Japanese word in unison: gambatte, which roughly translates as “persevere.” By the end of those school days, teachers, more often than not, had also found occasion to say this word to themselves.

As the Christmas holidays approached, the yearbook staff prepared a ballot for senior superlatives. In keeping with school culture, categories like “most helpful,”“best writer,” and “prettiest” were rejected in favor of “most pop-ular” and “prettiest” were rejected in favor of “most popular,”“best writer,” and “most likely to become a teacher at Pacific Rim.” Rousseau was chosen “most noticeable,” and, had the seniors conducted a vote regarding the faculty, his counterpart would have been a tiny, driven college counsellor named Doreen Kelly-Carney. Kelly-Carney, who was forty years old, had, in a previous generation, won the lottery that some of her kids played now: born to low-income teen-age parents, she’d received undergraduate and master’s degrees from Harvard. Kids and college admissions had both grown more complicated since.

Kelly-Carney had been hammering her charges since junior year with the expectation that they would at least try the college-application process. To this end, the school’s post-industrial setting was not just poignant but persuasive: from the window of the science lab, anyone could see that there would be few manufacturing jobs awaiting him at graduation. Still, as deadlines approached, several seniors balked. Some parents balked, too, declining to fill out financial-aid forms that they considered invasions of their privacy. Other parents inflated their incomes as a matter of pride. Kelly-Carney negotiated gently with the parents. With students like Dwayne, whom she had known for six years, she was blunt. “O.K., so maybe all these colleges will reject you,” she said. “Make them do it. Don’t reject yourself first.” Kelly-Carney had worked in the admissions office at Harvard before coming to Pacific Rim, and she respected the college process’s capacity to surprise.

Although many affluent white college applicants presume that their black, urban counterparts have enormous advantages, Kelly-Carney was aware of studies that showed that more than three-quarters of the beneficiaries of affirmative action at selective colleges were affluent and middle-class. Among low-income kids of all races, attendance at selective colleges has declined in the past twenty years, in part because college costs have risen faster than federal and college aid for needy students. The students affected by the new economic equation weren’t the athletes or the top students, of course. They were the middling kids like Rousseau, whose freestyle raps had lately explored this phenomenon:

You be the minority, preferably black?  
The new social profiling is green in fact.

Like most of the faculty, Kelly-Carney had fallen for Rousseau’s intelligent, independent voice, his honesty, and his unusually strong sense of justice. As for his G.P.A.—well, it was too late for lectures. To better his odds, she encouraged him to apply to thirteen schools.

For his college essay, Rousseau had settled on an account of his school trip to China, where villagers screamed, “You N.B.A.? Shaqille O’Neal?” when they saw him, and where he’d overcome his urge to stereotype them, too. He had fine-tuned the prose with Elizabeth Weston, to whom he’d grown close when she ran the homework center. “All us knuckleheads got to know Ms. Weston pretty well,” he said. Now even Rousseau’s mother considered Weston family.

Rousseau’s mother had been a good student in Haïti, but by the time her son reached middle school his English and math skills outmatched hers. Nonetheless, Caziarda, too, had college anxieties. With tuition bills in mind, she’d recently added several freelance hair-relaxing jobs and a course at a local cosmetology school to her work schedule. Hard labor was “in her genes,” she said, and, having studied the evolution of Roxbury’s shopping strips, she regarded nail gluing and hair styling as growth professions. Although she suffered from diabetes and high blood pressure, and had no medical insurance, she was deft at managing stress. She worried about.

Pacific Rim, seeking to minimize that possibility, had recommended Rousseau to a nonprofit organization called the Posse Foundation, which worked with selective colleges to identify and tutor urban public–high-school kids who might otherwise be overlooked. One evening, the Posse people invited Rousseau to join several dozen other kids in a preliminary competition at a local community center. There, they sat around in small groups discussing abortion politics and developments in robotics, as Posse evaluators listened. It was nerve-racking, Rousseau thought, trying to make intelligent conversation while trying to mind-read the people wandering behind you. But he also understood his own position:

Situation’s dire  
Verbal vernacular for hire.

His fluency served him, and he was invited to the next round, a personal interview in an office as colorful and self-consciously optimistic as Pacific Rim.

One by one, the seniors who had arrived before him were following pretty young women into interview
rooms. Rousseau didn’t want to dwell on the competition, so he focused instead on the décor: cool red chairs, beakers full of Snickers bars, a boom box on which OutKast and Alicia Keys played. People were trying to make him feel comfortable, Rousseau sensed, and he might have found this patronizing if the atmosphere hadn’t pleased him so well. He took a closer look at the photographs that covered the walls—minority scholarship kids kicking it at Bowdoin, Bryn Mawr, wherever, looking happier in every single shot than most humans ever get to feel.

Studying the photographs, Rousseau was surprised to see Felix, a Roxbury guy he’d jostled with in pickup basketball games. Felix hadn’t been around lately; the guys Rousseau played ball with often disappeared. It hadn’t occurred to Rousseau that Felix had been hiding at Hamilton College. The boy had never let on that he was smart.

Rousseau had been praying over this Posse business, and seeing Felix was, while not a sign, exactly, at least suggestive. By the time he sat down to be interviewed, he felt confident. By the time he stood up, he felt more so. He wasn’t too surprised, a few days later, to learn that he was in the Posse finals.

He’s stepping with some newness
What problems? He can do this.

Again, the Posse finalists gathered in small groups, this time with college admissions officers present. Rousseau’s group was asked to solve some campus disputes, as if they were college honchos themselves. Rousseau, hearing the assignment, brightened. Having been a honcho—well, a student-government leader—at Pacific Rim, he’d sorted through a number of pitched, emotional battles. But then came the specific problem: parents who refused to let their kids be taught by a homosexual teacher.

His church in Roxbury didn’t accept homosexuality. College admissions officers, he suspected, didn’t share this point of view. Rousseau couldn’t sell out the church he believed had saved his soul, nor did he wish to sound “like a gay-bashing jerk.” In the pleasant conference room full of pleasant people, he felt emotionally trapped. And, long before the letter arrived to make it official, he sensed that his picture would not be hanging next year alongside Felix’s in the room with the comfortable chairs.

The long-distance runner—the one prone to moodiness and confusion—arrived for a meeting with his adviser. He was carrying a dog-eared pocket dictionary and was shaking with anger. The room was the size of a broom closet, and in fact contained a broom, as well as the boy’s alarmingly red-eyed adviser, Alexander Phillips. An exacting thirty-two-year-old history teacher, Phillips caught every virus his students brought to school.

“Mr. Phillips, I know the work, but the teachers aren’t testing me right,” the boy began, clenching and unclenching his jaw: “I mean, maybe I couldn’t do it before, but I’ve got my disability fixed now; with the drugs. I’ve turned around a hundred and eighty degrees. I could have proved it to them, but they wouldn’t let me.” His body folded forward until the house key he wore on a lanyard dangled between his knees.

The boy had for years struggled to keep up with his classmates, and lately strange things had been happening in his mind. While on one level he knew this, as the months passed he preferred to retreat into a happier scenario, in which he would do well on his tests and win a track scholarship to Harvard. Many of Pacific Rim’s teachers had known this boy for six years. They ached for his future, but they also knew that there was something they could do for him now. He had twice failed the state competency tests that were required for graduation. He had one more chance before June, and his teachers wanted him to have a high-school diploma. In the small room with Phillips, more than anywhere else, the boy could at times still trust his mind.

“You couldn’t prove what you knew in the science quiz?” Phillips said between coughing fits. “Well, prove it to me, now.”

The questions were rapid-fire, and as the boy reached for answers—“Colder water contains more oxygen than warmer water!”—his body began to unfold. Phillips, who had a pink, open face and was wearing a sweater vest, seemed to know when it was time to inch his chair closer to the boy, and when it was time to raise the stakes. In an hour, the boy faced a quiz on Thoreau.

“So: ‘Life Without Principle.’ ”

The boy hunched up again. “I don’t get that we’re doing things so long in a short time—”

“What your teacher wants you to think about is what Thoreau believes in most, and why.”

“That you shouldn’t do things for money, that stuff, you know, I don’t want to go too deep into the details.”

“Mmm.”

“He was . . . freethinking.”


“Basically, he was hauling and making things, and he got critical.”

Phillips opened the book and laid it on the table; a concrete object sometimes helped the boy to focus. “We don’t give credit as a society to the proper people,” the boy began again. “I think that is what Thoreau thought—that only the people with the money get the praise. It’s like today, the large people, the athletes and actors, they get the stories and the Hollywood star. And the other ones, the lesser ones, do the things the large people say matter most, hoping that they will get a star, too. But the people who labor the hardest should really get the most credit. Like, today, how hard some people work, no one writes it down.”

The boy pulled the book toward him. “Here is one place where he talks about it.”

The title wise is, for the most part, falsely applied. How can one be a wise man, if he does not know any better how to live than other men?—if he is only more cunning and intellectually subtle?

Then the boy fingered a phrase that had troubled him: “It is wonderful how indifferent men of all classes are.”

“Mr. Phillips, this word ‘wonderful’ is wrong.”

“Thoreau is just using it differently. As you know, ‘wonderful’ usually means fantastic, but sometimes it also means what the word itself breaks into: full of wonder. An idea that makes you think.”

“So something can be amazing,” the boy replied after mulling it over, “whether it is happy or not.”

“So why is the Invisible Man keeping all this junk in his briefcase?” McAlister asked the seniors, pacing. “Bledsoe’s letters, the Sambo dolls, the broken bank—what is Ellison trying to convey?”

“He’s carrying around the legacy—
these broken images that constitute the black man.”

“Dwayne, excellent. It’s like poetry, the way you put that.”

The other seniors looked up, impressed. Poetry? Dwayne the resister?

Elizabeth Weston had been urging the class’s other poet, Rousseau: Start forcing yourself out of your comfort zone, because you’ll be out of it when you get to college. Boston’s Four Seasons Hotel was farther out of that zone than she’d imagined. There, two hundred or so white people were celebrating the fifteenth anniversary of the Pioneer Institute, a conservative think tank that counted among its causes charter schooling; Rousseau, as a student-government leader, had been invited to say a few words before the columnist Charles Krauthammer made a foreign-policy address. Rousseau’s best suit was not the “black tie” that had been called for on the invitation, but he didn’t sweat it. There was novel information to process: the elderly black man handing out towels in the men’s room, the gravity-defying chandeliers, the astonishment of filet mignon—although pre-speech anxiety interfered with full relish. A few days earlier, he had put his lines on paper: “I count it as a blessing from God that I came to a school like the Academy. It has prepared me for college and for life.” But, when called up to the lectern, he forgot the speech in hand. He freestyled a little, advising the rich people, among other things, “gambatte,” and when he finished, to his shock, they rose and cheered.

It was his life’s first standing ovation; he worried that there would not be others. But, reliving the moment in his journal, he felt anger encroaching on his pride. “The powerful people (and the rich) must be doing the right things if this one boy (me) out of hundreds of thousands, is so well spoken,” he wrote, with a sarcasm he rarely used in the journal. It was “so ‘Invisible Man.’ ” Back in his defiant days, it had occurred to him that he might be perpetuating one stereotype. Now he feared that he was perpetuating another—a superficial success story that might be held against kids who lacked the chances he’d had. And even he, the privileged one, wasn’t sure he was going to college.

By March, the appearance of the Virgin in the ophthalmology-clinic window had been discounted: chemical deposits, an inquiry of the archdiocese concluded, and most of the pilgrims dispersed. What criminologists had called the “Boston miracle”—a dramatic drop in violent crime during the nineteen-nineties—had been unravelling, too. In four days, three local teen-agers had been killed, and more shootings and stabbings followed, until the homicide rate was double the previous year’s. On buses, kids began wearing yellow police tape around their arms and ankles, to commemorate or invent a closeness to the dead.

Rousseau, for one, was happy to keep a psychological distance. He and his mother had moved to a new neighborhood. There, he had been promptly jumped and robbed by seven kids his age. For months afterward, returning from school, he felt on edge. He had let his street smarts soften, when the college referendum on his future was suggesting that he might well need them:

Hamilton College: no.

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: no.

George Washington University: no.

University of Massachusetts–Boston: no.

St. John’s University: waitlist.

Northeastern University: if you do well next year in community college, maybe.

Williams College: if you do another year of high school, we’ll give you a good, hard look.

Marcus was choosing among the University of Virginia, Virginia Tech, Syracuse, and Ohio State. Sarabina, whose parents expected her to stay close to home, had accepted a scholarship from Boston College. A few months before, Rousseau had arranged to retake the S.A.T.—a last effort to improve his scores and compensate for his G.P.A. But then he forgot the date and slept through the test. In his notebook appeared lyrics too terse to be called freestyling:

I won’t lie
Why
Try

One afternoon in Pacific Rim’s library, Rousseau huddled with Kelly-Carney, the college counsellor, his enormous sneakers toe to toe with her red flats. “It’s my own lack of discipline that caused this, but my mom and dad don’t
understand,” he said. “They think everything is going to be fine. I can’t stand to tell them anything now.”

“There’s still time, Rousseau, still schools you haven’t heard from, and safer schools where it’s not too late to apply,” Kelly-Carney said. “At the University of Richmond, you’ll be given geographic preference. Why don’t we push to get you an interview? Once they meet you—well, to not do it would be doing yourself an injustice.”

He held his head in his hands for a moment, then looked up.

“Ms. Kelly-Carney, it’s just—I aimed too high.”

One weekend, a teen-ager was robbed at knifepoint in a playground three blocks south of the school. “Factually and actually,” as Pacific Rim kids like to say, no one from the school was involved. Yet somehow they were in deep. While the school was bordered on the north and east by train tracks and old factories, the southern side, where the playground was, faced Readville, one of Boston’s white, middle-class enclaves. The mayor lived there, in one of the Cape-Cod style houses and peony-filled yards that evoked the age when good manufacturing jobs brought whole communities into being. With the armed robbery, the residents came together in a safety crusade. Among the identified threats: Pacific Rim kids who were turned loose in their neighborhood after school. As the days got warmer, some of them decided that they preferred Readville’s well-tended, uncrowded playground to the ones awaiting them back home. And so Spencer Blasdale’s phone began to ring.

Late spring was, for Blasdale, the season of Excel spreadsheets—a time of analyzing an influx of test scores and devising improvements for next year. Grave deficiencies were getting harder to find. On the Stanford 9 tests, the sixth graders under Elizabeth Weston and her fellow-teachers had risen from the thirty-ninth percentile, nationally, to the fifty-first. In math, they finished in the seventy-eighth percentile, a phenomenal accomplishment for an inner-city school, but an achievement that would be overshadowed by the state competency-test results of the tenth graders. Eighty-two per cent had demonstrated good or excellent skills in English, and ninety per cent had demonstrated such skills in math. Not one of the tenth graders had failed. And the troubled long-distance runner had not failed, either. On his final try, the senior earned the right to get his diploma.

Blasdale had little time to celebrate, however, and not only because his second daughter was about to arrive. Readville residents’ children were afraid to use the swing sets. Pacific Rim teen-agers had been seen kissing on a Readville hill. And so he added to his list of daily duties an after-school walking tour of Readville.

“It’s understandable,” he said one cloudless day, heading from the old factory toward the park. “Kids in groups can be intimidating. We’re trying to impress on the students that they’re ambassadors for the school, and if I’m out here more, letting residents know what we’re doing, I think things will be fine.” He hated the thought of moving again and losing students in the process. “It’s been tense, but once you meet people in the neighborhood, they’re much nicer than you—”

Suddenly, he stopped, inhaling sharply. Across the quiet street, a blond woman with a baby stroller was approaching a corner. Around the corner, by a hedge, was a Pacific Rim sixth grader with his pants down.

Blasdale sped across the street. “I had to pee,” the student said, putting things in and pulling things up. The woman with the stroller blithely passed.

Indecent exposure? Temperamental bladder? Later, after many painstaking discussions with the child and his family, Blasdale would have a better idea. But even now he knew that, to a skeptical community, the distinctions would be moot. The judgments of this neighborhood would not be too different from the judgments of the society at large.

In May, Pacific Rim seniors dawdled in the computer lab, planning their last weeks of high school.

“It’s a tradition, like the prom. We’ve got to have a senior skip day.”

“Should it be a Friday? Whose house can we kick it at? Dwayne?”

A voice came from behind a computer. “Y’all go. I can’t be with it.”

“Dwayne, you can’t be serious. Every other day’s senior skip day in your calendar.”

“My grandma would kill me. Anyway, I’ve got to do my government paper.”

Dwayne continued to assure his teachers that college meant little to
had finished the year with high honors. Hampshire offered to pay his way. Liberal-arts college in the hills of New Hampshire—didn't want him very much. He and his family would have to borrow about twenty-five thousand dollars a year—more than his mother's annual income. "Impossible," Kelly-Carney said. "Don't worry," Rousseau's mother said. "If I have to go corner to corner, church to church, you will be going to college in September." As she and his father took out big loans from the New York State college-financing agency, Rousseau lined up a summer job helping at-risk kids in his new neighborhood. At three hundred dollars a week, it would do little to change the economic equation. But he had done all the worrying about the future that a boy in his last days of high school could bear. How miserable could he be, anyway? He was taking Sarabina to the prom.

"I can see clearly now the rain has gone, I can see all obstacles in my way..."

In one room, the chorus was injecting some Caribbean groove into a seventies standard, in preparation for the graduation finale. Down the hall, an uncommonly relaxed Doreen Kelly-Carney was tackling senior-class questions about hot plates—whether colleges would let you have them in your dorm room. The process was over, the verdicts were in, and Pacific Rim seniors had done spectacularly well.

Elisa had chosen Williams over Smith. Kim had a full scholarship to Bryn Mawr. Ike had picked Syracuse, Melissa chose Simmons, and Suzie was Wellesley-bound. Simone, the first person in her extended family to finish high school in a quarter century, was going to Hampton. Jasmynn would be continuing her Mandarin studies at the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth. But the shocker of the season was Dwayne, who had followed one of Kelly-Carney's Hail Mary strategies: apply to a place where there won't be too many other applicants like you. As gang conflict escalated in his neighborhood, a small liberal-arts college in the hills of New Hampshire offered to pay his way. Rousseau had been less fortunate. He had finished the year with high honors and been accepted off the waiting list at St. John's University. Then he saw the offer of financial aid. Maybe his parents had filled out the forms wrong. Maybe St. John's didn't want him very much. He and his family would have to borrow about twenty-five thousand dollars a year—more than his mother's annual income.

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One June morning, the U.P.S. man delivered two brown boxes to the administration office at Pacific Rim. They contained the caps and gowns that the seniors eagerly awaited, but it took hours for the faculty to notice. In the public high schools near Pacific Rim, over a quarter of the children had dropped out before graduation; across the state, dropout rates among seniors were higher than they had been in the nineteen-nineties. At Pacific Rim, every senior had finished. One developmentally delayed boy would go to a respected non-degree program at a local four-year college, where he hoped to study early-childhood development; the troubled long-distance runner would attend community college in hopes of becoming a personal trainer. Each of the remaining twenty-two had been accepted to a four-year college. Later, Blasdale and his teachers told one another, they would bask. But three hundred other futures required immediate attention.

The class of 2005 was a larger, harder group, and nine teachers—a third of the faculty—were leaving. They’d found jobs with bigger paychecks, more time to be parents, less emotional depletion—the usual reasons. Blasdale had reviewed three hundred résumés, interviewed dozens of people, and thought he’d found some good new teachers, but he knew that in a year he’d be searching for replacements again.

In mid-June, Rousseau and the other seniors gathered on a curved stairway at Faneuil Hall, downtown. The boys leaned against Doric columns, comparing ties. The girls shifted their weight from stiletto to stiletto, mulling whether to walk in bare feet. Below them they could see the hall growing packed, people sweating and sniffing already, but the seniors were trying to delay their entrance as long as they could. It wasn’t a matter of sentiment. Dwayne, that knucklehead, had yet to arrive.

"Dwayne! Where you at? We’re blowing up your cell phone here!"

"Yo, Dwayne, even you aren’t too cool to come to graduation. I’m going to call right back in sixty seconds—pick up!"

"Dwayne, please—they’re making us turn off the cell phone, just get your butt over here now."

Two days earlier, at a dinner that the faculty gave for the seniors’ families, Dwayne’s mother had arrived sobbing and laden with flowers for the teachers who she believed had saved her son. Tonight, however, Dwayne’s classmates went forward without him, as they would do again in September. The kids sensed already that they had lost him. The teachers sensed already the more difficult rescue effort that lay ahead. Within three weeks of graduation, he would suffer two gunshot wounds, be arrested, and plead not guilty to assault with a dangerous weapon. As freshman college orientation in New Hampshire came and went, he would be in the Suffolk County jail.

"This is no place for you guys," he’d say when Rousseau and a classmate tried to visit. It was no place, Rousseau thought, for Dwayne, either.

Rousseau now came forward to give the commencement address. Standing under a portrait of Daniel Webster, with Blasdale and Weston beside him, and six hundred people in front, he felt uncannily calm. The next time life got hard—and it would get hard, he suspected—there was something he was keen to remember: that once, when challenged, he rose.