

# WORD!

## Students, colleagues mourn and remember Dr. Halcyon M. Lawrence

by Daniella Bacigalupa, Michael Downs, and Erin Lynner

On her website, Dr. Halcyon M. Lawrence defined herself using her first name. As an adjective: “calm; peaceful, tranquil.” As a noun: a mythical bird with the power to charm “waves and winds into calmness.”

Colleagues and students say she cultivated those qualities, bringing them to the classroom, academic conferences, and faculty meetings. She did this primarily through listening. A researcher who often critiqued the listening tools of technical communication—Siri and Alexa, for example—Lawrence approached people with an openness and focus on what they had to say.

“The most consistently present person I ever met,” said Dr. Sarah Gunning, Lawrence’s PRWR colleague in technical communication. “Her warmth was unparalleled.”



“She had a gift to see that people needed her,” said Dr. Erin Fehskens, chair of the English department, “and how to best be present for them.” Lawrence, a tenured

associate professor who taught courses in PRWR’s technical communication and information design track, died on Oct. 29. She was 53 years old. An ailment (continued on p. 2)

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## Dr. Halcyon Lawrence (cont.)

had led her to visit doctors who then discovered that she had an advanced cancer. She died within a week, leaving stunned colleagues and students to mourn.

"I'm just really grateful to have had the opportunity to take a class with Dr. Lawrence and work with her," said Ariel Crank, a second-year PRWR student in the technical communication track. Crank served as a graduate assistant with Lawrence and Gunning. Together, they began plans to create a certificate program to teach technical professionals how to better communicate their work (see story, p. 7).

"Working with her was really a blessing," Crank said. "When I was working with her, I felt like I was working with a classmate or someone I had known for a really long time."

Lawrence, a native of Trinidad and Tobago, began at Towson University in summer, 2018. In five years at TU, she taught several undergraduate and graduate courses. She worked with student writers who wanted to communicate technical information and also with students from other departments, such as computer science, who needed to learn communication skills. She had recently helped PRWR revamp its curriculum, updating the program's offerings in tech comm.

Lawrence's death came as she was teaching one of her more popular PRWR courses: Science and its Public Audience.

To begin that course, Lawrence asked students to consider their own biases and approaches to science. "For that to be the very first class set the foundation for vulnerability for everyone in the class," said Elizabeth Eakes, a student in her first semester at

**"The most consistently present person I ever met. Her warmth was unparalleled."**

– Dr. Sarah Gunning

the time of Lawrence's death. "It was a great reminder to really take that into consideration with every piece of writing you do. Just why do I have this perspective? What kind of biases am I holding?"

"She showed what it meant to care about the accessibility of science and to genuinely care about others, and hearing what they have to say and listening to them deeply."

Those practices were central to Lawrence's research interests. She published widely and offered conference presentations on the use of listening devices in technical communication—how people ask questions and receive answers from voice technology.

People invited her to speak about her research on podcasts, and she was featured in magazine articles.

"It was this really interesting new branch that she was opening up," said Gunning. Lawrence's interest began with her own experience as a person who spoke English without American inflections and how frustrating it could be to get Siri to understand her. As she began to investigate how other people experienced those sorts of technologies, she realized that she was also engaging with questions of social justice and linguistic justice.

"She didn't start off with thinking it was going to be this big revolutionary aspect," said Gunning. "She was just thinking of her own experience as a user and the individual user's experience with technology. I think that her collaborative nature with other people really opened her eyes to see all the possibilities that this could merge into later on."

Collaboration proved to be an important aspect of Lawrence's work, Gunning said. "She would meet people at conferences and hear about their research and somehow end up on their dissertation committees," Gunning said, "even though they weren't at Towson. ... She would find these young scholars who were doing something really innovative,

*(continued on p. 3)*

## Dr. Halcyon Lawrence (cont.)

and she'd be like, 'Oh, I'm really interested in hearing more about this.'"

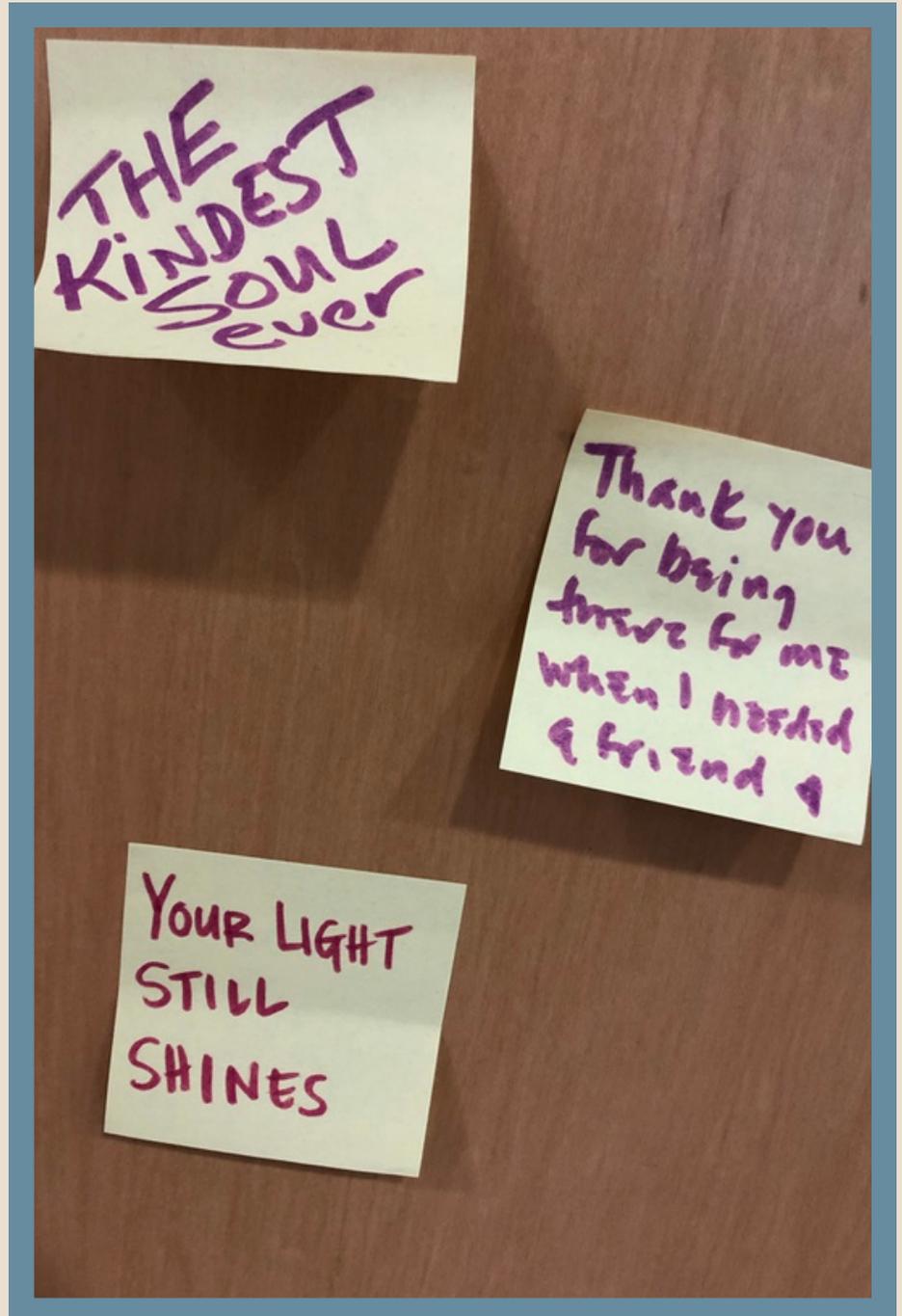
In the last year, Gunning added, Lawrence had found her way onto about half a dozen dissertation committees.

"Halcyon was very curious about everything," Fehskens said. "She was curious about how things worked. Not just big things like systems and technology but also the small, mundane everyday things like a table of contents.

"She believed in order to understand the bigger, more complicated things, you had to be curious about and understand all of the smaller things as well. Because of that, she instilled that same curiosity, that same seeking of information, into her students." Though Eakes only had the opportunity to work with Lawrence for half a semester, Lawrence's teaching changed her. "She was amazingly compassionate and caring about everyone," Eakes said. "She just served—even though it was unfortunately for such a short time—served as such an amazing role model."

Gunning misses her daily check-ins with Lawrence, via social media, when they'd message each other about their classes and what they had learned that day from and about their students.

Asked to sum up Lawrence's work and life, Gunning offered these words: "Speak less, listen more."



*Anonymous tributes to Dr. Halcyon Lawrence posted on her office door in the College of Liberal Arts building.*

## After four-year pandemic hiatus, PRWR again hosts Baltimore Writers' Conference

"Why write?" asked acclaimed author Eric Weiner to kick off the 2023 Baltimore Writers' Conference, a question with at least as many answers as there are writers.

More than 120 writers—and their answers—gathered Nov. 4 at Towson University for craft lessons in fiction, poetry, and nonfiction; and conversations regarding podcasting, web comics, screenwriting, freelance writing, book publicity, and literary citizenship.

Organized and sponsored by PRWR, with additional sponsorship from TU's College of Liberal Arts and the Johns Hopkins graduate programs in writing, BWC 2023 marked the conference's return after a four-year pandemic hiatus. Those 120 writers who attended included nearly 90 who registered for the conference along with two dozen featured presenters.

PRWR creative writing professors Geoffrey Becker, Leslie Harrison, Jeannie Vanasco, and Michael Downs led sessions, and Morgan Ormond, a PRWR student, led a presentation on podcasting.

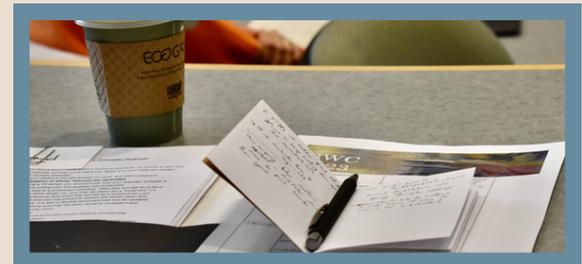
Weiner's most recent book, *The Socrates Express*, won the 2022 Towson University Prize for Literature. He was introduced by Daniella Bacigalupa, a PRWR graduate assistant who, along with fellow GA Erin Lynner, helped organize the conference. In her introduction, Bacigalupa noted:

*"The Socrates Express leads us to the trailhead of an old path that is needed now more than ever –it asks us to slow down; to not move so quickly from question to answer, from hypothesis to conclusion, from observation to judgment; be fully embodied, utilize your senses—see, listen, smell the coffee—and feel, with your heart. This is also a lesson in writing, too."*

– Michael Downs



PRWR student Daniella Bacigalupa introduces keynote speaker Eric Weiner.



The essentials for a writers conference: pen, paper and coffee.



PRWR student Christa Davis (right) hanging out at the Baltimore Review table.



Mahdis Marzooghian (PRWR alumna, 2015) takes notes during a session on writing creative nonfiction.

## Colleagues from around the world share sentiments about @Halcyon\_L

**Reactions to Dr. Halcyon Lawrence's death on Oct. 29, 2023 filled social media, especially on the platform previously called Twitter. What follows is a sampling of what Dr. Lawrence's colleagues wrote about her over the next two days. The messages show how her influence and scholarship in technical communication extended beyond Towson University's campus.**

I'm so sad and shocked to hear this – I didn't get to meet her but was just talking up her work in class last week. My thoughts are with y'all and her friends and family around the world  
– *Dr. Beck Wise, lecturer, The University of Queensland*  
*@wisebeck*

I'm so shocked and saddened by this news  
– *Dr. Jennifer Sano-Franchini, associate professor, West Virginia University*  
*@jsanofranchini*

@Halcyon\_L was a brilliant scholar. Kind, generous, and supportive... her work on language justice and accent bias was beautiful, vital, and impactful. What a legacy she

leaves behind.  
– *Dr. Emma Rose, associate professor, University of Washington-Tacoma*  
*@emmarosephd*

Halcyon was a brilliant scholar, a kind person, and a joy to work with. This is a massive loss to our whole community.  
– *Dr. Jordan Frith, endowed chair, professor at Clemson University*  
*@jhfrith*

In complete disbelief. It doesn't feel real. Dr. Lawrence was an inspiration and one of the most together and professional academics I ever had the pleasure to work with. This loss will linger for some time. No one in the field that I respected more. And precious few peers.  
– *Dr. Mike Trice, lecturer, Massachusetts Institute of Technology*  
*@MikeRTrice*

Truly in shock. I spoke to Halcyon just last month after she sent me some information related to my research. A generous, thoughtful activist and scholar. I'm grateful to have known what a model mentor looks like  
– *Dr. Morgan Banville, assistant professor, Massachusetts Maritime Academy*  
*@banville\_morgan*

Absolutely heartbreaking. I met Halcyon last year at SIGDOC and she was both (an) absolute delight and so generous as she spoke with me, a grad student she had just met. Sending love to all who love her.  
– *Rachael Jordan, lecturer, California State University-Channel Islands*  
*@RachaelJay13*

Everyone who knew @Halcyon\_L loved her. She is the most genuinely warm person I've ever met. ... The world will miss your light  
– *Dr. Kate Holterhoff, analyst at Redmonk*  
*@KateHolterhoff*

Dr. Halcyon was a real one. A bright light. She thought I was so silly in a good way. I loved that big warm laugh. She is one of my faves. I learned so much from her. Shedding tears for you my sis. Your work & light is in us. Forever.  
– *Safiya Umoja Noble, MacArthur Fellow, author of Algorithms of Oppression*  
*@safiyanoble*

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## Words for @Halcyon\_L (cont.)

Halcyon was such a brilliant, insightful, and caring member of our community. A heartbreaking loss for our field – she had so much more to teach us. May her memory be a blessing.

– *Dr. Liza Potts, professor, Michigan State University*  
@LizaPotts

I attended a phenomenal workshop that Dr. Lawrence led last month on "Redressing Language Bias in Technical Communication." I am glad that I told her how much it impacted me. It is immensely unfair that she is gone. We still had so much to learn from her.

– *Dr. Allegra Smith, assistant professor, Georgia Institute of Technology*  
@argella

Halcyon was an excellent colleague and mentor at a time when I desperately needed one; I hope all who learned from her will continue to carry her work forward.

– *Dr. Casey Alane Wilson, assistant professor, Francis Marion University*  
@CaseyAlane

This summer I actually felt like I could thrive in academia because of Dr Lawrence. She will be greatly missed

– *Jumiekan, learning engineer, Jamaica*  
@culchateacha

Devastated to hear this news.- I saw her speak 8 years ago and could feel her genius change our fields. Rest in power

– *Dr. Melissa Villa Nicholas, assistant professor, University of Rhode Island*  
@MelVillaNich

Oh, no! Just the kindest, loveliest person.

– *Eileen Clancy, graduate student, City University of New York*  
@clancynewyork

Oh my gosh. This is so incredibly terrible to hear.

@Halcyon\_L was a wonderful human and a brilliant scholar, which is a rare combo.  
– *Dr. Roopika Risam, associate professor, Dartmouth College*  
@roopikarisam

This is devastating news. Halcyon made the world a brighter place.

– *Dr. KellyAnn Fitzpatrick, research associate, Georgia Institute of Technology*  
@drkellyannfitz

A true heartbreak for our community. Rest in power, beautiful soul.

– *Nikki Chasteen, instructor, Florida Atlantic University*  
@AcademicNikki

This is such sad news. I appreciate Dr Lawrence so much. She was a champion of my early experiments with machine learning. I will forever be grateful to her, may soul rest in peace

– *Lex Fefegha, digital artist, London, England*  
@lexmakesthings

We are all heart broken and in shock over at @caribbean\_dsc. We were all hanging out and doing the work with Halcyon in Miami just a few months ago, and had a merry old time of it. She was an amazing colleague. Will miss you, Halcyon.

– *Dr. Alex Gil, associate research faculty, Yale University*  
@elotroalex

I'm so shaken by this. She was always the nicest and funniest and sharpest person.

– *Dr. Daniel Liddle, assistant professor, Western Kentucky University*  
@danielliddle

I can't help thinking of her mother who inspired some of her work. Her entire family must be heartbroken. Halcyon, you've gone far too soon

– *Dr. Josie W, associate teaching professor, University of Washington*  
@josie\_walwema

# Plans underway for certificate program in technical communication

by Daniella Bacigalupa

“We’re thinking about the biologists, the physicists, the environmental scientists, the geographers, the computer scientists,” says PRWR’s Dr. Sarah Gunning, “who have to explain complicated processes on a daily basis to audiences that may not be on the same level as they are.

“How might those technically oriented minds share their knowledge?”

That’s what Gunning, along with PRWR colleague Dr. Halcyon Lawrence and graduate assistant Ariel Crank, spent much of 2023 thinking about. That thinking underpins their work to create a certificate program at Towson University, one that will draw scientists of all sorts to take a limited number of PRWR courses and gain graduate-level education without having to complete an entire master’s degree.

Through 2023, Gunning, Lawrence, and Crank researched technical communication certificate programs around the country. In shaping their ideas about the program and curriculum, they considered the needs of potential students. They also worked within TU to gain support for their program.

Gunning, Lawrence, and Crank planned next to collaborate with the English department and hammer out details. The momentum paused when Lawrence died in October.



PRWR student and graduate assistant Ariel Crank presenting her research on tech comm certificate programs at the 2023 SIGDOC conference in Orlando, Fla.

“It’s been so difficult since she’s passed, and we’ve all just been trying to sort things out because she was such a big part of our lives,” says Dr. Erin Fehskens, chair of the English department, which houses PRWR. “This has all happened so fast. We still have no idea really how deeply her loss will impact everything.”

Since Lawrence’s death, Gunning and Crank have slowed down to reflect on what they’ve accomplished so far, and consider Lawrence’s lasting contributions.

Lawrence wanted to use Plain English, which is a way of writing that emphasizes clarity over jargon, and name the certificate “communicating complex information” rather than technical communication. She believed that for decades people have had

a hard time grasping what the term “technical communication” means. For Lawrence, the Plain English title would make the certificate program more accessible to scientists who are interested in connecting to public audiences.

Gunning and Lawrence welcomed Crank to the team in Spring 2023 and asked her to research how other universities operate their certificate programs.

“We wanted to make sure we weren’t duplicating efforts that are already out there,” says Gunning. “We wanted to see how others organized their certificate, if a portfolio is needed, the

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## Plans for certificate program (cont.)

admissions process, and the name of the certificate.”

Crank’s research spanned the East Coast and beyond, focusing on schools with Carnegie Classification Research 2 (R2) status, a classification given to universities that graduate around 20 doctoral students per year and spend at least \$5 million annually on research. Towson University is working to achieve that status.

What began for Crank as a seemingly clear research task became increasingly complicated—and interesting—as she soon learned that certificate programs in technical writing don’t have one standard name: they might be called programs in technical communication, or in information design, or scientific communication, and more.

For Crank, this graduate assistantship has changed how she defines technical writing.

“The term ‘technical writing’ can mean technical, but it’s also not technical,” says Crank. “(Lawrence) brought to my attention that technical writing itself doesn’t always have to be instruction guides or manuals. It’s more about being effective with your words and having a strong word choice.”

In October, Crank joined graduate students from all around the country in Orlando, Fla., for the annual conference of the Special Interest Group on Design of Communication (SIGDOC). She presented her

research findings for the certificate program and focused on a part that she believes makes Gunning and Lawrence’s proposed program stand out from the rest: community engagement.

“(Lawrence) made me focus on the community engagement portion of it,” says Crank.

The idea is to mesh professionals from various backgrounds who wouldn’t usually interact with one another and provide an online space for them to come and learn together, while also growing in their own careers.

Gunning and Crank now plan to write a formal proposal for the program during the Spring 2024 semester and submit it to TU administrators in May.

The team has devised a curriculum of five online courses—all current PRWR courses—that could be completed in one calendar year:

two semesters, or two semesters and a summer. Each course is designed to break

**The idea is to mesh professionals from various backgrounds who wouldn’t usually interact with one another.**

down technical communication in a friendly way. The latest draft curriculum requires 15 credits: two required courses and three electives. A complete PRWR degree requires 36 credits, which is 12 courses.

Nine PRWR courses could be among the options for students in the certificate program. Those courses are Foundations of Technical Communication, Technical Writing and Information Design, Business Writing, Science and its Public Audience, Editing, Grant Writing, Designing Content for the Web, Content Strategy and Writing for Social Change, and Design Layout and Production.

Lawrence’s death altered the efforts, but Gunning and Crank plan to see the certificate program through.

“The two of them are still working on it, and the work will continue,” says Fehskens. “I know everyone would still like to see it continue.”



*Dr. Sarah Gunning, PRWR professor for technical and business writing*

## WORD! congratulates PRWR's Fall 2023 graduates

A'maya Green

**Creative Writing**

### Why did you choose PRWR?

I honestly applied to be in the PRWR program because I thought I could get my master's degree with only one year added to my academic schedule within the accelerated program. While that did not turn out to be the case, I still value the time and knowledge I gained. I chose to stay with PRWR to challenge myself to be the best version of myself.

### Who were you when you walked into PRWR, and who are you as you are walking out?

I was confident, at first, that I was as good as a writer as I could get, but the program kicked me in the shins before telling me to get up to just do it again! It was humbling and frustrating and riveting. But, I'm too stubborn not to learn and not to try.

I still don't quite know who I am walking out of PRWR yet. I think that's the beauty of growth. I know I'm going somewhere and that I've changed, but I don't have all the answers yet. I know I've entered an actual career path with salary and benefits. I know I've experienced love and loss. I know that at the end of December, I will have my master's. But I am still figuring things out.

### What proved to be your most rewarding PRWR knock-down drag-out moment and why?

I suffer from some mental health issues and I've come a long way. Instead of unrealistically overcoming them, I've learned to live in equilibrium. This achievement was earned during the PRWR program with help from multiple PRWR professors. So, I'd like to thank them. 🧡



### Describe your writing process with emojis.



### What's next for you?

Moving forward, I want to take the extra time I'll have after graduating to write. Write fiction and poetry. I want to not only work on personal projects but also submit work to magazines. I also did an independent study with Dr. Sarah Gunning on social media management and webcomics, so I want to further explore that as well.

*(continued on p. 10)*

## Joseph Martinak

### Technical Communication and Information Design

#### Why did you choose PRWR?

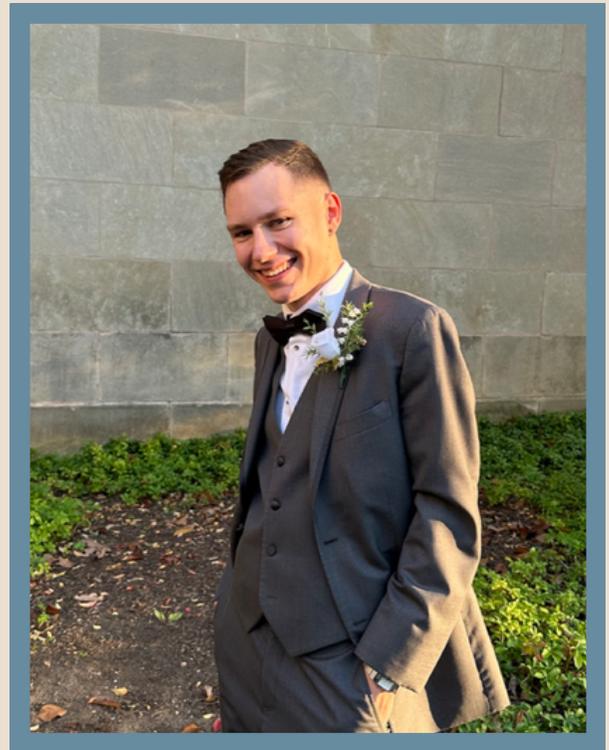
I chose PRWR for a few reasons, paramount of which was my familiarity with TU. Towson has felt like home for me through my undergraduate career, and returning seemed like a perfect reentry into academia. It was something familiar that would best suit my professional interests. These interests, of course, were in writing. Having studied philosophy in undergrad, I felt that PRWR would check both of the boxes of a welcoming familiarity, and honing my skill set as a writer. And I'm happy to say that it did just that.

#### Who were you when you walked into PRWR, and who are you as you are walking out?

When I walked into the program, I was relatively fresh out of undergrad and, certainly, jaded by the pandemic. Entering the program, I did not consider myself a writer. And honestly, it wasn't my ideal plan to go back to grad school, but when I left the program, not only was I glad I went back—I was glad to have gone through PRWR. When I left, I was a confident and fulfilled student—and a writer. The program stretched me in directions I hadn't thought it would but built me up in every direction it took me: creatively, professionally, and socially. I'm very thankful for the connections and experiences PRWR has left me with as I've graduated and begun working as a true professional writer.

#### What proved to be your most rewarding PRWR knock-down drag-out moment and why?

Writing my book proposal [in freelance writing]. Easily. I was in the Technical Writing track, and so had for the vast majority of my time as a student been studying, well, tech writing: information design, document layout, research methods, you name it. Stepping into the shoes of a freelance writer (even in what limited capacity I did for that class) was very much so out of my wheelhouse, and something I frankly thought I couldn't do. But, after many hours of anxious self-editing and way more productive



peer and instructor feedback—with a tear sprinkled in here and there—I came out the other end with a completed project, and one that I am proud of. One that I'm still toying with the idea of fleshing out more seriously! But that is why I loved PRWR. I went in for tech writing, was put through the wringer most heavily in an elective, but came out a stronger and more well rounded writer on all fronts.

#### Describe your writing process with emojis.



#### What's next for you?

I plan to stick with my current role as a communications associate (which fits nicely into my tech writing background). It is a role that I can excel in and something that has already provided me with further learning and professional development. The opportunity for my position would not have been possible without my time in PRWR. And my desire to even explore the idea of having poetry/fiction published is also a direct result of my time in the program. Otherwise, you'll still be able to find me playing *Magic: The Gathering* around Baltimore, as always.

(continued on p. 11)

# Kathleen Wallish

## Creative Writing

### Why did you choose PRWR?

I chose the PRWR program based on my experience as an English undergrad at Towson. I am grateful for the opportunity to have had a few more years to learn from the great professors in this program.

### Who were you when you walked into PRWR, and who are you as you are walking out?

I was pretty set in my ways when I walked into PRWR. I thought the writing I did at 21 was going to look like the writing I did at 25 and so on. Today, I feel a bit more relaxed about writing, and I try not to set expectations beyond writing well and often.

### What proved to be your most rewarding PRWR knock-down drag-out moment and why?

I churned out a lot of work for Freelance Writing. Do I ever want to look at those essays ever again? No. But it helped me get over my perfectionism. I used to freeze when trying to write anything that fell outside my comfort zone.

### Describe your writing process with emojis.



### What's next for you?

This winter, I am going to read all the books I did not have a chance to read. In the spring, I'll be spending time in Finland, Lithuania, and Latvia. After that, who knows!



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