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THE TRAVELER'S RECOLLECTIONS

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Wilderness and Legends

Cowboy wizards acted as the catalyst for this entire thesis. More accurately, the soundtrack for a developing videogame called Wizards with a Gun. In August of 2021, I saw the trailer for this game and fell in love with the song Breath and Bone. So I found the composer, Ryan Ike, and jumped headlong into his discography. Mr. Ike also did the soundtrack for another game called Where the Water Tastes like Wine, and the soundtrack enchanted me from the first pluck of the banjo. This game, closer to an interactive storybook, centers around how folk tales change as people tell them, blossoming into new and divergent stories with each sharing. I fell in love with this game as a cacophony of banjos, mandolins, and 12 string guitars set the scene for awesome tales that made me breathe the very soul of America. The game brought me to an all-encompassing epiphany.

Stories inherently evolve.

I started thinking about urban legends and folk tales from around my home of York, PA. Then I start recalling different tales from around the state, and begin to think which ones I could make into new stories. This coincided with a newfound love of every book Jack Kerouac ever wrote. The seeds of the Traveler's Recollections are planted sometime in November of 2021, sprouting into the sapling of a thesis proposal in April of 2022.

With urban legends, place inherently plays the largest role. You can't have the creepy ghost infested gravity hill with having a real hill in York where you go up a hill when parked in neutral. Pictures then became a cornerstone of each of these stories. I got in touch with my friend

Nick who has the lovely hobby of collecting fancy cameras, and we began meticulously plotting an adventure through the wilderness and urban sprawl of York County.

Part of the way through this planning, my advisor Dr. Carla Mulford tells me I've won an award. And not just any award, but the Kathleen Bole Memorial Award which came with an incredibly generous grant of money. To say my jaw hit the floor doesn't do my surprise justice. What would have just been some run-of-mill photos transformed into multiple styles of film, each tailored to the specific story told. I thought only the people who worked on this little thesis would be the ones to care about my story, but to receive such an accalade brought forth so much joy.

On June 15, I gathered the group to take these photos. This crack team of Nick, my brother Jack, and myself set about cruising the roadways of York. We trawled across the width and breadth of the county, from the farms around my house, to the derelict old factories of York city, and the infamous gravity hill closer to Mechanicsburg. It was a rush of freedom, to explore this place I've lived most of my life in such a new light. And so new trails were blazed, rainstorms were weathered, and many photographs were taken.

A week later, I traveled across America to Fort Knox, Kentucky for Army Training. 34 days later, I hopped on a plane and got my first taste of the West Coast working at Fort Lewis, Washington. Everywhere I tried to swap local legends with everyone I could, collecting tales from across America as I told others of Pennsylvania. I eventually made my way back to the commonwealth on August 14, a new fire burning within to write these stories.

And so here I am, at the end of a long road. A story can be told for every speck of dirt that litters America from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and I only hope these stories do some justice

to the humble area of York county. More importantly, I hope whoever finds themselves between these pages comes out with some curiosity of the places they live or have lived. It took 22 years to understand all the stories of one town in Pennsylvania that I had the privilege to call home. All those years of local learning and picking up odd tidbits of hometown history along the way. I gained a greater appreciation for the place I call home.

I wanted to write new stories based on old tales, kernels of truth wrapped in the confections of creativity. I hope the stories below inspire curiosity and care for the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania.

Thunderchild

I believe it was the May of ‘23, early May to be specific. I remember cause we had just finished sowing the first year’s crop. Mr. Mitchell liked to get it in nice and early so’s that he could make some easy money come summertime. “Fast shipping and quick profits” he would always say. Anyway, me and the field crew finished all the planting for the day, and Mr. Mitchell was in a real good mood. All the better for us, it being payday and all. So as the end of the day rolled around, our gangs sidled up to the main barn where Mr. Mitchell doles out our cash. I’m not quite sure what had done it, but boy howdy was he smiling ear to ear.

"Listen here boys," he said," You all have done a bang up job this year. So much of a bang-up job, in fact, that I bet we'll ship a larger crop than even Joe Bergmann two hills over. And now personally, I think hard work deserves a reward. An extra two for all of y'all!" At this a mighty roar erupted from the collected farmhands. As we all lined up to get our weekly pay, I shared a sidelong glance with all my buddies. Tonight would be a night for McCassidy's.

McCassidy's Saloon stood as a central keystone of our little community. By modern standards it was a small little place, two stories of stone, brick, and mortar. It had been a real big deal a few years ago when electric lights had been put in. The whole town had turned out to watch the construction and see the old building light up for the first time. As the full might of Mitchell's farmhands rolled into the saloon, we found ourselves hard pressed into a tide of people. Seems our scraggly faces were not the only people with a few dollars to spend. There were work gangs from across the area surging into the old bar. People from Tim Hooper's farm, the Pepper Sister's Place, Alincy's Vineyard, and even some of the Jonson Brother's coal miners drank and talked through the berth of McCassidy's Saloon.

I made my way through the press of humanity. Along the way I swapped greetings with the friends I saw, shared some jokes, and partook in some good-natured insults with the Bergmann farmhands before finally sidling up next to the bar. My hard-earned wages miraculously turned into a fine frothy lager like magic. The first taste of that sweet alcoholic ambrosia eased away hours' worth of aches and pains. It was right about then the fiddle player struck up a tune and the whole saloon reached a fevered pitch. Soon I was dancing to and fro with all my friends, line dancing with several fine young ladies, and feeling my pockets grow ever lighter in tandem with my mood. Pint after pint of beer made their way past my parched

lips. Time turned into a soupy stream of consciousness, and before I knew it dusk began to creep its way across the darkening sky.

I eventually stumbled my way out of the uproarious saloon, deciding in due time the night had run its course. Through a drunken haze did I stumble across the green rolling hills of Pennsylvania. One unsteady foot fell in front of the other as I followed the dirt path that led back to my home. The path wound hither and yonder in front of me as I pushed into the thickening backwoods. The trees swayed in the cool May breeze, the first buds of summer desperately holding onto their home in the boughs. The breeze grew increasingly into a strong wind, the cold working its way past my clothes and deep into my bones. Even in my state of inebriation I awakened to what was growing on the horizon. Over the amber sunset menacing clouds were quickly darkening the sky, blotting out the quickly dissipating light guiding my way through the woods.

"Well scheeeeeuckss," spat from my drunken lips into the oncoming storm. I quickened my stumbling pace, hurrying along the trail as fast as my uncoordinated legs would fly. The storm loomed ever closer, thunder and lightning sporadically announcing their presence from within the belligerent clouds. Fear lanced through my hazy mind. The storm felt different, like a wolf circling around me. Something in the air felt ever so subtly off about it. The air tasted just a bit more tingly. The pressure in my head felt more than any normal storm could produce.

About the time all this began to register in my mind, the first lightning bolt struck. It crashed down from the heavens like a hammer to an anvil. Splinters flew from what was formerly a tree, cutting bloody gashes across my face. In an instant my drunken merriment faded, replaced by the white hot dread of imminent death. I sprinted down the path, narrowly avoiding another lightning bolt that set the tree to my left alite. I crashed through the forest, pushing past

branches as every twist and turn led to a new fatal collision with lightning bolt after lightning bolt. Nowhere was safe from these celestial spears.

I could not help but laugh hysterically at the fifth bolt that corralled my path through the woods. What in the hell was going on? What power above had I offended to earn this electrically charged chase? It was all too insane to truly believe, yet the trees around me kept exploding from that skyborne wrath. Oh well, at least I would die having had one last drink from McCassidy's.

Finally, I blundered my way into a clearing that held one solitary oak tree. It stood mighty and proud over the field, a wooden lord in a kingdom of grass. That tree stood as my only hope for cover amid the storm. Sprinting with all the might I could muster, I made a beeline towards the potential savior. Just as I reached this last hope for sanctuary, the greatest bolt of lightning I had ever seen split the oak apart in a flash and sent me flying deep into unconsciousness.

I did not think I was dead. Yet, I could only see an impenetrable darkness before my eyes. Maybe this is what death was? Then pain flared through my system like a freight train. Definitely alive, though how much remained to be seen. I tentatively felt both my arms, then my legs, before working up the courage to unscrew my eyes. Thankfully, everything was roughly where it should have been, minus the cuts and scrapes earned from my little woodland chase. With every muscle in my body tingling, I stood up and gazed at the sight before me.

That once mighty oak that dominated the field had been sawn in half. It was as if God himself had taken a hacksaw and jaggedly cut apart that venerable sentinel. However, that was the least miraculous thing in front of me. Nestled within the root the broken roots, a whirling ball of lightning rested. It was beautiful to behold, an utter contrast to the murderous bolts of hatred that had been raining down on me. The ball whirled gently around, sunken slightly into the fallen

oak's base. Blues and whites glittered across the crackling azure surface, It reminded me of Faberge eggs, like the ones I had seen in the Philadelphia exhibit years back. I stood dumbstruck staring at this utter impossibility, until it began to steadily dissipate. Each little spark took away from the ball, little bits of electricity flitting away into the ground. The little sparks left only a small crater remaining, leaving behind only a small little lump at the oak.

The thing unfurled before me into something vaguely human. Little arms and legs stretched out from where it lay, and two bright eyes shining with lightning groggily screwed open. The little thing glowed a gentle blue all over. This creature sat up, looking around at the confusing space it found itself. It looked like a kid, just a small kid freshly woken from a lazy afternoon nap.

Without even thinking, I reached out to the little fella. Just to make sure he was okay and all that. The kid reached out in turn, my flesh and bone meeting his thunder infused hand. A jolt arced through my system, but only initially. Looking back, touching a kid made of electricity wasn't the smartest move. But I seemed okay, and the kid seemed just as curious about me as I was of him. He hopped up out of the hole and started poking and prodding me, running around just like a little kid should.

More questions than I could answer began running through my mind. The hows and the whys overwhelmed me so fast I felt like my brain was about to burst. I had nearly been killed roughly a dozen times in the past hour, and now here was something no one in the world could explain jumping around in front of me. I took a deep breath.

"Can you speak English, little buddy?" I asked calmy. The kid looked up at me, cocking his head to one side as curiosity blazed behind his clear white eyes. "Well, I'll take that as a no. My names Mickey, and I guess we got to figure out what to do with you." The kid looked at me

a little longer, before he moved up next to me. I knelt down and gave him a little once over, staring deep into those storms in his eyes. “First things first, I need to call you something. You got a name little buddy?” Once again, I was greeted with silence. “Alright then, I guess I’ll call you something then. How about… Ben. Yeah Ben, just like old Ben Franklin. Heh, guess you and him would have gotten along well.” With that sorted out, a raindrop fell against my nose. A subtle reminder of the storm still writhing above me.

“C’mon then Ben, I need to get somewhere before this storm drops more punishment on me.” I took the kid’s hand and made my way back up along the trail of broken trees, my mind still firing like a steam engine. Up along the path of destruction, a plan began to take some shape in my mind. I could not take care of Ben, I just wasn’t smart enough. But Mr. Mitchell certainly held some smarts. If anyone could figure out what to do with a lighting child, it was him. Ben hopped around and looked in wonderment as we made our way back to the road. Each broken tree sparked his interest, and every root under our feet drew his gaze. I wondered what it would be like to view a world like this from his perspective. He certainly wasn’t from around here to say the least, but just where he came from was a question I couldn’t shake. Did he come from Heaven itself, or somewhere far past the sky? Moreover, he was just a kid, and I was willing to bet my bonus that someone would come looking for him.

About an hour or so later I made it back to Mitchell’s, just in time when the rain really began to fall. I ran up to the farmhouse with Ben in tow and knocked on the door. It took a couple knocks until Mr. Mitchell clambered his way down the stairs. The old famer threw open that door with some dazed anger ruminating in his features. Then he saw Ben, and his jaw dropped to the floor and down the porch.

"Mickey, what in the name of God is that?" he stammered on in confusion, head turning back and forth between my battered person and Ben's blue features.

"It's a long story Mr. Mitchell, can we discuss it inside. Also, his name is Ben." It was then Mr. Mitchell finally noticed how broken up I was and ushered me inside from the steadily increasing rain.

"Jesus Mick where are my manners. Sit down here and get yourself dry. IDA, COME ON DOWN! Can this… Ben be touched? Oh I'm sure he can be, you look like hell though. How did this happen? Where the hell did he come from? Where the hell where you?"

"Calm down Jim," Ida Mitchell commanded as she came downstairs. "The poor boy is half in the grave. Go be useful and call Dr. Samson." With purpose to focus his frantic mind, Mr. Mitchell charged off to the telephone. Mrs. Mitchell, to her credit, took only a second to stare at Ben before turning to help me clean up. As she bandaged up my scraps, tiredness began to replace their weary conviction keeping me up for last few hours. Mrs. Mitchell began the initial barrage of questions before I gently slipped into a fatigued sleep.

When next I woke up, Dr. Samson was knocking on the door. Both Mitchells let him in, and the man immediately flew over to me. Cracking open his bag, the good doctor looked over every nook and cranny on my person. He doubled checked bandages, knocked my knees, shown light into my eyes, the whole nine yards. It wasn't until halfway through his little examination that Doc Samson noticed the sleeping form of Ben curled up next to me. From there the same surprise I had seen already leapt onto his features, and medical curiosity took it away from there. However, I shooed him away before he could wake the kid up. From there Dr. Samson regained his composure and went back to checking me. Once all was set, we all gathered for a little discussion.

"Firstly Mickey," Doc Samson began," you are lucky to be alive. In my opinion you will make a full recovery, although you will feel like hell for a few days. There will also be some scars, namely that lightning tree over your left hand." In confusion I looked down at my hand. It hadn't received any more punishment than the rest of my body, but there running up my forearm was a little bolt of lightning. It looked like someone had plucked it right out of the sky and slipped it under my skin. "The scar commonly occurs after lightning strikes, which given the circumstances you should feel lucky to have only a small one. Now, however, we must discuss the electrifying elephant in the room. I have telephoned the Mayor, who should be here first thing in the morning along with some of the local newspapers. Indeed, I have also sent word to colleagues in Philadelphia and Washington, hopefully they will send representatives to witness this new scientific discovery!"

"His name is Ben, Doc, or at least that's what I call him. Is he going to be okay with all these scientists? I mean he is a kid, shouldn't we be worrying more about getting him into school?" The Doc looked at me quizzically, and with slight condescension.

"Mickey, I understand you went through a lot today, but this creature you found could be humanity's next step forward. We know next to nothing about him, and so we must have intelligent men look at him." The Doc punctuated his point by slamming his fist into his hand. I didn't know what to say. He had made a very compelling point. I mean some scientist most certainly needed to have a look at what Ben was. But I had a nagging feeling this wouldn't be good for the kid. Those scientists would probably keep him in a hospital all his life, away from other kids and schools and the very world he came from. It just didn't seem fair to the kid.

Ida Mitchell must have seen my thoughts written across my face, as she put matters to rest. "Thank you Dr. Samson, but we should really let these boys rest. We'll telephone you in the

morning about checking in with your colleagues and meeting. Good night." The Doc stammered a few excuses, but he knew better than to challenge a woman in her own home. Collecting his things, Dr. Samson made his way back outside into the rain.

Mr. Mitchell looked me down as his wife took the Doc out. He saw the gears turning in my head and looked between both me and Ben. "Y'know, Mick, you can stay here tonight. Don't think too much about what's gonna happen tomorrow, I'm sure the mayor and maybe some others will want to see Ben. Everything will be just fine son." With that, Mr. Mitchell went back to bed.

As the house began to quiet down, Mrs. Mitchell brought down some blankets for Ben and me. He had managed to sleep through most of the night, but as I wrapped him up Ben snuggled up next to me in the blankets. Here I felt weird, a pang in my chest I had never felt before. I had known Ben for less than a singular night, but this little boy meant the world to me. Here rested a face fresh to the world, something wholly new that needed someone to help him see this wonderful place. As Mrs. Mitchell went upstairs, I stared out of the window into the rain outside. The pitter patter set me sleep, thoughts of this mysterious child dominating my fatigued mind.

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I woke in the morning to complete and utter bedlam. The first sounds of the shouting broke through my groggy brain like dynamite. I got up and saw Ben looking out the front window. As I sidled up next to the boy only to see the entire population of the county jostling for a position in front of the Mitchell house. All the field hands were out front, helping corral people away while Mr. Mitchell directed everyone to kindly get the hell off his property. There were several well-dressed men in suits angrily arguing with the old farmer, backed up by several

gentlemen in intimidating black suits and national guardsman. I shared a look with Ben, his eyes still briming with the same ecstatic curiosity. Welp, time to go face the world.

I made my way to the front door and opened it as nonchalantly as possible given this circumstance. With that humble entrance, nearly a hundred pairs of eyes focused on me. What had been utter chaos went up to complete turmoil as people hurled questions at me like it was going out of style.

"Mick, what the hell happened!"

"Is it true, did the kid fall from the sky?"

"Sir, Myron Marks, *Time Magazine*, can you tell us about the Thunderchild?"

"We must study this creature for science, sir, please let us see it!"

"Hold it, now hold up. QUIET DOWN!" I yelled over the writhing crowd. My voice carried across the assembled host like a thunderclap. I clapped my hands over my mouth, awe mixing with embarrassment at the power of my voice. The first to break from this reverie was one of the men in black.

"Sir, my name is Agent Dundalk of the FBI, may we please see this Thunderchild?"

I stared back at the G -man, indignation welling up. "No sir, you may not see Ben, and furthermore you can't just demand…" I stopped as a little figure wormed its way into my left hand. Looking down Ben stood there gazing out, looking at all the people gathering outside to see him. I felt the crowd's frenzy grow to fever pitch as they all rushed towards the house. Mr. Mitchell got bowled over as field hands, farmers, doctors, and lawmen all rushed in to get a better look at Ben. I put the kid behind me, bracing myself to face the tide of humanity alone.

Before the crowd could smash into us though, a lightning bolt crashed down from the sky into the space in front of me. The blow stunned the crowd but left me feeling perfectly fine. In

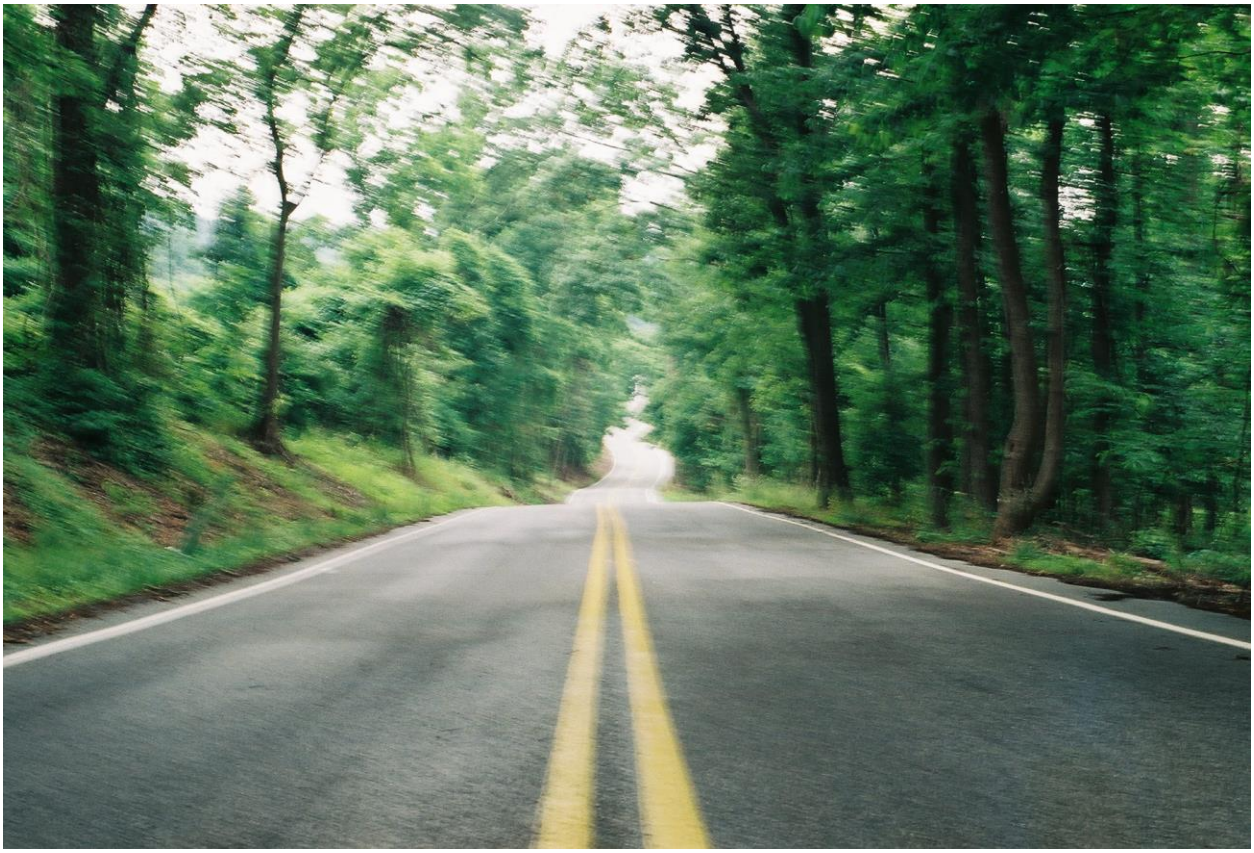
the wake of the bolt stood a giant of a man, built like an ox with a great white beard hanging down from his face. He dressed himself in a fine gray suit. However, most striking of all were his thunderous eyes, writhing with keen ferocious inquisitiveness. This great man gazed at the crowd; a stern expression plastered across his features. Feeling the horde sufficiently cowed, he turned back towards me. A smile cracked through his face, like a ray of sunshine through the eye of the storm. Ben ran from my grasp and hugged the giant man, who returned the gesture with vigor.

"I must thank you, young man," the stranger rumbled in a voice of thunder. "This little one slipped past the gates, for he wanted to see the world. I am all too thankful that you were kind enough to look after him. Here, give me your right hand." I stood in shock, nerves rigid with dread as this veritable Jupiter told me to extend my hand. Hesitantly, I held my arm out. The stranger gripped my hand, lighting shooting from his fingertips into my arms. They perfectly mirrored the marks on my left arm. Both lightning bolts sparked vividly, and I felt energy shoot through my veins. With a final nod of thanks, and a wave from Ben, the two disappeared back through the lightning bolt, leaving we stunned people to figure things out.

For most people, the story faded into urban legend. It all seemed just too far-fetched to believe, despite the scientists and lawmen there to confirm things. I went on with my life, staying out in the valley. However, I did eventually get a nice little cottage out in the forest, right next to that old broken oak. Ben grew up, but he still comes to visit me sometimes. I never know what to expect when he comes, always talking about celestial beings and managing the skies. We walk along the route where I found him, sharing a chuckle at my mad dash through the woods. He offered to host me for a visit, but who really knows where Ben comes from. Apparently, I can

travel using the thunder his dad gave me. I don't know if I could leave the world behind the way he's asking me too. But hey, I got to see and live something miraculous.

Road Spirits



The moon hung high and bright above the small backroad. The pale eye gazed down from the heavens, illuminating the winding asphalt for all the eye to see. Every now and again along the path a house would rear itself, though at this hour of night these small homesteads remained still and quiet in the pale moonlight. Forest surrounded the road where the treads of civilization did not reach, concealing the sleeping groundhogs and turkeys that called these little patches of forest their home.

Sometimes a lonely car would pass along the road, blinding headlights searing through the stillness in the air. The engine rumble would work itself slowly along this winding road, the moon watching the vehicles progress with eager amusement. The car would pass along the sleepy little houses, the animals resting in their various nooks within the woods and go over the patchy asphalt without a care save for the destination it sought out. Yet unbeknownst to the cars that ventured over the worn road, and the animals sleeping within the forest, nor even to the people who called this little piece of Pennsylvania their home, this road proved itself to be wildly important to a select few.

Along the asphalt walked a heavy-set man, his grumbles broken up only by the noises of nocturnal creatures. He scratched his red-gray beard, a tic developed over the years when frustration gave way to nervous energy. Blue denim overalls stained with years of asphalt, oil, and whiskey covered his frame, complimented by a set of black steel toed boots and a rough scarlet undershirt coated in even more mysterious stains. The man switched between scratching his beard and pushing back the yellow hardhat on his head as he ambled down the backroad. As he climbed up hill on the road, the man's grumbling reached a new fevered pitch, each step up the incline producing a new level of swearing and annoyance.

At the crest of the hill the man stopped to catch his breath, keeling over onto his knees in an effort to force air into his lungs. As he hunched over, hungrily sucking in oxygen, his right hand meandered into his pocket and pulled out a dip can. With practiced ease the man whipped up the can and put in a new lip, gazing out from the top of the hill as he worked the chew into its usual spot. He liked this road, the way it wound up and down along the hills. A sign of hard work and ingenuity bolstered over the years by rough, human hands. Good people lived here, and good people had worked here.

Well, except for that one time, but why let one crash ruin an otherwise upstanding road?

As the man let his thoughts wander like cars upon his very road, another figure made its way up along the twists and turns. The woman glided along the asphalt with practiced ease, designer shoes clacking along at a practiced, steady rhythm. Her clothing screamed lavish to the world around her, a dress laden with reds, oranges, and yellows amalgamated in such a way that the woman resembled a walking Picasso painting. She was stick thin, with lanky legs eating up the distance along the road with disturbing speed. The woman was in the sort of rush every person in every city on the east coast always seems to be in. Next meeting this, lunch at noon that, drinks after work before getting an expensive dinner with the friends. Brown hair was tied up under an equally flashy bandanna of blues and greens. The woman, in contrast to our friend at the top, climbed up the slope with little effort. Once her long stride carried her to the crest, she looked down at the man. The two looked like caricatures described by one another to an artist, and friendly contempt shown from behind each pair of eyes.

"Cass," the man offered first, hocking a ball of dip spit off into the grass.

"Hello, Chuck, it has been ages hasn't it," the woman offered back behind a smile dripping with venom.

"Don't talk to me about that, y'know I ask you guys to come out here every month to hash things out. And by the way, why am I the only who bothers to show up on time," Chuck rumbled out like a gravel truck. He angrily worked around the chew in his gums, grumpily smacking his lips together as both he and Cass stared each other down. "Speaking of you guys, where in the hell is that uptight pencil-pusher, it isn't like him to be the last to these little pow-wows."

On that note, another man crested up the hill. His cheap loafers slapped down the path with a weary beat. An entirely average looking fellow gazed up Chuck and Cass from behind eyes laden with fatigue. A crinkled suit barley held on to his dilapidated form, the pinstripes worn and faded from the heavy fluorescent lights of a government office. His black hair had been trimmed down to nearly to the scalp, save for a little on the top roughly three quarters of an inch long, slicked back with some cheap gel. One could feel the regulations bleeding off this man who ran almost exclusively on black coffee and bureaucracy. He worked his way to the hilltop, briskly walking past both Chuck and Mildred to a desk set up perfectly along the road's dividing line. Sitting down, the man took a second to straighten his crinkled red and blue striped tie before cracking open his briefcase on the desktop. A stack of papers taller than a toddler materialized from within the briefcase's narrow confines, along with a tasteful black ballpoint pen, the man's only true confession towards class within his fatigued ensemble.

"Good morning, everyone, I hereby call this meeting to order, on today's agen- "

"For Christ sakes, Tollins, can you act like a normal human being for once? At least a small hello or something before you do your whole robot routine." Chuck cried, exacerbation liberally coating his words.

Tollins looked over towards Chuck, a stare laden with the icy chill of a DMV worker. "If it would please you, Charles, some of us have better things to do than laze around and pretend to work," he paused, "if it would please you, may I finish introductions and agendas for the record?" Chuck opened his mouth to rebuttal, but clamped it shut after thinking on the matter. Hawking another ball of spittle, the husky workman waved his hand towards Tollins. The barest, most miniscule hint of a smile worked its way across the bureaucrat's features, a small victory he never got when dealing with others. "Splendid, where was I? Good morning, everyone, I hereby

call this meeting to order, on today's agenda we shall be discussing the matter of the so-called "Gravity Hill" found within York County, Pennsylvania. Representing the civilian roads of the county will be Charles Stone. Representing the interest of York City in this matter will be Mildred Porters of Philadelphia. Lastly, I Richard Tollins will be the representative for the United States Government. In the name of the Supernatural Road Safety Commission, we shall begin opening remarks." With that said, Tollins pen flicked to life, gliding across the top of large stack of papers.

Chuck shifted his hardhat back off his forehead. He closed his eyes, drawing in a deep breath of the cool night air. The moon hung where it always had, giving the old worker some courage he needed. "I think we all know why we're here, at least I hope we do. That commitment we made years back to help those taken by the asphalt to rest is commendable, and I would not want to spend my time any other way. Furthermore, I understand why we chose to leave these fellows out of the count for now. Makes sense, them being what kicked off this whole fiasco to begin with. But enough time has passed. We should put these boys to rest once and for all, it ain't fair they have to keep going when we have helped give peace to so many others." Chuck finished with a final look to his compatriots, his eyes softer than they had ever been. "When the crash happened in '56, I just couldn't believe it. Those three boys were mangled beyond belief, body and soul. The road wasn't done yet, but they didn't know. They just barreled through here like the dumb bunch of kids they were. Please, Tollins. Those kids didn't know they would still be here decades later. Let them rest.

Mildred looked back into Chuck's eyes, staunchly trying to reign in her emotions. It would not help to show her hand this early into a meeting. Chuck, however, for all his faults made a compelling point. These boys were long past their time to move on, and even to her icy

heart she understood just how much it took for Chuck to call this meeting. Stepping forward Mildred spoke, “Mr. Tollins, I believe our… esteemed friend here brings up a wholly valid point. What happened to these young gentlemen speaks of a tragedy beyond counting, most certainly due to how they linger here. I support Chuck’s proposal we lay these boys to rest.”

Once again, silence hung over the assembled meeting. The only sound came from the scribbling of the pen. Calmly, Tollins reached over and clicked said pen, looking at his constituents with a calculating gaze. Chuck and Mildred both shared a sidelong glance, not knowing where the government worker would go with this consensus. Many things could be said about Rich Tollins, a stuffy bureaucrat, a pompous snob, even an unpredictable maverick from the people back at the bureau, but heartlessness he could not be accused of. With great care, Tollins reached once more into his suitcase. However, instead of reaching deep into its recesses, the man instead reached for a worn folder at the very top. With a great degree of reverence did Tollins place the folder on his desk, opening it with as much though as one would open the Declaration of Independence. Inside the folder sat a particular piece of paper, signed with a multitude of names at the bottom of the worn document. Tollins flipped the folder around to face Chuck and Mildred. “I remember when we first gathered here, all twenty of the original commission. We all understood the gravity of the situation, and signed away a portion of our afterlives to help those who needed a little guidance. Those boys were the regrettable awakening to how many people got lost on the roads. I can say with no small measure that the pact struck should be upheld, with these boys being the last souls we help back along the true path.” Tollins eyes weighed down a bit more heavily at the gravity of his decision. It was odd after so many years to have this argument once again with the very people who set out to fix this very mistake.

“Please, Tollins, I just can’t stand it anymore,” Chuck cried out, “to have even one soul lost out here on their lonesome hurts enough, but to have these boys still out after so many years it like a needle through my heart. I just can’t take it anymore, not when we still have so much work to do. It will be decades before we even get close to finishing. Why not set them on their way now?” At this, a truck came hurtling down the narrow road, headlights illuminating the little party of three. It rumbled on none the wiser, taking it nice and easy as it went. As it hurtled by, the truck seemed not to notice as it passed through Tollins and his desk. A faint shimmer hung around the man as he seemed not to notice the truck, his mind searching for some point of evidence to convince Chuck away from the path. He sighed, knowing only one path forward.

“Charles, we stand here at a stalemate. I think our best course of action going forward would be to… ask the young men their opinion.” Both Chuck and Mildred took a step back, as if Tollins had smacked them each across the face.

“Tollins, Rich, please, that cannot be your only suggestion,” Mildred pleaded. She walked towards the desk, leaning on it heavily as she looked towards the bureaucrat. Just a hint of trepidation snuck through the otherwise collected demeanor of the man.

“We promised this for them, it seems only right to see what they have to say about it.” As he finished saying this, Tollins once more reached into his suitcase. He retrieved a small gear shift, and gingerly planted it upon the desk. Chuck scratched his beard in frustration, mind searching for words of protest but finding only nothing. Mildred took a step back from the desk, girding herself for the conversation to come.

Off in the distance came the familiar grind of tire on asphalt. The loud hum of an old engine barked out in the distance, speeding towards the three spirits with the careless abandon of

the young. From the mouth of the road hurtled a deep blue Chevy V-8. It zipped along the road like a great lightning bolt, hurtling closer and closer towards the trio of ghosts. The engine barked and screamed like a lion on the hunt, and just before the muscle car plowed into the remnants of the commission. At the last second, the car drifted to the side with the brakes screeching high hell. The vehicle skidded to s stop right in front of Tollins' desk. It rumbled there a while, a steel lion thinking what to do next. The ignition switched off, and the Chevy went dormant. With a heavy click three doors opened, and out of the Chevy stepped three young men.

Each wore the expression of high school seniors, kids in their prime. The future rose before them like an ocean of opportunity, if only their lives had kept going. Each of the three bore fatal wounds apparent to the eye. One boy had a great hole punched clean through the center of his chest, going through his sternum and out the back of his letterman jacket. The second had a clearly broken neck, along with a number of assorted broken bones across his arms and upper body. The last boy though had it the worst, as his severed head rested comfortably held under his left arm. Despite the grievous injuries, each of the boys wore a smile from cheek to cheek. They sauntered on over to the commission members without a care in the world, stopping in front of the desk with swagger to spare.

"Howdy there Mr. Stone, it's been a minute hasn't it!" The boy with the hole in chest exclaimed as he saw Chuck.

"It has been a while, Will, sorry I haven't been around to visit," Chuck said behind a smile. It took all he could to hold it together, years of guilt seeping through his gruff demeanor. He could barely look at the three boys without feeling the same pain that had flared up in '56.

“Mr. Stone, you know you do not have to blame yourself anymore. Just because we were driving like numbskulls doesn’t mean your road had anything to with this. Accidents happen, you old coot,” the boy with the severed head intoned.

“Yeah, Scott is right. You just built this place, you didn’t plan it, Mr. Stone. My dad would always say they just paved over old deer trails with putting much thought into it” the boy with broken bones affirmed.

“What happens in the past stays in the past. Scott, Mike, and I just made a mistake and cannot leave quite yet. But enough of all that, what do you need us here for?” Will spoke with all the joy he could muster. A knowing glint worked its way across his features, as he thought on what Tollins was about to ask.

“Thank you for coming today, gentlemen. I apologize for bothering you all at this hour, but Charles would like to once again request we help all of you move on to the afterlife, in spite of the original agreement signed between all our parties. This decision must be unanimous, and I cannot convince my associates to stay their hand anymore than they could convince me to change my mind. It seems only in the nature of fairness to ask you three for your opinion on the matter.”

Will thought on this question for a moment, before reaching over for the initial bill creating the commission. He quickly grabbed the floating pen, before signing his own name directly next to Chuck’s on the paper. He tossed the pen over to Scott, who likewise did the same, followed by Mike.

“Well, I would like to not be some ghost anymore, but well, damn, seems I signed onto some sort of contract. I don’t think it would be fair to just cut the line like that. So yeah, the boys

and I will stay here for now. I mean hell, we're a little tourist trap now what with pushing cars up the hill" Will finished with a smile, "Besides, you can't have Gravity Hill without the gravity breaking ghost story!"

Tollins stood up from the desk and moved the pile of papers back into his suitcase. "Then it is agreed. The Gravity Hill ghosts will remain as they are, until our business is concluded, and the commission disbands. If that is all, then I call this meeting adjourned." With that, the desk disappeared into thin air, and Tollins collected his pen with the original bill. Gently placing them back into the case, he made his way back down the hill. Before he left, the old Bureaucrat put a hand onto Chuck's should, a sympathetic smile warming the features of Tollins icy complexion before he left.

"Well, you tried your best, Chuck. And hell, I think you even brought some life back into that old zombie," Mildred quipped from beside the husky man. "Shame, seems we must go back to business as usual. Though thank you for bringing me back out here. It does the mind wonders to see why what we do matters. Until next time boys, hopefully it will be our last. Ta!" With that, Mildred took her leave of the old hill, gliding gentle along before disappearing as well.

Lastly, the boys got back into their Chevy one by one, each tapping Chuck on the shoulder as they passed. Will looked the old man in the eyes, his sunny complexion marred only by the hole in his chest. To Chuck it was not much, but the smile within the young man's eyes spoke of a patience honed over time. With that final look, the Chevy fired to life once more. It tore off into the night, flying up and down the hills of the road before fading into the very asphalt itself.

Chuck sat alone, quietly lamenting his failed attempt at change. The agreement had been signed, but it had never stuck right with him. Even if Will, Scott, and Mike were getting along better than the others he had helped. A sigh wheeze from the old man's lips, and he fully took the chew from his mouth. Oh well, better to focus on the work ahead. As Chuck made his way back down the hill, he looked up at the moon still hanging overhead. It glowed brightly, just as it had when the meeting began. The giant rock had watched everything that had happened, from the car crash until now. Chuck smiled at the celestial body, hoping it would shine down just as brightly when he could lay those boys to rest.

The Machine of York

I think about rust a lot. The way that old farmers would bring their worn, battered up cars to get to Martin Memorial Library sparked the interest in my mind. There would be flecks of rust over here and there, with the super old lemons practically having a coat of rust as their main paint job. Yeah, rust just existed everywhere on these cars, but it also got into the air. All around town you could just taste that metallic tinge with every breath. Is it possible for people to get rusty? I always thought so. I mean, if the cars can get rusty, then why the hell can't people? I remember once in biology class that the reason blood looks red is because it's all iron. Well, iron gets rusty, so ergo we can rust.

I think rust describes York, Pennsylvania right down to the bone. The town wears it like a nice suit, draped all over itself night and day. It used to be a gigantic city, a "dynamo of American ingenuity and promise," old Mr. Hardtberg would say before he passed away. He had lived next door to me, got to see this old town in a better place and a better time. Mr. Hardtberg made York seem like something out of a Disney movie. The factories hummed with industry back then, people going into these places of ingenuity to bring our home a step closer to greatness with each passing day. I can only imagine it, back when this pit of desolation had once been so full of promise. When it existed as an ultramodern paradise of human wonder before everything went downhill. It was gradual at first, back in the 70s things just started to fade. Rust popped up in small patches. Then the factories began to close one after another. Like a domino chain of deterioration.

I can't really say for certain what put York on the downward spiral. My personal belief exists somewhere between the rust moving into people's brains and evil gnomes whispering of better opportunities out by D.C.. Everyone says I'm crazy though, so maybe take my theories with a grain of salt. Mick said that York slid down the economic ladder due changes in the viability of industrial factories, but I think he may be wrong. Not to say Mick is dumb, I know no one smarter in this little town. I mean, he teaches at the college while I just work on pipes all day. Rusty pipes. But I don't need a degree in economics to know something wrong happened here. I mean, I saw the Machine after all.

No one really believes the Machine exists. Everyone tells me it's just my typical overactive imagination. Which, in all fairness, they most certainly aren't wrong about. But the Machine is different. Different from when I saw that flock of parrots around the Civil War memorial in the town square. It is different than when I saw that top hat and wedding veil getting married at St. Patrick's Church (a lovely ceremony, by the way). Those just seemed too ludicrous to fully believe. But the Machine sticks out in my mind as something stuck within the confines of reality.

I first saw the thing during the York Fair. Now the Fair is a good time, a splendorous ghost of when people would flock to old York for fun times above all else. People still come, but even between the carnival games and the funnel cake and the petting zoos and all the marching bands playing there's something off. I had been eating some Bricker's French fries, gently shaking the rust off them. Mick walked along with me, telling me all sorts of stuff about just what the fair did to help York out. Listening to Mick just puts me in another state of being. It's like he has a well-ordered library of all the world's knowledge located on the avenues of his

brain stem and frontal lobe. Not everything he says cracks through my own mind though. My head is more like Martin Memorial. Decent size, good inventory, a fine catalogue of music, but try to cram the library of Alexandria in there and the poor building would burst brick from brick.

Mick lost himself within facts of rabbit populations while I tried to shake off the fry rust a bit more. That's when I saw the Machine. Just beyond the Fairground gate, in this old factory right off the railroad tracks, and across the street from Cavalry United Methodist. Up in the tallest corner of that old building I saw a flit of movement. Unmistakable, movement just like that of a person, though I had to scrunch up my nose at that notion. People usually don't look like crows. And crows usually aren't the size of gas pumps. And furthermore, crows don't really have a metallic sparkle to them. Unless of course there were robot crows flying around the country, which would in fact have metallic beaks. Well, unless the robot crows covered up those beaks so they wouldn't shine, given it could distract airplane pilots and cause all sorts of issues. By the time I worked out the robot crow conundrum, we'd already walked a good deal past that old factory. I chew on a now rust-free fry and contemplate how to tell Mick about my observation. It takes until the first roller coaster ride for my thoughts to fully order, and until we hit the rabbit tents to rehearse my words.

"Mick, I saw a robot crow in the old building." There, nice and straight to the point. I thought it best to simply go right for the truth on this one. Often my visions for Mick in the past met with a combination of strange jokes, mirthful laughter, and a healthy dose of that one facial expression people make when they think you should be on medication but also shouldn't be because that stuff messes with your other bodily processes. That day I only warranted a slightly raised eyebrow and skeptical bite of funnel cake.

"Very curious, to say the least. I have some questions though, namely on the airborne

properties of a bird made entirely out of metal. I do not claim to be an aerospace engineer, but the lift alone would need massive amounts of force metal flapping wings simply cannot produce." Mick did offer a highly compelling point, though the counter simply resided in only seeing the beak of the creature. For all intents and purposes, it could have a jet engine instead of wings, or much more likely could summon a host of smaller robot crows to help it navigate around the abandon factories of York. I scratched my chin at this new issue. Mick was the smartest guy I knew; I mean hell he works at York College. I tried to push the beak out of my mind for the time being to focus on the rabbits, but something about that old glint stuck deep withing the folds of my brain. I just couldn't put my finger on why though.

Later that night, after Mick and I had parted ways. I sat around trying to think of just why that Giant Robot Crow had allowed me to spot it. There were plenty of people at the fair, and I had been the only one to see the creature. I stayed up hour after hour, working through just what about the mechanical corvid caught my attention. At exactly 3:26 a.m., the answer crashed into my mind with the force of a meteor.

There was no rust on its beak.

It took a few days to get back to the old factory. It mesmerized me to the very core. Something wholly and utterly without rust, living within the heart of York. The rust coated everything, from sky to people. That something could break through this haze left all my ideas of this place lying flat on their backs. Now I just needed to find the thing again. I waited a week, until the next Saturday when I hopefully could retrace my steps. I stood outside the gate like I had a week prior, same shoe on my feet, same fries in my hand (still with some rust), I had even rewound my brain to reenact that very moment in time. That last part took a lot of practice, hence why I had needed to wait so long. I stared at the same broken window on the factory's topmost

floor, searching for any sign of the crow. He didn't show up there. I took some more time, and moved to every side of the factory I could possibly get to. The angle just had to be wrong. I looked from the bleachers on the fairgrounds, then moved over to the railway (exceedingly rusty), and then I went over to the gas station to look on in. All of these proved fruitless, especially the one where I went into Cavalry Methodist. The minister was confused at first, but was nice enough to let me in. Ah well, I shared some fries with the old man and went on my way.

Now on any other day, I would have simply said this vision belonged with the others. But then the lack of rust slingshotted the robot crow back into my head. I labeled this particular thing "the Machine" in my head as robot crow became too much of a mental mouthful. I knew the Machine existed, now I just had to find it again.

Attempt number two came right at the end of August. I had spent the day working on St. Rose of Lima's restrooms. It was just across the street from Cavalry Methodist, and the Machine's house. The entire time I spent tightening up pipes and checking water pressure, the Machine made a cozy nook in my head. The pipe work took its usual toll, and I had a nice conversation with the priest on how Fall slowly introduced itself the past week. I tried to avoid bringing up the Machine, I didn't want to burden the old minister, but it just couldn't be avoided. He gave me a curious look, but not in the way Mick gave me looks. This look held the beauty of a thousand-year-old stained-glass window that consisted exclusively of the color orange. His light shown down warm on my face with a smile that saw much of what our mortal world could throw at it, and remained pleasantly amused every time.

"Well, young man, you may not be too far off the money!" the old Father said with amusement. "I love to watch the crows fly around the old factory, sometimes go out and feed

them between masses. Though I am forced to admit, I have not seen one made of metal yet." He smiled at me with every nerve on his face, it would have been the happiest I had seen someone if the rust on his collar had not muddied the appearance somewhat.

After this revelation I fixed up the last of the pipes, bid the good Father farewell, and went out onto the street. Then I started staring at that old factory again. It remained the same, a rusted hulk of years before attempting to struggle on in modern York. I often wondered why no one had torn it down and built an Olympic sized infinity pool there. But I guess the YMCA already has the pool part covered, so why would we need a second one? Then a flash came out of the windows. It moved methodically, with the purposeful grace of a foreman and the intelligence of an engineer. For a moment, we even locked eyes. Well, if the Machine had eyes. It was more the two glimmering eye sockets within its bird-like head. This glimpse lasted much longer than the first, at least five seconds before it once more disappeared back into the rust.

I got home that night and decided to meet the Machine. But I didn't want to be rude about it. I mean, I wouldn't like it if Bigfoot broke into my house because he had never seen a human before. However, I couldn't just call the Machine's front office and make an appointment, after all the front office had been rusted away and covered in graffiti over the years. I also imagined the Machine appreciated a more personal touch and therefore didn't have a secretary.

So I wrote the Machine a letter. Writing it was hard, given I didn't know how to address the creature and the last time I wrote a letter I was sixteen. But the people at the post office were patient with me, and I got the Machine a stamp with a ruffled grouse on it. The postwoman had said they were limited edition stamps and I hoped the Machine would respond faster if I showed how sophisticated I was. I kept the letter simple, only introducing myself and asking what a nice time would be to meet. I also enclosed some paper so it could return my letter along with some

other stamps of Great Danes. They were also limited edition plus Great Danes are the official dog of Pennsylvania. At least, that's what the postwoman told me. So late on September 12th I borrowed a ladder and climbed up to the Machine's perch. The climb jolted my nerves a bit, but that may have also been excitement. My nerves always acted weird when I climbed things too, dancing around like circus performers. I know I didn't have a fear of heights, but I guess my nerves did so they danced when I climbed things. I left the letter under a piece of old banister and left with a hope in my heart to see the Machine again.

I checked back at the Machine's house every other day. Eventually though I realized the Machine would send a letter back to my house. I mean, there was a return address on the envelope, and the Machine definitely knew how to properly write a letter. I talked to Mick a lot while I waited for a response. It set my heart at ease whenever we sat in his office and talked about what I saw. He seemed tired of teaching at York College, but not tired in the way where life drags on into another day, but tired closer to having just completed a marathon. We talked on and on about the Machine, by which I mean I talked for several hours about its existence. The fact that I had seen something so violently real still just blew my mind away. I see things all the time, but I know their existence isn't real. But how could something like the Machine not exist? Something that stood firmly within reality, our reality, the reality of York. Mick remained a sceptic to the Machine. I expected nothing less.

"Well, this "Machine" defies all known logic. First and foremost, how would a giant piece of metal shape itself into a crow's skull? Someone must have designed it way back, maybe the 70s, and put up this art piece in the factory." Mick's point did cut with the sharp edge of logical thought but dulled itself on the general illogical nature of the Machine.

"I don't think the Machine comes from someone's hands. I mean, the thing has its own brand of intelligence. I saw it in those sparkling eyes. People around here don't sparkle like that thanks to all the rust. And here we have something that defies the rust, that chooses to sparkle on despite the orange flakes that coat everything here. I really wish it would answer my letter already?" Mick looked at me for a while, do what I call getting into character. Every time he considers my viewpoint Mick does the same thing. He'll hunch over, putting his elbows on his knees so the bones touch. This helps to conduct the thoughts I'm putting into the floor travel faster to his brain, the bones being the highways of stimulus after all. Then Mick will adjust his glasses so they come all the way down his nose. I think they'll fall off every time, but he just has perfect balance with them. Then he'll breathe exclusively from his left nostril and right ear, so the brain gets the certain amount of breath where he understands the idea but it doesn't decimate his ego. The process meticulously falls into place before my eyes, and I sit back in shock with practiced surprise.

"So, I get why the Machine intrigues you. Hell, it would intrigue me as well. But what makes you think this Machine tethers itself to our reality?" Mick pushes his glasses back up, fully digesting all the ideas I sent him in a matter of moments. Mick's a smart guy like that.

"Well I think the Machine tethers itself here because…" and for the first time in my life, an explanation fails to come forward. I pause at this, re-catalogue the brain library, and attempt to speak again. But no words come out. My tongue flops around like a newborn deer out at Nixon Park. Why does the Machine exist in my reality? Also, can anyone else see my reality? Does my reality live alongside everyone else's reality? I sit, stunned silence drifting ominously over Mick. To Mick's credit, his character mask is still on. He recoils slightly in shock, the first time in years of knowing me where an explanation cannot find root in the soil of mind. Mick

shakes his head, cleaning his glasses before leaving suddenly. When he comes back, two cups of coffee nestle themselves in his palms. Mick hands me one, and we both sip, sit, and contemplate the nature of what just occurred.

I got home late that night, around 8:30 after talking with Mick. The stars I can see glitter in the sky past all the lights of the night. I wonder if the satellites orbiting the earth also get rusty, but probably not as there is no oxygen in space. I get home, unlocked the front door and took my boots off before stopping dead. There, sitting in my mailbox, a letter gently dangles in the fall breeze. I gingerly take it out, before rushing inside to the kitchen table. A little Great Dane barks in the letter's corner, yelling at some unknown animal out of view. This is it. The Machine wrote back. With hands shaking from excitement, I gently work my finger under the letter's seam. On the paper within, only a single line stares back in flawless cursive.

8:30 P.M. September 21st

Sincerely,

The Heart of the Factory

A week later, I stand outside the rusted building outside the fairgrounds. The nerves jump around in my body, shaking all the rust from my clothing and my head. I have a ladder (personal), a camera (disposable from Walgreens), and some cookies (chocolate chip from Giant, still warm). If I am going meet the Machine, or The Heart of the Factory, or whatever it is, then good manners mean I should bring something over. That's what Mr. Hardtberg said every time I went to see him. I would bring over the marbles I would find, chips of road, and sometimes a wrench from my dad's toolbelt. Mr. Hardtberg liked them all, and after a time taught me the joy

of bringing over cookies because you get to have some too. I wonder what he would think of the Machine?

At exactly 8:30 p.m. on Friday September 21, I set my ladder up against the high perch of the old factory. My nerves jumped around ecstatically during the climb, sent into a frenzy from the unusual appointment. I walk up to the door at the highest point of the tower and knock exactly three times.

The door opened on its own, and I stepped into the Machine's home.

The first thought I had upon seeing the towering creature of metal roughly aligned with surprise mixed with vindication. The Heart of the Factory stood roughly ten feet high, with a cloak of metal shards and old conveyor belt sections covering its slender frame. It stood on two spindly, double-jointed legs made entirely of polished mental, leading to a torso that looked like the ribcage on the skeleton in biology class. Two arms dangled down from its frame, reaching down to the first knee joint. And there, resting at the very top of this metallic monstrosity, sat a beaked head that shined brightly beneath the glow of York. Its beak stretched out a good foot from the body, and in its eye holes two pinpricks of green light regarded me with unfathomable curiosity.

"Hello, what are you?" I said, offering up the tin of cookies to the creature. At this, it cocked its head slightly to the left, an amused chuckle clacking from its steel beak.

"Hello, friend, I am the Heart of the Factory, the Spark of Industry, or as you call me, The Machine of York." It clanked out, speaking everywhere and nowhere simultaneously. At this, it gingerly plucked a cookie from the tin, took a small bite with its beak, and set it down on a large foreman's table. Slowly, it walked back farther into the factory. It sat down on a large

iron chair, offering me a seat opposite itself. A tasteful chair made of old piping, with a small pillow decorating the seat. I took the seat, slowly tallying up all the questions I wished to ask this marvel of metal.

"Can I only see you? Are you real? What makes you real? Did you like the cookie? What happened here?" my mouth fired off question after question, chambering one after another off the machinegun that was my tongue. The Machine once again chuckled, before sitting up straight within its throne.

"I have always been here, friend. My birth happened sometime long ago, when man first set to crafting tools. Then I existed in stone. Over the years I moved on, developing myself and your people. I settled here in York around the 20th century, helping to turn this town into a machine as efficient as myself. However, as time always does, my powers wane with every passing second." The Machine looked back down at me, taking another bite of the cookie.

"But are you real?" I asked once again.

"As real as human will." It responded in kind. The two green dots looked at me, widening slightly as I put together what the robot crow meant. Wait, was the Machine a real crow? I would assume it's a corvid of some sort given the beak, but the thing ran off something other than robotics. Then the truest question of all made itself known.

"Do you see the rust?" As the question leapt from my mind to the Machine's, the green glow widened to encapsulate the whole of its eyes. The green illuminated me fully, until all I could make out from its glow was the Machine's silhouette.

"You have true understanding my friend. You see this place for what it can truly be, and the limitless possibilities which make their home within the ground. Go now, with this small token of my respect. And never stop looking."

With that, I stood alone in an empty warehouse. The sounds of York city faded back into my ears. I looked around for any trace of the Machine, but it disappeared without a trace. There remained one small object where the creature had sat, right on the seat of the rusty throne. A small metal bird sat there, a crow with a small bottle of cleaning oil in its beak. I studied the two vehemently, attempting to fathom every detail for what the Machine had wanted from me. I took the small tokens with me as I left, gently moving back down the ladder. Then at the bottom, I noticed a very key change. There, on the ground before me, lay a perfectly clean spot. No rust anywhere around it. I looked again, then slowly turned back towards the factory. It too remained wholly spotless, shining in the light like a jewel.

I understood what the Machine had meant, and in time I managed to clean the rust off myself forever. I never did see the old bird again, and no one ever really believed me because I had forgotten to use the camera. But Mick did say I shined more brightly after that night. Something in my head sparkled and worked like never before.

I sat and talked with him a few weeks after I met the Machine. Mick seemed unusually animated while I remained usually clam.

"I just cannot believe the amount of business coming into the town. First, they finish the intersection at MT. Rose to 83, now the first factory in decades moves in. A factory! There hasn't been one of those in years. It boggles the mind," Mick clicked his heels as he danced

around the office. An economist with a purpose really is something to behold. I smiled all the while.

"The Machine did that, Mick. It believes in us again. Or maybe it gave us the power to believe in this place."

"Yeah, the Machine, right. And my great grandpa met a kid made of lightning. But hey, all that matters is that new commerce flowing into the city." Mick continued to dance, and I joined to not feel left out. It felt good to dance again in a small office crammed in the back of the economics department.

I polish the small bird with the cleaning oil every day. From the spot where the Machine lived the rust slowly began to dissipate. The railroad tracks became clean, the people no longer flaked orange dust wherever they went. And I began to appreciate the spark that reignited the Machine of York.

The Mummy of Appalachia

I never thought fire would hurt so much. Ma always said it would burn and I never worked up the courage to test. Even when I was growing up, I never wanted to know whether she was right or wrong. Especially when I signed on with the coal company. Especially when we went down the mineshaft. A loose spark is the last thing you want when surrounded by coal. Ma gave a lot of good advice before I left for the mountains. I was sad to leave, but she couldn't support eight mouths on her lonesome. And hell, I thought working in the mines would give me some credit.

The vein our crew worked on never ended, and before long the boys put me in charge. I had enough manners to yell down the bigwigs without getting booted. A couple of the older miners shirked at a greenhorn getting the job, but they didn't raise a big fuss.

Things ran smooth as butter. But then we hit a section of pure stone. Blasting through was the only way. I hollered up a storm when they brought in the men with their charges and plungers. The company stood their ground, claiming dynamite would get the job done faster. Hell, they even offered up a hefty bonus to anyone willing to help set the charges.

None of my boys would be going down that hole. If the company needed someone, then hell I was someone. And after all, then had gone for a real professional, Davy. The salty old codger had more nitroglycerine than common sense in his head, but beneath his scraggly beard, broken teeth, and wild eyes sat a mind that knew explosives.

"Y'all got nothing to worry about," he assured as we went back down the shaft. "It'll only be a little boom. Nothing that you should worry your head about, Mike." The tools of his trade jangled along as I lead him through the darkness.

Everything ran like clockwork. Davy went about his measurements, taping and prodding the great wall of stone. I fiddled around with the sledgehammer and pinions, my mind warring between fear and duty. The blaster measured out his charges with professional enthusiasm, and we set about working. A long metal rod cracked into the rock, driven by hammer blows. The sound echoed down the halls with an eerie rhythm.

Clang.

Clang.

Clang.

The dynamite went in next. Three small tubes that sealed my fate went down the flume. Davy sat next to his handiwork wearing a wicked smile. I stood farther back in the shaft, sweat trailing down my temples. Something was wrong. Five years working down a hole gives you a sense of things, and that sense screamed at me louder than a steam whistle.

"DAVY WAI-!" shot from my lips before being drowned out by noise and fire. My skin burned and I wailed in agony. The shaft caught alight in the explosion. It took all my will to run back the way I came, fire eating away at my body. Davy's laugh carried over this path to hell, trailing me before the fire took my senses.

I woke up sometime after that nightmare. It was in a strange house I found myself, one of the nice cabins the foremen get. The bed I sat in spanned a quarter of the room. I couldn't feel it, nor the blanket that covered me. Most concerningly, the bandages wrapped around my body gave no sensation at all. There were nice carpets strewn all about the floor, their designs mixing in each other like someone spilled a kaleidoscope. Fat snowflakes drifted around outside the one-room cabin. Wait, snowflakes? The leaves had just started to change when we hit that rock. Lord, what had happened?

I tried to move, but my body did nothing. Instead, a small red shape appeared at the foot of the bed. It pulsed gently, smaller shapes falling away from the symbol. Other symbols appeared beside it, one green and blue. Each moved at a different rhythm, pulsing gently along with their siblings. Before I could get lost further in the twinkling colors, the cabin door swung

open with seismic force. Before the door could even slam into the wall, a figure swooped to the foot of the old bed.

The young woman wore a smile on her face wider than the Susquehanna River. Reddish-brown hair spilled out from beneath a surprisingly dry hood. It framed a befreckled face home to two brilliant green eyes, shining like mad emeralds as they looked me up and down. She flicked off her winter cloak, letting it fly to a hook close to the door as she sized me up.

"Holy hell, I am a GENIUS!" she yelled, twirling about the little cabin like a ballerina. Before my very eyes she began to fly around the little space, hovering around as she spun. As another burst of wind whipped through the cabin, the woman stopped her cajoling with a sheepish grin. "Sorry, Michael, where are my manners." With a flick of her wrist the door closed shut, and she floated down to the foot of the bed.

"Ehhhhh…" I feebly wheezed from underneath the bandages, suddenly realizing just how weak I was. The woman looked down at the pulsing symbols, her smile changing to a look of clinical professionalism.

"I am the good witch Minerva O'Boyn, but my friends call me Minnie. I certainly hope to call you a friend. You're still very weak, but my magnificent magical prowess kept your soul from heading off just yet. Give me just a second here." Minerva trailed off as she rummaged through the bag at her side. From it, she retrieved a piece of charcoal and a handful of multi-colored flowers. She drew a series of markings on my chest, ones that made my head feel fuzzier than a glass of whiskey. The witch then began to chant in some weird language, scattering the flower petals along my chest. Each bandage strip lit up with glowing blue script. Tendrils of azure light were vacuumed in from the very air as the witch chanted.

All at once, her wild melody stopped and a tidal waved of blue light suffused itself into my bandages. Vitality surged through my limbs like a thunderbolt. I felt stronger than I had in years, and slowly but solidly I stood up from the bed.

“How do you feel, Michael?” Minnie inquired, staring intently at the small pulsing sigils.

“Like 18 karat gold!” I shouted, clamping a hand over my mouth.

“Seems like your mind is still getting used to your new strength.,” the witch said as a smile returned to her face, “Good, because you’ll be needing it. Come, let’s discuss that over tea. Oh, and here are some clothes for you.” With that she handed me a green flannel shirt and denim pants, before summoning up a dining table with some fine-looking china.

“Wait, hold on, the hell do you mean? Who are you, what in the name of God did you just do to me?” I demanded while working myself into the shirt.

“Answers you do deserve, my friend.” She beamed at me as the tea poured itself,” First off, I used a mix of old Egyptian burial magic, Irish alchemical herbology, and American ingenuity to bring you back up. Not cheaply either, thank you very much,” The witch said, waving her hand and sending a chair to me. Minnie fixed me with a sad, sympathetic look. “Michael, for all intents and purposes you were dead for roughly a week. That’s how long it took for the initial spell to take hold in your bandages. You are alive for a very important purpose, to defeat the Zalbed.”

I cocked my head, curiosity peaked at the tale this witch wove. “Well, thank you for saving me, even if it is for work. Now, what the hell is a Zalbed?”

“An ancient creature, older than any human. They eat the heart of mountains, which in turn kills the very earth for hundreds of miles. Many thought these creatures hunted to extinction. Little did I know one lived right it this mining town, waiting for the moment to strike.”

“Davy! He blew me to kingdom come to eat a damn mountain?!” I exclaimed, dormant rage boiling to the surface of my mind.

“Indeed, Michael. The creature manipulated the mining company into going deeper and deeper. Soon enough it will get what it wants. That is where you come in. Those sigils woven into the bandages give you much more than strength. You’ll be able to see past the Zalbed’s disguises and withstand its temptations. However, you also hold a unique power. By surviving the Zalbed’s fire, it can no longer burn you.” Minerva set her tea down gently, determination etched upon her features. “Michael, you must defeat this monster. For the sake of all who live in these mountains.”

I could only stare at this mountain witch. Everything she spouted sounded right out of a fairy tale. Yet for all she told me, no arguments came to my head. Everything thus far had proved the old magics were real. The fact I could even stand gave Minnie all the credit she needed. If this mountain-eater did exist, then it could kill off the entire mining industry miles around. All those people left to poverty couldn’t stand on my watch. To top everything off, Davy blew me up. He had to pay for that at the very least.

“Alright, you got yourself a monster slayer then,” before I could even finish the sentence, Minerva had launched herself from the table and into a bearhug.

“OhthankyousomuchIdidn’tthinkthiswouldwor-“ the witch’s ran her mouth a mile a minute. I just stood there in stunned silence, letting the sudden wave of joy ease the tension from

the room. Suddenly realizing she was supposed to be an enigmatic mountain witch, Minnie released me from her grip. “Sorry about that, I just didn’t even know I would revive you, Mike, let alone you would agree to help,” she apologized from behind a sheepish grin. Then a flash of energy once again reignited her eyes as Minnie flew across the cabin. “One last thing, Michael, while your strength may be that of a hundred men, it won’t last long against the Zalbed. In this case, I took the liberty of making you one final present.” At this, she hefted up a sledgehammer. My sledgehammer.

“Well, I’ll be…” I said, taking the old tool with a sense of wonder. Runes had been carved all along the head of the hammer, restrained energy barely contained within the script. The shaft remained singed but whole, surprising given the power of the blast. It had been wrapped with leather near the head and pommel, offering a better grip for swinging. Runes too scrolled their way all along the shaft, with one solitary line of English saying *From Minnie, With Love.*

“That should teach that nasty old beastie a lesson or seven,” Minnie offered, the pride shining from her emerald eyes. I tried to smile, a hard task without lips. Minnie had shifted the power of life and death, at longshot odds, to help others. That I could respect. “One last thing, Mike. The Zalbed believes you to be dead, so you should be able to take it by surprise. Just don’t go running in all willy nilly.”

“Mean to say you ain’t coming with me?”

“Not all the way, I can’t enter the mine. Something with how the creature defends its territory. I’ll take you as far as I can though.” With that, the winter cape flew back onto Minerva’s shoulders, and we set out through the door.

The Mine looked like a singed eyesore. Where once men and machinery had flooded into the depths of this mountain, quiet remained. It scared me fierce. From the looks of things, the shaft had been wholly abandoned. There still had to be a fortune's work in ore down that mineshaft, and I knew who was to blame.

"After the explosion, no one else wanted to go down there. Asking around, people still think your ghost haunts this little joint." Minerva surveyed the crater that had once been my fortune. Ash blew from the shaft's opening, flowing out in long jagged lines through the rest of the blast marks. Tentatively, she moved towards the blast marks with inching steps. They started to glow with a sickly red, the past explosion lying dormant in the ashes. "Tch, seems my assistance stops here. That thing sits down there even now, searching for the mountain's heart. I'll leave all the doom and gloom to your imagination, just make sure that Zalbed stays down there."

With a wary nod, I strode into the blast. The ashes lit up lightly, before dissipating once more as I passed. Yet those embers carried over into my soul. A new determination reared up like a horse in my head. I had died here. It felt weird, knowing that had a witch gone out on a limb my burnt corpse would still be down in the earth, petrified. Vengeance screamed out from the recesses of my soul. This animal had thrown me away like my life meant nothing. Davy had not been a close friend, but he at least had a beer or two when we all went out drinking. I had liked him, and he decided that warranted blowing me up. Well, it seemed only right to pay back what he had given me. Ten-fold.

Into the mine I trudged, ashes and dust kicked up where my feet landed. It felt like a glimpse into hell. Darkness all around, kept at bay only by the glowing script of my bandages. Yet what I saw best remained unseen. Chunks of rock were blasted away from the shaft at random intervals. Long claw marks proclaimed the dominion of the Zalbed across the wall in equal measure. Tracks of melted stone marked where the creature had paced and turned in its made quest, criss crossing the cavern in some sort of mad dance. Other tunnels led off from the main line, not dug by human instruments. They spanned the height of two men and snaked off into the darkness without rhyme or reason. Dirt and coal were everywhere, the lifeblood of my work tossed aside like a playground pebble. The amount of coal this thing dug out could have kept people warm, fed families with their wages, or been used to fuel the fires of industry. Instead, it sat wasted in the dirt.

It took some hiking before I hit a spot all too familiar. The sheet of rock had, as expected, been blown open. Beyond that I heard noises that sounded somewhere between a shuffling minecart and an avalanche. I pressed forward, before stopping at an imprint on the ground. My imprint on the ground. I took a long, hard look at the clean space. It remained free of any blasting remains, no fire had touched the area.

Death looks a miner in the eyes day after day. Just a part of the profession, I suppose. But it remains an implication, something heard of but not seen. He lay in the darkness of the mineshaft, or the shadow of the coroner. I had died. I had died in this very spot, burned alive by a specter of hate beneath the earth. How many people get to see their own grave? How many souls must look at their charred flesh still on the ground? I am a rare exception, and vengeance would be mine. God told us that hatred is a sin, something vile to keep under lock and key. I held no hatred for the world around me, for the people that worked me, or for my general circumstances.

But that outline, my grave, lit something deep in my soul. I began to hate. I hated this monster from beyond time. I hated how it robbed me of my profession. I hated how it forced me into these bandages, no longer able to feel even the breeze. Most of all, I hated how this Zalbed took the one thing guaranteed to all the righteous, a quiet death.

Payment would come in blood.

I crossed the blasted wall and came face to face with this subterranean Beelzebub. It stood much taller that our last meeting, at least the height of three men. The beast's skin mimicked the stone around us, his joints flowing with rivers of glowing magma. It looked like a twisted sort of knight from a fairy tale, left to the hungering darkness beneath the earth. Claws chipped away at the far end of the wall, arms like steel beams tearing great chunks from the earthworks. The monster didn't even hear me enter, so enthralled with digging the tunnel farther down.

I smashed my hammer into the ground, roaring a wordless challenge backed by vengeance and vitriol. The beast halted halfway through a claw swipe, turning its hideous face for my eyes to see. Though face might have been a bit too generous, give the twisted amalgamation of rock and magma that greeted my burning eyes. Greats jaws of blackened stone sat beneath two burning spheres of pure, distilled hunger. The Zalbed's teeth harkened to the mouth of an ancient cavern, steaming bits of molten saliva trickling from between the rows of stony fangs. The monster took a step forward, sizing me up as its eyes bored into me. A spark of recognition flashed behind its visage. A low rumble echoed through the caverns, emanating from the Zalbed. It laughed. The damn thing was laughing at me.

“You are very stupid for a human. You received another chance at life and still come to your death. A fool in every sense of the word.”

“Shut it! You burnt me alive, killed this mine, and want to destroy the livelihood of hundreds. I’ll say this once, you molten ignoramus, get out of my mine!”

My hammer sailed forward, righteous vengeance and Minnie’s magic propelling it forward with strength and precision. In return, a stony claw reared itself up from the monster’s side. The two weapons collided like an earthquake, sending dust flying around the tunnel’s confines. The Zalbed snarled at me, agitation cracking its igneous features. The runes on my hammer glowed like the sun, warring with the sickly illumination put out by the monster’s magma.

“Who gave you these magics? What manner of fool stands against a timeless one such as I,” the monster demanded. A small piece of stone fell from its hand.

“The mountain gave them to me, it sorta likes it heart,” I returned with a lipless smile. Seems Minnie knew what she was doing after all. Once again, we launched at each other, trading blow after blow. My hammer rained down like a cave-in, and its claws returned like an avalanche. I swung with a miner’s rhythm, magical vitality lending unceasing stamina to my strikes. The Zalbed, in return, began to slow down its onslaught. The longer our fight went on, the more bits and pieces of rocky skin chipped away from the Zalbed’s igneous features. A feeling of desperation worked its way across the creature’s attacks, trepidation causing clumsy strikes to falter against my defense. In return, I redoubled my efforts, channeling renewed energy behind each swing.

The Zalbed wavered. Its attack came sloppy and slow, like a flood of molasses. It was the only opening I needed. All my anger and retribution flowed from my burnt muscles, through the hammer, and clean into the side of Zalbed's craggy temple. The monster lurched with the blow and staggered a few paces through the tunnel before collapsing. I held for a moment, triumph washing over me before I saw the monster stir. Striding forward, I readied the sledgehammer for a finishing blow.

"Hey, Mike," a familiar voice echoed through the cavern. The Zalbed rolled over, and there staring back at me was a molten copy of Davy's face. "I'm still in here, that thing took over. Please, Mike, I'm okay now you don't have to kill me." He flashed a gap-toothed smile. I looked at this man I had known, this fellow miner who had dug into the earth with me. I looked at this man who had shared beers with me and told me the beauty of nitroglycerine. I looked Davy square in the eyes and dashed out whatever brains the Zalbed thought it had.

"You ain't fooling me twice, you sumbitch." With that, the sickly light of the magma melted away with the monster's life. Only the blue glow of my badges illuminated the cave, obscuring the broken body now cast in shadow. A death for a death, dealt out in fairness. A hand touched my shoulder.

"Thank you, Michael," Minerva offered behind me. Her eyes glowed from beneath the dark of her hood, fixed intently upon the Zalbed's corpse. "We must seal this place off, or else more of its ilk may show up."

"Well that makes sense now, give me a second." I set about the, smacking my hammer into loading bearing walls and support beams. Eventually, I worked my way back to the entrance that had started it all, Minerva sealing up the rock once more with protective wards.

“Well, Michael, it seems our agreement comes to an end, however…” the witch trailed off. I cocked my eyebrow. “I mean, there are other problems that could use your expertise. And come on, I think I went through enough trouble enchanting you to earn a few more favors.” Her green eyes twinkled in the dark, reflecting the blues runes back towards me as a I looked into them.

“That you did, Minnie, that you did. Well now,” I scratched my chin as a smile crept across my teeth, “I suppose I could keep on saving people, if you really need me too.”

“A deal it is then!” Minerva exclaimed, launching into another bear hug. We two walked up the mineshaft one more time, stopping again at where my body had been. The outline had been covered up when I collapsed the cave. Crawling back past this place of death, I looked out into the light pouring from the mineshaft’s opening, a felt a tinge of hope work through my heart.

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ACADEMIC VITA

Education

The Pennsylvania State University, *Schreyer Honors College* **Class of 2023**
Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) in English
Minors: History, Military Studies

Work Experience

Nittany Lion Battalion Staff, Pennsylvania State University **May 2022 – December 2022**
S3

- Facilitate and plan all Battalion level events for the Nittany Lion Battalion. This includes New Cadet Reception, the three-day Field Training Exercise, administering the Army Combat Fitness Test, the Combat Water Survival Training Test, the Dining In Formal Dinner, and all Battalion labs.
- Manage a team of 20 cadets to effectively and efficiently execute all training.
- Organize the weekly Training Meeting to present all Battalion activities to the Battalion Command and Professor of Military Science.

Nittany Lion Battalion Alpha Company, Pennsylvania State University
Executive Officer

- Manage a team of 11 cadets in planning and executing the three weekly Physical training events and the weekly Army Training Lab.
- Manage all land and supply requests for Alpha Company through the Nittany Lion battalion.
- Organize the weekly Training Meeting to present all Company activities to the Company Commander and Alpha Company Cadre.

Cadet Troop Leader Training, Fort Lewis, Washington **July 2022 – August 2022**
Cadet Officer

- Shadowed an Active Duty Chemical Lieutenant in the managing of a Chemical Response Team of 12 soldiers.
- Participated in a week-long Chemical Field Training Exercise, observing how to properly execute hazardous material sample collection and decontamination over six missions.

On-campus Activities

Lion's Guard Color Guard Team, Pennsylvania State University
S1

- As the S1, tracked and logged all active personnel in Lion's Guard.
- Planned and executed Color Guard training labs once a week.
- Planned and executed Beret Testing, an eight-hour event testing cadets on Color Guard knowledge, Color Guard Execution, military bearing, military history, and Penn State History.

Tactics Club, Pennsylvania State University

Tactics Officer

- Facilitate and execute Tactics labs on platoon level tactics, survival methods, and operations planning.