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Townie: Stories of Development

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## ABSTRACT

Through works of creative nonfiction and satire, this thesis shows glimpses of various State College subcultures and their sometimes complicated relationship with Penn State. With the framework of a coming-of-age story holding the collection together, these stories and essays describe a Happy Valley local's estrangement from the carefully curated image of an unproblematic college town. This thesis looks at the divide between the university and the titular "townies," as well as where that line is drawn, and it illuminates the glossed-over fissures that introduce discord to a harmonious town-and-gown relationship. Themes of erasure, gentrification, and cultural homogeneity interact with a celebration of a humble yet multifaceted community. This conflict elucidates the nuances involved with belonging, be it to a place or a culture, and it interrogates the idea that State College's greatest source of identity is the institution at its center.

**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

Acknowledgements .....	iii
Introductory Reflections .....	1
Shagwagon .....	5
Clearing Waste .....	15
Townie: A Glossary of Definitions .....	17
The Yards .....	29
Our Streets .....	31
Bibliography .....	43

## Acknowledgements

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I extend the same gratitude to my honors adviser, Carla Mulford, for her tactful critiques and overall concern for my well-being. Her willingness to help me look beyond the academic grindstone and look for balance in my life has always been as centering as it is transformative.

I would also like to thank my parents, Deborah and Perry Schram, for raising me in a community they so obviously love. Even though my relationship with State College is complicated, I can't think of a more caring act than wanting me to see in it what they do.

Jess Kim, Xavier Szigethy, Sam Lear, and my other study buddies have my appreciation for accompanying me almost every day as I worked on this thesis, even when they made me comically unproductive.

Lastly, I thank the staff at The Bicycle Shop and Zeno's Pub in downtown State College. Working at these businesses helped me find a new richness in working with people from all walks of life, and I will always appreciate the ability they gave me to see people beyond their face value. This thesis is a testament to their way of life.

## Introductory Reflections

If you know me outside the context of this thesis, you know I'm not typically a confrontational person. It comes with the territory: growing up in State College, I'm used to being overshadowed by an entity far larger than myself, and that leads to a mindset of constant compromise, sometimes to my detriment. That said, when it was finally time to decide what the topic of my thesis would be, I knew I couldn't look anywhere else but around the block. My status as a local, affectionately or derogatorily known as a "townie," has been at the forefront of how I conduct myself socially while I've been on this campus. Every class on my first day at Penn State started with a whip-around in which everyone introduced themselves by their hometown. Whenever I said "State College," people's heads peeked up, just for a second. It made me feel noticed, and I wasn't used to it. I felt unnerved knowing that my lifelong residence in town seemed like a novel concept to my classmates.

Through my time in the English department, I've had the chance to look at plenty of other stories about those who live unnoticed or undervalued lives. Despite covering subject matter far removed from my white, middle-class lifestyle, Louise Erdrich's *The Round House* struck a note with me in particular. Reading through the lens of a child, I empathized with the narrator's tendency to boil complexities about land rights and Native justice down into sci-fi references and other absurd-but-grounding analogies. Drafting this thesis, I wanted to try capturing that same childlike perspective and aim it at the evolution of my imagination of State College as I grew up.

I didn't find it easy to keep feeling like a child in the years following the Sandusky scandal. The controversy rocked my family and my neighborhood, and an uncertainty about the image of Happy Valley began to corrupt our lives and our senses of place. As the University—and to some extent, the community at large—worked to cover its tracks and repair its image over the course of the 2010's, I became more attuned to reading between the lines of what was happening in and around University Park. That perspective informs these essays.

Because my concentration in English focuses on Professional and Media Writing, I felt like it would be an apt fusion of my skills to introduce fake professional documents as a supplement for my main essays in this project. Designed to mimic the kind of administrative and marketing-oriented texts I've been accustomed to examining, these works of satire, "Clearing Waste" and "The Yards," are designed to show the cracks in the community in a more exaggerated but close-to-home fashion. In the spirit of the facetious Kurt Vonnegut's *Player Piano* and *Slaughterhouse Five*, I wanted to combine the outrageousness of the local community's ignored reality with an apathetic "so-it-goes"-ness.

I was also encouraged to play with genre and form because my supervisor, Dr. Kasdorf, introduced me to lyric essays while I was constructing my initial draft. While I'm used to writing straight slogs of text, I found that essays like Randon Billings Noble's "The Heart as a Torn Muscle" and Elizabeth K Brown's "Informed Consent" not only used form as a means of breaking up text for readability, but also as a way of enriching the story being told. Their professional style plays with the inorganic feeling some professional documents have, burning through it all with perspectives that resist their euphemistic presentation.

In my first few iterations of this thesis, I couldn't find a place to plant my emotions on this brick wall of professionalism. I lashed out in erratic ways throughout each of my pieces,

mostly to blow off the steam I had built up from so many years of living in the shadow of Old Main, and I don't believe it strengthened my work at all. Yet some of this emotion is still important: the personal angles I provide through my memoir pieces express the problematic undertones of a cultural evolution that, on paper, looks like it's taking State College in the right direction. There's a sense of intuition that has always fueled my concerns about the transformation of my hometown, and I felt like hard, analytical nonfiction would too easily lose that. Nonetheless, I hope that this iteration finds a better balance between celebration and frustration, as well as introspection and analysis. As I was revising, even though I knew what emotions I was trying to convey, I forced myself to approach my work with a bigger emphasis on "Who cares?"

Looking to other voices that decried the overreach of a university's presence, I found Davarian L Baldwin, an urbanist from Trinity College who studies the relationship between town and gown in other communities. I was shocked to read his book, *In the Shadow of the Ivory Tower*, and see something similar to the metamorphosis of State College happening in other places across the nation. The squashing of small businesses, the gentrification, and the cultural homogenization I've witnessed here are also present around other major schools, such as the University of Chicago, Yale, Cornell, Ithaca College, Arizona State University, and New York University. We're just one limb on a rapidly branching tree of change, and I was both comforted and terrified to learn that we are not alone.

If nothing else, I hope this thesis illuminates the "townie" as someone more than a prudish curmudgeon who hates fun. I am, admittedly, a college student myself, and it would be absurd of me to say that I don't find myself on the gown side every once in a while. But my roots are still grounded in the small community that raised me next to a bigger one; as much as this is a

criticism of those who blindly bleed blue and white, it is also a coming of age story and a celebration of those who helped me find a new kind of peace in a fractured community. I yearn to live outside of the bounds of resentment.

Before I went home to write this introduction, I stopped by a reading of Dr. Kasdorf's new book, *As Is*. It's the newest collection of her poetry, and it's a celebration of the imperfections we might view as world-ending conflicts. It reminded me of the value of contrast, and it helped me to reassess what message I was trying to send with this thesis. I asked Dr. Kasdorf to sign my copy, and below her signature, she wrote one simple phrase: "Love this broken world."

I hope whoever reads this thesis sees that I want to.



## Shagwagon

I have a bad habit of making assumptions about others based on their cars. Growing up in a well-to-do college town surrounded by an expanse of rural land, I have seen stark economic discrepancy, and it showed itself on the roads. Filthy-rich students tore through the streets in Lamborghinis on the same pavement traversed by rusty trucks and farm equipment. At the same time, lower-class students got around in hand-me-down minivans and station wagons while passing neighborhoods packed with shiny hybrid SUVs. These cars all tell a story, assign an identity; we project our priorities, our means, and our culture onto these massive, tons-heavy boxes of steel. We keep belongings in them, decorate them, and take them everywhere as if they were roving extensions of our homes; we also fuel them, repair them, and care for them like they're extensions of our bodies.

I used to struggle with my automotive image. In the early years of high school, I borrowed my parents' cars whenever I needed to get around, while many of my friends, supported by their university-employed families, bought their own, sometimes getting them before they could even drive. Even my coworkers at the local bike shop, who abhorred driving, had their own cars; when we rode mountain bikes together, their souped up trucks and hatchbacks with fancy rack mounts would be the first things I'd see as they pulled up to the trailhead, as if it were their introduction. For me, it was my mom's Chrysler minivan that looked like two kids were raised in it, a dying vehicle that carried my family dutifully through almost two decades. I struggled to enjoy driving the van, even though it was all my mother and I had the means to own and maintain; but my coworkers joked that I wasn't truly independent yet because I hadn't chosen my own car. To them, choosing my steed was the ultimate rite of maturation.

The more senior mechanics at the shop prodded me one day about my experience with what they considered the “lost art” of driving a manual transmission. At the time, all I had done was stall my friend’s Volkswagen Rabbit a couple times in a gravel parking lot, and I had given up, flustered. I didn’t have any means of getting more practice, but I had felt some attraction to shifting through gears on a quiet country road like driving a racecar. I longed to possess some nugget of antiquated knowledge that could bring me closer to these self-proclaimed “old-heads.” With an adolescent’s bank account, though, I was stuck imagining.

I told everyone at the shop about this conundrum. Perhaps it was a cry for help, but one of the quieter guys, a younger employee also named Adam, piped up.

“Could you afford a car that’s, say, 500 dollars?” he asked, though I sensed a hint of smugness in his tone. I think he and the others had always seen me as a somewhat sheltered child. They assumed that I looked down on their way of life because they made less money than my parents, and I’ll admit that I didn’t always understand them. I regretted this barrier between me and the people with whom I spent my Saturdays, but they seemed to know better than me what kind of trajectory my life would take. They knew I looked forward to college and a career of desk-sitting while they would lean over repair stands until their necks and knees gave out.

Their way showed me there was a simple beauty in grit, in a life spent working with one’s grease-blackened hands. They honed the golden moments in their humdrum rituals and made them the central focus of their days: their first cups of coffee from the machine in the office, daily walks to the corner store, their first drinks cracked open an hour before closing time. I would watch them cup single cans of beer, the kind of beer we kids would stuff down our bloated gullets by the case, and sip them over that last hour before going home. They didn’t care for the taste or the buzz, just the fulfillment of a ritual that completed the day. They owed

themselves nothing more, and I envied that humble self-satisfaction. I wanted a way into that life, and I was curious if Adam was offering that to me.

“Who the hell would have a car that’s worth what we make in a week?” I responded to him. He walked over to me, his head buried in his phone. He was clearly looking for something, and I could tell from the speed of his shuffle that he was excited for me to see it.

“This isn’t going to be some piece of shit, is it?” I asked.

Adam gasped and scoffed as if to mock my concern. I knew him to be thrifty, and he always had a good eye for diamonds in the rough, but I had yet to see the appeal of a car worth that little.

“This car isn’t even close to a piece of shit,” Adam said in an unserious tone. He still hadn’t found the picture, but he began to sell it to me anyway. “This thing is gonna keep driving for as long as you need it to, and everything under the hood is perfect. Even better, it will probably pass inspection.”

“What do you mean ‘probably’?” I asked as he turned around to show me an image of the car in his driveway.

It was a piece of shit.

The 1995 Subaru Legacy was painted an abhorrent, rusty-red color that seemed like it would rub off onto my fingers if I touched it; the paint blended into hand-sized patches of brittle corrosion that sprayed backward from the fenders of each wheel. The headlights shone a sickly yellow color, and the seats appeared stained. I refused in that moment to consider Adam’s offer. No matter what, I didn’t want to be seen by all my friends driving their sparkly dealership cars while I sputtered around in that tin can.

A few days later, though, as I was dropping Adam off from a mountain bike ride, he asked me if I wanted to take another look at it, “just while you’re here.” Reluctantly, I agreed, but only because I hadn’t seen a manual car in a while. The interior smelled of moth balls and wet dogs, and clumps of hard dust had solidified in the console cupholders, but Adam seemed excited to start it up. I sat down in the driver’s seat that sat just a foot above the ground, pushed in the clutch pedal, which creaked under my foot, and turned the thin, coppery key in the ignition. The car coughed like an old lawnmower at first, the engine lifting the front end arrhythmically as it struggled to turn over.

“Is this even going to start?” I thought, worried that I was hurting something. Adam stood outside with his arms crossed—he knew what was coming.

Suddenly, as the cylinders finally caught a spark of life, a deep, resonant hum zapped through my feet to the back of my seat. The body settled down onto the wheels as if soaking in a bath, and the expired air freshener hanging from the rear-view mirror began swinging to a heartbeat’s cadence. I looked to Adam, wide-eyed with disbelief, and he nodded while walking around to get in the passenger seat.

“Let’s take it for a spin,” Adam said.

The car was a rocket ship in disguise. The way it tore across the roads around Adam’s neighborhood made the machine feel totally unhindered, like every other car I had driven was keeping me in a bubble. Of course, this was probably because it lacked modern safety features, but my connection to the road seemed like it was wired straight from the hubs to my hands. The low-standing frame turned corners with unfettered grace and deeply planted traction, and it launched from stops as quickly as my inexperienced hands could fumble the shifter. The next day, Adam and I took the car straight to AAA, where I handed him a wad of cash and floored it

home with my new plates to start patching up the rust. Several hours of getting high off fiberglass adhesive and spray paint later, my newfound chariot of youthful scrappiness was, to my standards, ready for the road.

Among my peers in high school, the status of car ownership propelled me to the top of our little social hierarchy, regardless of what the thing looked like. The rumor spread that I owned a car and could give rides, and my phone constantly blew up with messages from distant acquaintances who “definitely want to catch up sometime!” The second topic of conversation would involve where and when I was giving someone a lift, which sometimes felt shallow, but I wasn’t above enjoying the clout anyway. The feeling of sitting on my hood outside a friend’s house, the engine running and the headlights sifting through evening fog behind me, made me feel like a fledgling adult. And a badass. Of course, the façade fell apart when my friends smelled the grandma’s-closet interior for the first time, but I learned to swell with pride every time someone chuckled “This thing’s a piece of shit!” as I pulled away from the curb. Over time, the car developed a nickname, “the Shagwagon,” as it looked to many like the kind of car in which a teenager would lose his virginity while parked at an overlook. Or perhaps a Dairy Queen. I never truly fulfilled this potential, but I never minded that people assumed. I enjoyed wearing the musk of someone laid-back and self-confident enough to drive a box of spare parts.

Over three years, I put more than 20,000 miles on the Shagwagon. I drove it all over the Northeast, made it my college cycling club’s team vehicle for a couple racing seasons, and even convinced my ex at one point to make it our daily commuter. Every once in a while, the ever-looming rust on the car’s underside would devour a component or two, so I had it in the shop all the time for repairs; but I always relished the fact that I could damn near replace the engine and still have spent less on my car than anyone I knew. The paint would chip over time, and I would

occasionally find a new dent somewhere on the bumper, but the engine always purred with the same gentle-but-sturdy hum that made me want to drive it in the first place. In this sense, the car felt alive: even as its decades-old exterior crumbled away, the car kept a consistent, spirited amble that convinced me it had a soul. Even as several chapters of a turbulent adolescence opened and closed, and as I careened into adulthood, the one thing that remained constant was my Subaru. Sometimes, it wanted to push into the future more than I did. I knew, though, that it wouldn't always be that sturdy.

In the summer of 2021, I took the Shagwagon in for an annual inspection by my friend Vanya. Russian-born and a Cornell graduate, Vanya earned the title of “Shirtless Wonder” for racing his mountain bike 100 miles in nothing but spandex shorts. He lives on a horse farm with his wife in a remote area west of town and runs a small but effective repair shop out of his garage. To play with cars, he gave up a university job he held for years that took him away from his home and kept him crunching numbers through the sunlit day. I respected him for that in the same way I respect my old coworkers, though I knew he made a choice and they hadn't.

My friends told me rumors about Vanya's knack for chumming with local mechanics in exchange for a roll or two of inspection stickers, which came in handy when I was worried about getting the Subie to pass anywhere else. Vanya's yard is filled with old, old cars, all of which are packed with fist-sized rust holes, but which all still have up-to-date inspections. His superpower is keeping “classic cars” out of the grave for as long as he can, and he loved keeping my car on the road. Unfortunately, every year, the repairs crept into higher price margins, and I was beginning to dread repair updates even from him. In 2021, Vanya finally dropped the bomb on me that the transmission was on its last leg, noting that the clutch slipped when he really stepped on the gas. He told some ugly number for what it would cost me to replace everything. He

promised me that I could probably get another year out of it all if I were careful. We agreed to wait until the following summer to crack everything open and get it done, especially since I didn't have plans to drive much until then.

I didn't keep that promise to myself, however, as life became more complicated—in other words, more adult. When the next summer rolled around, I found myself working an internship based in Easton, Pennsylvania for a magazine company. The closest apartment I could find for the summer was in neighboring Bethlehem, which meant that my daily commute was more than 20 miles round-trip. As much as I hated to put my car through that kind of stress every day, I decided to push through it until August. I figured that because the clutch wasn't slipping too badly, I still had plenty of time before it became a crisis worth addressing. I was diligent about shifting carefully, and I never drove when I didn't need to. I knew that every time I changed gears, I ate away at the transmission a little bit. It started to slip at 50, then 40, then 30 miles an hour, but I could still creep along, and I thought I could still crawl back to State College if nothing bad happened.

Then, one day, I couldn't climb the hill down the road from my apartment. The engine squealed as I tried, cussing worriedly, to scale the 50-foot hill that stood between me and the road to my office. I threw the car into as low a gear as I could go, but it ground to a halt on the incline. I began to smell the burnt-rubber odor of a clutch that had worn down to bare steel, with nothing left to grab onto the drivetrain. It was done.

I coasted backwards down the hill back to my apartment. On level ground again, I could limp the broken beast back to my driveway, where I left it to sit for several weeks. This whole episode happened with almost a month left remaining in my summer gig, and I was effectively

stranded. I couldn't get the car to Vanya any time soon, and I knew that taking the poor thing to any shop near me would end with a bill the size of my summer earnings.

With no options for getting to work, and the nearest bus stop sitting several miles from my apartment, my only option was to finance a new car. It seemed ironic to me that the most cost-effective solution to my problem was to ditch the car that had so devoutly kept me going over so many miles, but I was out of time to come up with a better idea. I made a down payment on a newer car with what little money I had, and the Shagwagon found a temporary resting place in the grass outside my apartment. Weeds had time to grow up in its shade.

When the time came for me to move back to college, I enlisted my father to help me exhume the Shagwagon and move it to a more final resting place, or at least to a scrapper. We hooked it up to the rental truck that contained the rest of my belongings, and I drove the three hours back home sitting in a caravan behind it. I spent the drive staring at the sticker-bombed hatch, where my friends had covered the rear windshield with everything from the University of Vermont logo to a small sticker reading "Free Blowjob." A melancholy gaze rested on the dent under my license plate that I got from rolling backwards into a parked car on a steep Pittsburgh hill. The air freshener dangling from the mirror up front wasn't swaying anymore.

Every once in a while, now that I'm back in school, I pass a car that looks like the Shagwagon. More often than not, it looks a lot cleaner, which throws me out of the illusion that the old thing is still out there, ready for me to take it back. In reality, it's in my dad's driveway, sitting with a dead battery and flat tires.

The other day, I walked into the bike shop where I used to work, and I took some time to check in with Adam about the state of things. That dim, stuffy basement is all that connects me to my teenage life, and I still have a habit of stopping by, dropping off some beer, and shooting



the shit with the men who, whether they wanted to or not, helped raise me. Usually, the conversation falls into a rant about politics, management, or some new shiny piece of bike gear; this time, though, Adam was going off about an old Chevy truck that was already losing its luster after just a few months.

“It just doesn’t have a zip to it like that Subie I sold you,” Adam said with his eyes fixed on the vague distance. In that moment, I realized that he missed the Shagwagon too, and that I wasn’t the only one burdened with disposing of a car that carried me loyally through so many years. He, too, regretted getting rid of it, and he also hadn’t been able to come up with another way to keep it rolling. Seeing this glint of yearning in his posture, I suddenly had an idea.

“You know, I’m not driving that car anymore, if you want it back,” I said. “It’s in pretty bad shape, but you’ll have more time and money to get it back on the road than I would.”

A small, “you little bastard” kind of grin started to form under Adam’s cheek as he shook his head.

“You know, I think I’m going to have to take you up on that.” The pitch of his voice raised slightly as he fought back what I imagine was childlike giddiness. We agreed to sell it back for the same price I bought it from him, and we shook on the promise that the Legacy would drive again.

Adam already has an appointment with a body shop in town to get all the rusty panels cut off and replaced with a fresh outer layer. He aspires to replace almost everything in the engine bay helped by an enthusiastic Vanya, and he wants to throw a new radio in the dashboard, just for good measure. As I know it, the Shagwagon, the old, tired husk of a car that longed for the scrap yard, is dead, but another blank slate will sit atop the old frame soon. I may have to part

ways with it before its metamorphosis, but I'm reminded that its story started before I was alive, and it will surely continue well after I've signed the title off to Adam.

The Shagwagon didn't belong to me; I belonged to it, or at least to the philosophy it showed me. I don't see success in a shiny new car anymore, and in a way, I feel liberated. Even if I believe that my car can say something about me, perhaps even at my foundation, I'm unafraid of the consequences of living well in a hunk of junk.

This morning, I scratched the door of my new Subaru Outback as I fumbled for my keys, and the mark won't buff out. That's more like it.

## Clearing Waste

**MEMO TO:** Fairmount Building Custodial Staff

**FROM:** SCASD Administrative Offices

**DATE:** August 23, 2022

**SUBJECT:** Clearing Waste

We are contacting you to notify you that we are now entering the next stage of transitioning assets out of the State College Area School District's historic Fairmount Building. As you know, this building was the original site for the State College Area High School over a hundred years ago. It has continued to serve as the host for several other academic programs, including the Delta Program, a district-sponsored democratic alternative school that used the building from 1981 to 2019.

The building's century-old legacy means it has accumulated untold artifacts reaching as far back as the first World War, which we acknowledge on a plaque next to one of the entrances. Unfortunately, this also means that there are too many assets for us to be willing to deal with, and we have given ourselves no choice but to throw it all in the garbage.

While this might seem like a waste of resources, we are committed to clearing the way for another buyer, such as the State College Borough, to purchase the building and its land as quickly as possible. The borough, to which we have given right of first refusal, plans to revitalize the plot of land, turning it into a creative space that could become a new "arts and cultural hub" for downtown. The project will improve the aesthetic appeal of South Allen Street, attracting more bright young professionals.

In the meantime, it will be the job of the Fairmount custodial staff to remove all items from the building. Every classroom, closet, storage room, and hallway must be cleared of all movable objects. Below is a list of the waste we have managed to inventory so far:

- Two industrial-size trash bins full of children's books; many of them are first editions, and many more of them are brand-new, only opened once or twice
- Microwaves, refrigerators, and other kitchen appliances, fully functional but outdated
- Multiple closets of brand-new art supplies, mostly unopened
- Five working bicycles, left by Delta Program students from a cycling class in spring 2019; when the program moved that summer, some kids forgot to take their things home
- Dozens of desks, tables, couches, and shelves, for which Delta faculty might come looking—don't worry about them, though

**To clarify, none of this is to be donated, distributed, or otherwise removed from the premises. This is all school district property, and anyone caught taking it will face consequences up to and including dismissal or prosecution for theft.**

As you may also be aware, the Fairmount building is not entirely vacated. On the top floor, the Reclaiming Individual Talents (RIT) Program is continuing to operate as usual. This program functions as a last resort for children with behavioral issues, whom the state requires us to educate. These students have all been suspended, expelled, charged with truancy, or otherwise sanctioned severely for their behavior; they also tend to come from underprivileged families.

While the RIT Program is expected to operate as normal, we will continue to empty the building around them. This might cause a few awkward changes in routine for the program, so be aware of the following:

- **There will no longer be a functioning cafeteria**, as we will be relocating its staff and equipment. Students will receive daily lunch portions from the leftovers of the neighboring Easterly Parkway Elementary School, which will be delivered to a food warmer. (This warmer doesn't always work, though, so there is also a microwave in the lunchroom.)
- Due to the excessive work required to turn the building's boiler on and off, **the heaters in the building will always be on**—and they get frighteningly hot, with some rooms exceeding 100 degrees Fahrenheit. Be advised that you may have to run air conditioning year-round, even in the dead of winter.
- **The fire alarm only halfway works**. It makes a lot of noise when it goes off, but it can't contact the Fire Department anymore. (You may find this out the hard way when one of the aforementioned heaters ignites spontaneously.)

**Be aware that these measures are only temporary, and they do not reflect our long-term goals for the RIT Program.** We are currently renovating the State College Area High School's old auto repair classroom (a garage) into their next permanent location. We tried to relocate them into an old locker room, but the program's secretary, Deborah Schram, wouldn't have it. "I don't care what you think about these kids—they need a classroom," she told us over the deafening roar of bathroom fans in her would-have-been office.

As we continue our reconstruction of the school district at large, we thank you for your patience and cooperation.

## Townie: A Glossary of Definitions

### *Riot*

One definition implies unabashed revelry, carefree debauchery, and the spirit of a legendary party; the other connotes violence.

As long as I've been alive, State College has been a hotspot for riots of both kinds. I remember the noisy neighbors up the street who partied and played beer pong in their front yards, and I remember the football games that sent hundreds of thousands of superfans trotting past my front yard. I also remember the first time I smelled pepper spray, when I was eleven: the day after my neighbor, Joe Paterno, lost his job.

I found it peculiar that a smell like salsa was wafting in from the campus down the street. I was too young to understand what was happening, but I watched from my school bus as a sea of cheering students marched on Paterno's street, blocking our path. The students all chanted like they were at a football game, like their team was about to score. "We love you, Joe," they orated into the chilly autumnal air. It wasn't until I saw the news the next day, covering unprecedented chaos and destruction just blocks from my house, that I started to feel uneasy about the crowd around the block.

That was how I grew up: sharing backyards with people invested in little entertainments that gave the entire town a hangover. Truthfully, it was sometimes exhausting to live on the dumping ground of young-adult angst, as if we were nothing more than a town-sized troop of babysitters. As these students grew up, they graduated, and they were replaced with a new wave of fresh, wide-eyed teens who no longer had to answer to their parents. With the bitter memory

of a fledgling uprising, I found it hard to hear the hollering the same way. But my parents knew better than I that college antics were a fact of local life.

“One of the hardest things about going to Penn State,” my dad often said, “is that there’s always a party going on somewhere.” He meant it as a warning, but I could tell he was smothering rosy reminiscence whenever he said it. For many locals, the “life of the party” is an anticipated inevitability on warm days, and there’s a sense of comfort in that, despite the disorder it brings. It gives the town a rhythm. The whole community operates on a semesterly calendar, even for those who don’t go to school, because the town feels empty in the summer. Not enough noise.

My parents met at a Penn State party, living in the same building, but two floors apart. I owe my existence to their debauchery.

### *College Town*

A town that contains a college, or that has been consumed by one.

From my family’s brick ranch house in College Heights, I sometimes heard the Blue Band practicing as I got off the bus and walked the short few blocks home, percussion thudding through the trees that lined our streets. We were flanked up and down our hill by dilapidated three-story houses with plastic tables scattered in backyards, all populated by students in their endless bacchanalia. Football games were something that brought my family to visit, our friendly neighborhood happened to be full of university employees, and “JoePa” was no more significant to me than the size of his candy bowl on Halloween—really big, by the way. The neighborhood kept everything small, and I had liked it that way. I believed that my relationship with Penn State

and its students was stable, perhaps even harmonious, despite the beast I knew it could become when things got off-balance.

State College is often lauded as one of the safest, most pleasant towns in the country. The moniker, “Happy Valley,” comes from the Great Depression, when the town’s economy, bolstered by the university, staved off the worst of the crisis. It’s part of why my family decided to stay here and raise me: the schools are top-notch, crime is rarely a topic of discussion, and the presence of a massive state-funded institution makes the local money and job market resilient. It’s the kind of town nobody wants to leave, which is why more than half of my high school’s graduating class had no problem deciding where to go next. You don’t ask teens here, “Where are you going to college?” You ask them, “Are you going to Penn State?”

It's in the name of the town: State College exists because of the university, and there’s a good chance it would crumble without it. For some time, I found solace in knowing that the behemoth next door held everything up. In recent years, however, I’ve been reminded how terrifying this reality can be when it’s not kept in check.

When I worked at a bike shop on College Avenue when I was seventeen, I heard the news one Saturday that a lot down the block, which used to host a parking lot and an Arby’s, was slated to be leveled and filled with a “luxury” student apartment building.

“That’s hilarious,” I remember saying. “Who in the hell thinks that anyone would move there? Penn State isn’t the kind of school for people who spend daddy’s money like that.”

I had known Penn State as the economic choice for college, the place people went because they could afford the in-state tuition. I never knew any blatantly wealthy students, and my understanding was that there was some glory in living in controlled squalor. My millennial

coworkers preached the gospel of the packet ramen diet so much that it seemed un-collegiate to live any other way.

Maybe, if I hadn't been so incredulous, I wouldn't have been so confused the following fall when move-in traffic was far worse than usual. As I watched from the bike shop windows, minivans and U-Hauls stacked up across the street, throwing their blinkers on in the left lane and clogging everything. My manager had a fit about it. When I saw that they were all moving into the cold, rectangular high-rise that now stood in the old lot, I had the chilling realization that it was almost certainly at full capacity. Rent was, on average, over \$1000 a month per person.

Over the following half a decade, more of these garish, polygonal, 12-story buildings cropped up all over downtown. One by one, they each filled up as soon as they opened, all touting similar lavish amenities: swimming pools, hot tubs, rooftop patios, gyms, lounges, tanning beds, and more.

While it seemed criminal to pepper the skyline with these resorts in disguise, my coworkers and I rationalized it all as a way to keep rent low everywhere else. We figured that, since these brand-new buildings were taking students out of all the other apartments, there would be less demand for affordable housing, which would keep small landlords from raising their rates.

We were wrong.

During the pandemic, I watched as one of my fellow bike mechanics, Sparky, saw his rent increase by half because his landlord wanted to "match current market rates." He had lived in that house since he went to college here almost twenty years ago, but he was suddenly priced out by a staggering margin. After he moved out, I found the listing for his old place online. It



was listed as a three-bedroom. It had two bedrooms and a concrete-floored basement. \$1700, plus utilities.

Sparky no longer lives downtown. He lives in another corner of College Heights, south of town, that doesn't have any students nearby. It's all townies.

### *Townie*

As I've always understood, "townie" is intended to be derogatory. It's also how I introduce myself when people ask where I'm from.

Townies are, broadly speaking, defined as those who have lived their lives here for reasons other than going to school. Some people narrow it down to mean only those who grew up here, but I'm more liberal than that. What's important isn't the length of one's townie tenure, but rather one's knowledge that this place wasn't built for us. Or at least it isn't anymore.

Almost everything downtown is designed to take advantage of the student experience. Bars on every block shell out thousands of cheap drinks a night, loaded with sugar and bottom-shelf booze to help them go down easily and get to work quickly. Simply made greasy food, often generalized as "drunk people food," is abundant well into the early hours of the morning. For students, the nightlife in State College is like concession stands at an amusement park, propped up to catch them on their aimless excursions. Their bar crawls and drinking games now come with themed t-shirts they can buy in stores; they wear them like a badge of honor, like saying "I survived the scary rollercoaster."

All of this intricacy and excess falls apart when the students leave in May, and we're left with a town full of businesses that close their doors. Scores of bars and restaurants have limited summer hours or close entirely. We are left to fend for ourselves.

Davarian L Baldwin, an urbanist and historian at Trinity College, describes this lamination of college life as the rise of the "UniverCity," a conglomerate of an educational institution and its host community that washes away the grit and imperfections of normal urban life. According to Baldwin, the birth of a UniverCity leaves a wake of gentrification, cultural sterilization, and alienation, forcing the community to transform into an extension of the school in order to continue existing at all.

What's unique about State College, though, is that Penn State itself isn't the one encroaching on the community, as Baldwin describes the urban areas surrounding the University of Chicago, Yale, New York University, and others. It's third parties, both from here and out of state, hellbent on capitalizing on the blue and white. Slowly, both financially and aesthetically, the landscape is becoming inhospitable for anything else. Those of us who don't align with that identity, unable to stay on the streets, must move underground.

### *Asylum*

Refuge for the displaced, and the name of a local music club.

As a current student at Penn State, I'm more submerged in university life than I ever was before. A younger me would see my time studying here as a betrayal of my place in the town-versus-gown divide, but I'm more pragmatic and less hot-headed than I used to be. I think.

I still identify as a townie; the foundation of my previous life gives me something sturdy to stand on. University life can be cold on its own; it's massive, yet empty; full of faces and names, yet few know each other or care to. There's an edge of impermanence that cuts into the heart of the lecture-hall small-talk I endure.

“What's your major?”

“English.”

“Yeah.”

I need an escape.

Every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, I spend my mornings in a small café in the basement of a men's hair salon and a tattoo parlor. I tap away at my weekly writing assignments under harsh white lights that glare from a cheap paneled ceiling, the only light that seems to enter the underground space. People climb over each other's bags to move around mismatched tables, and the smell of just-okay coffee and overcooked rice waft unendingly from a kitchen obscured only by a curtain. It's also filled with townies, just like me, who are looking for shelter from the expensive, unforgiving and impersonal. (It's where I'm currently writing this, and it's where I wrote a lot of the rest of it, too.)

The cafe's name is Webster's. Formerly on the main drag of Allen Street, it now resides in a tucked-away location next to an alley filled with dumpsters and potholes. It's the kind of place you wouldn't stroll into because you simply wouldn't notice it was there. But for plenty of locals, it's a haven that has seemingly fought off the oppressive deep-clean of downtown, perhaps because it doesn't threaten the street view.

Webster's is a host for all kinds of niche community events. Their schedule is smattered with tango nights, drag bingo competitions, book readings, open mics, and poetry competitions. Small, independent shops are tucked into corners of the basement floor, offering used books, records, and clothes. Local artwork, music, and literature are scattered on tables next to the front counter. Some of the chapbooks are little more than a few pages of printer paper, folded down the middle and stapled, but in those folds are words that feel like they're written directly at us. Prose and poetry from little voices that only want someone to hear them. There is no ulterior motive, no career-climbing aspiration to launch off from here, kicking the rest of it down in the process.

This café is a forum, a cultural hub, self-contained in its lightless crevice yet teeming with life.

Every once in a while, in the evenings, Webster's hosts what's known as an "Asylum show." Asylum is a music club on campus that focuses on bringing small acts into town to perform. For five to seven dollars, anyone can show up to hear punk jams, psychedelic rock, harsh experimental noise music, and all other kinds of eclectic, countercultural sound. Sometimes, a prodigious group of talents will make a name for themselves in the underground music world here: Mellow Honey, Queen Blue, The Willard Building, Fragment of Joy, Androgynous Summer of Terror. Other times, it's just some kids smacking around with instruments they can only kind of play, but the Asylum crowd brings a fervent energy to their performances anyway.

These performances happen in the main seating area of Webster's. All the tables are shoved out of the way, making a spot for the bands to perform and the audience to stand. Nearby is a bulk jar of earplugs—newcomers run for it once the first set of the night begins. The loud,

guttural music makes jawbones resonate and bodies flail. Mosh pits spill over onto the floor where I had laid a stack of books ten hours before, cranking out some papers for a literature seminar. If anyone had made a peep then, they would have gotten looks from other customers.

Outside, in the dumpster-filled alleyway, crowds of Asylum kids stand in circles smoking cigarettes. You can barely hear the music thudding through the window wells next to them. The bar down the block, blasting radio hits through an open door, hides us perfectly. In our obscurity, we feel safe to exist again.

### *Culture*

The backbone of society, or a city planner's favorite euphemism.

In the fall, the State College Borough Council stopped the construction of more high-rises. While it's only a temporary ordinance, the moratorium could allow local government to stop more unaffordable housing from driving everyone out. Sitting at the table, but unable to vote, was the Mayor of State College, Ezra Nanes.

Ezra is my friend. He moved here to pursue an MBA, but he stuck around for a job outside the university's sphere. Over time, I got to know him through the mountain biking crowd, and I was impressed by how sensitive to the heartbeat of the town he seemed to be. That was even before he got involved in politics.

I was comforted when someone who shared my lifestyle, alongside many of my ideas, got involved in local government. It gave me a sense that local power wasn't preordained, that we had a chance at infiltrating an unfeeling bureaucracy. To see him and the borough halt the

towering behemoth that was swallowing downtown was a breath of fresh air that rescued me from the throes of defeatism.

I was giddy to see the tantrum-like responses of students that trickled into local newspaper columns. Claiming we “must plan and prepare how our region will be in the future, rather than romanticizing how it was in the past,” they tell a story of students as victims of the oppressive, conservative man coming down on them, forcing students into an unfair housing market. How convenient of them to forget that people who can’t afford a car aren’t the ones moving into their prized luxury rectangles. In truth, these students are the ones romanticizing a past in which they got what they wanted, and we are the ones preparing for a future in which we must coexist again.

I felt a rush of power that came with stopping the beast of bougie development in its tracks—I felt like my fears and those of my community were finally realized as something beyond an embittered longing for stagnation. There was a chance for townie culture to return to the streets of downtown State College. Maybe, I thought, we could revive the personality of a town that wasn’t so poised to homogenize with campus. We could once again have a town with a sense of character, healthy doses of grit, and less of daddy’s money fanning around.

Around the same time I heard the news of the high-rise pause, I heard of another new development that was actually catching steam: a new performing arts center on Beaver Avenue. It was going to be a cultural hub for theatre performances, art shows, and recitals, all in a central downtown location between Humes Alley, Pugh Street, and the parking garage.

“Wait—what?” I asked myself, a gear skipping. “Isn’t that where Webster’s is?”

*Progress*

The end-goal of human struggle. It seems hard to predict, though, what it will leave behind.

While I was distracted by my arrogant sense of victory over the battle for downtown, I left my flank exposed. Somehow, I saw Webster's as safe because it could hide. Now, like a mouse in tall grass, it seems like the café's size has made it disappear under the entity mowing it over.

We get mail now about the Nittany Performing Arts Center. It's running along at full steam, it seems, thanks to a staggering list of donors who have already contributed to its success. Some people I know are celebrating the downfall of a café that they view as mismanaged, run by a group of people unfit to own a downtown business. Maybe they're right, but it's hard for me to imagine where I'll go next, or where anyone else will. What will happen to all the little rituals, too unexciting for a grand stage, that shape the lives of those who don't mind the simplicity? Surely there won't be tango classes in an 800-seat auditorium, nor will there be any Asylum bands lining up to perform. They're unworthy, it seems, to stay where they are; they don't define home for enough people, especially not enough donors.





## The Yards

Incoming upperclassmen! Do you ever feel like the fast-paced, bustling landscape of downtown State College is wearing you down? Are you tired of having to live right next to campus, constantly nagged by that silly reminder of all your homework? Maybe you're sick of having to watch all those poor, yucky townies move out of the building next door because our property management firm priced them out?

### IMAGINE IT FOR YOURSELF:

- You and your four best friends!
- One massive, five-bedroom apartment!
- A white, vinyl-sided building in a sea of homogenous look-alikes!
- Your own plot of golf-grade turf, scored right through the heart of the gasping remains of State College's natural land and clean groundwater!
- A private pool and study lounge!

At The Yards at Old State, developed by the Toll Brothers, your dream of having a playhouse to yourself, away from any pesky neighbors, can be a reality. This is a chance to be yourself—a student who's only here for four years—in a spotless suburban paradise. With our rock climbing walls, outdoor grills, and complimentary coffee, you can enjoy a student experience enclosed in a microcosm that evades all the complexities of sharing a community with others. It's like you're in an endless party: one where you can swing from hammocks, sit under fairy lights, and crush brewskies all day long.

While you're here, take a look at our floorplans that, while making you share a kitchen with four people, will charge you almost a thousand dollars a month in rent. What can we say? We're advertising these properties as luxurious! Of course, when we drive our rent up, it will allow everyone else to do the same. In fact, it's already happening! But that's not a problem for you; you'll only be here for four years, and you'll hardly remember half of it, anyway. That doesn't matter—you're here to explore yourself, carve your own path, and other buzz words.

If you're interested in checking out our apartments, feel free to take a look at one of our state-of-the-art virtual reality tours, in which you can see a full rendering of your future crib. We'd show it to you in person, but these properties are still an active construction site in several areas, and we don't want you to see that part until you've signed the lease. The piles of gravel and orange dirt will assuredly obscure your view of beautiful Musser Gap, which will sit less than a mile from your front door with a trail leading right to it. We assume you're going to be inside watching football on our massive array of flatscreens anyway.

When you're interested in beginning the application process, feel free to send us an email, call us on the phone number below, or fill out our website's application. If you look us up online, please ignore the news that's been circulating about how our properties are accumulating trash that spills over onto other people's land. All that news is coming from the same people who told us a few years ago that our properties were destroying the local ecosystem by polluting the groundwater. Remember, those angry old farts are the ones we're helping you move away from in the first place!

The experience you'll have here, at this point in time, is one of a kind. We're working on scooping up some other undeveloped land to stuff with buildings, too, but you probably won't hear about that until it's too late!

*The Yards at Old State*

(814) 308-9922

1830 Blue Course Dr

State College, PA 16801

## Our Streets

In walks home from middle school, I explored every corner of Penn State's campus. During those brief, daily spurts of twenty minutes, I was beholden to nothing but my wanderlust. I would challenge myself to get a little more lost every day, learning to find my way in a map of buildings that, over many years, had grown to dazzling heights over my quiet neighborhood.

I discovered the best shaded spots to sit in the grass and read a book, as well as the small alleys and narrow tunnels that could cut minutes off my daily commutes. I knew that I could make a beeline from downtown to my dad's house through a tight corridor between some faculty parking lots and the Alumni Garden. Other times, my friends and I liked to visit the stairs near West Halls to bomb them on our mountain bikes, much to nobody's excitement but our own. At the center of campus, a tree by Old Main was where I carved my name next to my friend's, thinking it would be funny to pretend we were in love.

Until I went to school in the buildings that surrounded those sacred spots, nostalgia was the only value I placed on my surroundings. Penn State and I rarely challenged each other's existences. The school was a thoroughfare for my childhood adventures, while I was a harmless passerby who was too wrapped up with homework and girls to make a fuss worth quelling. I didn't have the capacity to consider what consequences came with living next to a massive institution. The complicated functions of a billion-dollar school hide behind a quaint, brick-laden shell, a neutral canvas on which anyone can imprint benevolent, coming-of-age memories. It also does its best to absorb controversy.

In the fall of 2022, I was walking to the Thomas Building on campus, as I did every week for my Anthropology lectures. Normally, I'd ride a bike, but I was stuck with a broken arm.

Despite the cast, I appreciated the chance to revisit the slow-paced ambling of my youthful afternoons, and I enjoyed the liminal time I spent contemplating among the waves of other students. The purpose of that day's walk was novel, though: I was going to a protest.

It's not often that demonstrations in State College get very big, especially against the university. They're typically relegated to a small patch of sidewalk near the gates at Allen Street, where they catch the attention of stopped rush-hour traffic for a few minutes. In many ways, Penn State and its critics have a gridlocked relationship: picketers have a contained yet unchallenged stage where they stand, but others can drive past or walk around them, and business can go on as usual for the university. These protests align with the small-town vibe that the university sells as safe and peaceful, and for most of my life, I innocently trundled past them as if they were nothing more than a given.

I was comforted by the protestors' tinge of progressivism, just as I was by the groves of trees and the warm brick and sandstone buildings that backdropped my earliest memories. None if it needed to change, as far as I could tell. But when I heard white supremacists were coming to campus, I snapped awake.

Founding Proud Boys member Gavin McInnes was scheduled to speak on campus on October 24, 2022. A known leader of a well-established hate group, he and other alt-right figures were planning to host a provocative "comedy event," but a lack of context about the show's content roused the town's residents. The protest did not solely aim to counter this presence on campus; it also came about because, despite backlash for McInnes's appearance, he and others were paid honorariums and transportation reimbursements from funds gathered by the students' activity fee. Students were outraged to see school funds, which people were undertaking grievous debts to pay, go toward an event designed to bolster hateful ideas.

As an unwitting contributor, I realized that I couldn't keep giving Penn State a smirking wave-by like a lovable cartoon villain. Despite my frustration, I wasn't expecting a protest to amount to much. I was cynical. Penn State had the foresight to urge us not to demonstrate, and I assumed people would listen. They offered "alternative programming," which would involve students sitting in another building and watching another speaker, keeping any discomforting outcry to a manageable level that was within their view and grasp.

Almost every other time there had been true unrest in State College, it had poured out of Beaver Stadium after the football team had lost—or won—a game. It came after a football coach was fired for covering up sexual abuse. It even came because someone claimed to see a creepy-looking clown downtown, and everyone agreed it was prudent to hunt him down in a riotous pack. Every year, the streets withstood hordes of drunk people that sparked like an errant ember in calm air, setting an unsuspecting town ablaze. Overnight, they tore down lampposts, flipped cars, and littered the streets with glass. They sprayed beer on each other and hollered like apes well into the night, then disappeared before the next quiet morning, upholding the disbelief for many that anything like that could happen in their tiny town. This time, though, we were the angry ones, the ones used to staying home while all that chaos ensued. By approaching the threshold of disruption with our protest, we carried a timid self-awareness that people might see us the same way as the drunken all-star brigade.

Penn State's alternative programming was their way of telling us to be quiet and get off the streets. It seemed like an attractive idea: establish ourselves as condemners of hate without having to confront it, and avoid the risk of comparison to the inebriate stampede. We'd remain in good standing with the university, and we'd be agreeable. But McInnes was still being paid,

regardless of the empty words of condemnation being thrown around on email announcements, so I strode past the university's peacekeeping plea to join my friends outside.

An unnatural yearning to show outrage came with walking under the sun-speckled campus trees. I was on the same sidewalk where I once ran home with armfuls of comic books after squandering 20 dollars I found on the ground. At my core, I wanted to fight for that original, unfettered image of exploration for the local kids who roamed campus like I used to. I also knew that I was standing up for the victims of white supremacy, people who might never feel the homely safety I stitched into my earliest memories of State College. I wouldn't have been able to walk those streets again knowing I had stood by while evil....

When I finally arrived at the site of our demonstration, I was early. A few dozen people, all wearing hoodies and facemasks, stood huddled in a silent crowd, waiting to get started. We were sizing ourselves up, waiting to see how many people would show. We were trying to assess whether the university's efforts to keep us hidden away would work in their favor.

Every time I turned around, though, I saw a bigger group behind me. Before long, I was among a few hundred people. The air was still silent, and most of the people there probably didn't know how to break open the timid anticipation and begin. When the time finally came to start, a few people with megaphones stepped out of the assembly and spoke up.

"Hey everyone," one of the leaders said with an echo ebbing over the stage-frighted crowd. "Thanks for coming out."

Their voice sounded enchantingly familiar, but their mask covered their face and obscured their identity. In the same vein, I couldn't properly identify anyone in the crowd, but I knew I was among friends. My closest friends, many of whom organized the event, wore generic

Penn State clothes and went by pseudonyms in order to blend in. I had to keep a matrix in my head of all the new names—Dale, Bobby, Phoebe, John, Hank—in case I needed to call out for them. This sort of false anonymity, I could tell, made the speakers more anxious, as if they were speaking to strangers with the tone of established friends. Nevertheless, they mustered a courage beyond what I could imagine, and they kept speaking after the first resonances of their voices settled on a dull silence.

“We’re going to start off with a few chants,” the announcer said. It seemed inorganic to suddenly begin shouting when many of us had been standing there for half an hour in silence. We realized, though, as more and more people began mouthing, then mumbling, then speaking in sync, that there was no higher power that would descend and grant us permission to protest. We were there to disrupt, to take the empty landscape around us and fill it with our presence by force.

“Whose campus?” the leader would ask.

“Our campus!” the group responded. The exchange repeated, getting louder each time.

It truly was our campus, we stressed, constructed and paved for us to walk. Allowing outsiders with nothing but vitriol onto the university’s platform was like lending kitchen utensils to serial killers—taking something practical in the right hands and making it devastating in the wrong ones. The administrators claimed we were limiting free speech on campus by resisting white supremacists with a history of bringing violence to college campuses. But as the crowd developed and started to synchronize, we were only exercising our freedom of speech louder than those inside. More enthusiasm began to swell, like a gust of warm air, through the ranks.

Unexpectedly, the doors to the building opened. Out walked a man dressed in a flawless suit and tie, his hair done up and greased over like he was headed for a newsroom. Another man, holding a camera, trailed him. He looked like a journalist, just like many of the others who stood encircling us. What threw off the illusion, however, was when he walked up to the leaders, who had finally shed their nerves, and asked to borrow the megaphone. Journalists aren't supposed to intervene.

“My name is Alex Stein, and I came out here to tell you what a poor representation of the population you all are.”

Alex Stein, McInnes's co-star in the comedy special, is a well-known right-wing commentator previously banned from a slew of social media sites for his use of hate speech. He was desperate to get his hands on whatever noise-making apparatus he could still find. But the moment he finished his first remark, the crowd erupted with noise to drown him out.

As people realized who Stein was, there was no question that we were looking our enemy in the eyes. He guffawed with his arms raised in the air as he began parading in circles around the building containing his supporters. He laughed in protesters' faces, inviting them to come debate with him, but we knew he wasn't there to create a space for civil discourse. He whipped out his phone, trained it on the crowd surrounding him, and began to exclaim how “mentally insane” the students were for gathering to resist him. He pointed at people whose faces were exposed and said that they were his favorites, likely because he could use their reactions for content. A younger kid, who I later recognized as a student at my old high school, had enough of his jest and spat on his jacket.



We jeered at Stein, letting out the frustrations the university told us we couldn't express. The seal of restraint on our emotions was ripped open as the chants began to filter back in, booming louder through voices that erupted proudly from the heart and stomach.

We began to circle the building. There were multiple entrances, and our goal was to make noise at all of them. We walked at a shuffling pace, mostly concerned with sticking together and remaining defensive in appearance. Police lined the outside of the lecture hall, staring at us with their hands on their belts. They weren't afraid of us, despite our numbers and volume. Their calm was unsettling, and we wondered why they assumed we wouldn't be a problem.

Then, we rounded the corner and saw the source of the cops' comfort. Standing up the hill, about a hundred feet away, a line of officers sat on horseback. They rode quarter horses that stood much taller than us, and they held back waiting for an unknown cue. They had clearly been waiting for a long time, too, even when we were just a small group of timid kids unready to break the silence. Were we, a group of unarmed students, enough of a threat to justify this kind of force?

Less than an hour before the event's start, we continued to cheer and chant, on the lookout for members of the Proud Boys who might be coming to pass through the crowd into the building. It was inevitable that some of them would come to see their former leader in the flesh, and we had been there long enough that they couldn't have snuck in beforehand. In time, we began to see them materializing off in the distance, weighing whether it was worthwhile to plunge into the crowd to get booed and shoved around. Finally, a lone man, wearing a black hat with "TRUMP" emblazoned in gold on the front, began walking toward us. Someone announced that he was approaching, and the crowd quickly turned from the doors to get a look at the person. He wore all black, blue, and yellow, which indicated that he was indeed a member of the hate

group. We stood, shoulder to shoulder, to show him that we weren't going to let him through without hearing our cries of condemnation first. Unbothered, he stuck his head down, crossed his arms, and tucked into the fray. As more and more people stood in front of him, he began to grow irritated, and even though he was close to the door, I could tell he was thinking about something else.

Someone, possibly by accident, shoved the Proud Boy. He responded with a punch.

In that moment, multiple people from the crowd moved to pull him away from the person he was attacking. They pulled him to the ground and fought to hold him down before he could hit somebody else. The cops, in the background, began looking around. They were waiting for something to come. One of them said something into their radio.

Spurred by the quick line of chatter, the horses began closing in on us. Their speed, while slow, coupled with their imposing stature, made many people think that they were being charged. The front rows of the crowd, looking up, saw nothing but massive, dark entities striding toward them with clops that boomed on the concrete walkway. We thought we might be run over as the animals plunged between us and the doors. The Proud Boy, who had regained his footing, was quickly pulled behind the horses by a cop, who threw other students? Protesters? to the side.

“Get back!” one of the megaphone-equipped leaders urged us. “We’re not here to hurt anybody.”

We regrouped in a circle and continued chanting. Now, instead of pride, we felt distress. Rumors began spreading that people were getting pepper sprayed on the other side of the building, and that rumor was confirmed when several, tears streaming from blood-red eyes, were ushered into a safe spot in the middle of the crowd. We thought the cops had sprayed them,

considering what we had just experienced, but we forgot that we were now dealing with two adversaries at once.

We turned to see two men, dressed in black riot gear, approaching the group of students from the other side. One of them held a long, cylindrical can in his gloved hand. His face was obscured by a black helmet with a visor.

“He’s a Proud Boy!” Someone shouted as the man with his can stepped closer, shuffling back and forth as people moved to keep him away. “He has mace!”

My only memory of bear mace comes from my days as a Boy Scout camping deep in the Pennsylvania woods. We kept it locked up, only accessible in an emergency, because its potency was unlike any irritant one could use on a human. The man stood aiming it at a crowd of kids. In response to a shove backward, he unloaded the can onto an entire row of people.

Those hit by the blast screamed in pain as others ran for cover. I watched my friend, the one codenamed Bobby, clutch his face as the chemicals rattled his nervous system. He could hardly stay on his feet.

Seeing Bobby’s eyes burning as tears poured down his cheeks, I recentered and reminded myself where I stood. It was the first time I had properly recognized him in the crowd, and the thought of my other friends being in danger shocked up my spine. I feared for myself: I still wore a cast on my broken arm, and I had no way to defend myself. A protest that I thought would fall silent after an hour or two had now escalated into a fledgling battle, and I was not built to fight. Few of us were. I stood back against a wall, looked around, and tried in vain to slow my breath. I imagined all the ways I could escape, slip through some unseen alleyway or parking lot, and run

to my father's house uphill. I could so easily retreat into the State College I knew before, ignorant of the struggles I was privileged to ignore.

I knew I couldn't take my friends with me if I ran; turning to see Bobby collect himself and reenter the crowd, unhesitant, I realized that running would mean abandoning what these students, these unarmed kids, were risking themselves to stand for. I pulled off my hood, ran my fingers through my hair, and stepped back into the circle of chanting people. The assembly was several times larger, and I began to notice that we were holding our ground.

We continued orating into the darkened evening sky. The event was scheduled to start any minute, and we were willing to stand out there for its entire duration if we had to.

Suddenly, news spread through isolated shouts that the event had been called off. A majority of the crowd didn't have phones, lest they be used to incriminate someone, so we couldn't initially confirm it. But the announcement eventually came from those same few leaders who first stepped in front of us, cheering through their megaphones to thunderous applause. We turned to the building, inside which sat a defeated McInnes, and cried out with incredulous fervor. We took to the streets and marched across campus on the asphalt.

“Whose streets?”

“Our streets!”

After the group made it far enough away, it disbanded calmly and anticlimactically. I finally found all my friends, and we walked home together, taking time to catch up about the less exciting parts of our week. Shedding my mask and hood, I looked at my partners in crime while dripping sweat from my clumped hair. My closest companions, with whom I rarely did more than share morning coffee and evening drinks, were looking back at me like I was a different

person. We had all feared for our lives just twenty minutes prior, and we were now walking downtown past an indifferent Monday night. Bobby, wiping his reddened forehead, lit a cigarette and sighed as we walked. I didn't feel innocent anymore, and I didn't know whether that was a good thing or not.

The next morning, I walked back to the Thomas Building merely to get to class. The streets were starkly clean—no evidence of last night's events other than the faint smell of horse manure. A few scattered police officers stood in the halls, conversing casually with untired faces. My lecture took place in the hall right next to where McInnes and Stein were poised to give their speeches, and I didn't hear anyone in the lecture room speak about what had happened there the night before. The town had absorbed the chaos again, it seemed. This time, however, I didn't hear silence; I heard anti-noise. There was a truth about last night that we all knew, but it was so deeply unspoken that it might as well be forgotten.

That afternoon, when my class ended, I walked through the neighborhood where I grew up. It took me less than five minutes to make it off campus and into the folds of houses filled with my family friends. I remembered, again, why I ever bothered to be on campus: it lies adjacent to the humble, simple streets where I learned how to ride a bike, snuck through backyards to see my school buddies, and walked home from Blockbuster with my parents.

But I no longer saw the same peace there. I felt a tension between the previous night's events and the eerily unfazed neighborhood just a few blocks from them. If the people who lived in these vinyl-sided family abodes saw me and knew what I had been a part of, how would they react? Would they have admired my effort to keep unprecedented violence out of our community, or would they think that I helped to incite it? Not knowing launched me out of my nostalgia into an uncomfortable place. State College is known by many as a resilient town, one

that absorbs even the greatest hardships, but I realized after the protest that this resilience swallowed everything in its wake. Conflict doesn't last at Penn State, not because it's resolved, but because it's smothered.

Later that day, all students and faculty received a bulletin from the university.

“Police determined that it was necessary to cancel the speaking event in the interest of campus safety. Demonstrations regrettably turned violent.”

Contained in those two sentences was everything Penn State was willing to say about the protest. According to them, we were a force they could have stopped at any time, and we were part of nothing more than a regret. Thus was the meaning they would permit us to have. On my way back across campus, I followed the same corridor I took to get home from middle school, only this time I walked more quickly. A novel nervousness set in as I passed by hundreds of people whose lives seemed to continue like normal. Most of them probably didn't even open the bulletin in the first place.

For the first time as a townie, I felt like I didn't belong in the unassuming caricature of a peaceful State College. I had seen behind the curtain when I wasn't supposed to, and it destroyed the Oz-like illusion that kept Happy Valley's image intact. No longer was I worried about disturbing the peace; I was petrified of being erased in order to preserve it.

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# ACADEMIC VITA

## Education

**The Pennsylvania State University, Schreyer Honors College**

*CLASS OF 2023*

Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) in English;  
Concentration in Professional and Media Writing

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## Work Experience

**Expert Reviews Editorial Intern, Hearst Magazines**

*JUNE–AUGUST 2022*

- Wrote and edited product roundups for Hearst's Enthusiast Group, consisting of *Bicycling*, *Runner's World*, and *Popular Mechanics*
  - Collaborated with and fact-checked senior editorial staff
  - Sourced and interviewed industry experts to improve content credibility
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## Extracurricular Activities

### **Penn State Cycling Club**

*President*

*MAY 2020–MAY 2022*

- Organized and led meetings and events for members of the Penn State Cycling Club
- Established permanent connections with other members of the local cycling community, such as NMBA, Friends of Rothrock, State College Cycling, and Happy Valley Women's Cycling
- Acted as a representative in interclub relations and to the Club Sports office

*Race Director*

*MARCH 2021–SEPTEMBER 2022*

- Organized a full mountain bike race weekend, Penn State's "Rothrock You Like a Hurricane," in Rothrock State Forest
- Communicated with local jurisdictions and DCNR to gain approval for use of state land
- Mapped and marked four courses for XC, enduro, and downhill races
- Collaborated with the Eastern Collegiate Cycling Conference, making the race an official event on their calendar