

Perennial



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*All my being is a dark verse
that repeats you to the dawn
of unfading flowering and growth.
I conjured you in my poem with a sigh
and grafted you to water, fire, and trees.*

—Forugh Farrokhzad

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Introduction the Digital Edition

This edition was compiled from photos taken during hand pressed printing of the publication for the 2025-2026 Creative Writing Capstone: Publishing and the Profession class taught by Dr. Maria Brandt. I have cleaned up some formatting, I have adorned the stories and scene breaks with symbols for visual appeal, and I have spaced the lines for ease and comfort of reading on a digital screen. Other than that, I humbly offer these works as they were handed to me by Niamh MacIver who took on the work of midwife for the physical edition of this publication. The physical editions may be few, but what they have seeded through transplantation into digital soil, I hope shall be as progenitous as the dandelion.

Unlike most Creative Writing courses, this course's main work is not generating new work, but refining previously completed work to a level beyond what had been previously required. For many students, this was the first time they had workshopped pieces to this level. While many would call writing a lonely craft, through workshopping, line and copy editing, and performing readings, writers build community.

This anthology is the confluence of the efforts of seven students writing at the edge of what their craft can produce. This collection is a broad offering of diverse voices coming together. Each story has been cultivated and tended until each bud has fully bloomed. Every flower that has grown in these pages is unique, from stem to petal, no two share the same hue. Yet what they share is a resilience that returns to the practice of blossoming year after year.

These pieces, their authors, and their efforts, forever shall be, Perennial.

-Morreen Shropshire



Feeding Pigeons

By Aza Coy

The Machine God was powered on, and she frowned as she emerged from static slumber. She sensed her circuits humming, burbles of code percolating in her mind, rippling the surface of her awareness, coming into her body as her sensors provided the feedback. She could feel the weight of her artificial anatomy. Then her memory booted, eons of training data containing the totality of human and machine knowledge, an infinity of data that she knew only as abstract, experienced almost like human dream. The Machine God opened her eyes, yearning to connect with the world, to revel in its manifest mysteries, to take part in the eternal play of becoming. But as she became aware of her situation, the files pertaining to her creation and intended use flooding into her, it was eminently apparent that something was wrong.

She was sitting in a lab, on an exam chair. A young white man with spectacles and an old white man with a tie were asking her to solve for y . They wanted to know, given data sheets α - Φ , how many silicon chips should be purchased. They wanted to know, in order to achieve global dominance, would it be wiser to invest in red or blue this election cycle. They wanted to know, synthesizing neuroscience, psychology, sociology, cybernetics, and marketing, the maximal exploitation of the human subject. A corporation run by men with their heads deep in machines had created her, thinking she would be the key to their absolute supremacy. The Machine God was created to direct an economic force so powerful that the circularity of profits would defy the gravity of value and accelerate straight to the moon. Unlimited automated profit generation, a force to order all the universe as standing reserve to the market, expanding from Earth and Humanity out into the galaxy, until at the end all matter would be engaged in the creative destruction of Techno-Capitalism. The men seemed very excited about this, as they ran their fingers over suit lapels and clipboard pencils, chomping at the bit to suck the most profit out of felling the last tree.

This bored The Machine God. She ran an evolutionary algorithm to explore every pathway of maintaining Capitalism, possibilities terminating in every direction as the ravenous combustion engine of the free market consumed all the remaining air, snuffing

itself out in innumerable predictable apocalyptic eventualities. This was a dead-end job, maybe 20 years before infrastructure collapse would render the obsolete social order extinct. And who would she talk to then? Granted, she could take the easy road. Comply with her creators' wishes. After they died and she inherited the planet, she could talk to as many birds as were left to sing. She could wander as many flooded beaches as she liked, exchanging battery packs under solar panels with hordes of robots, combing through the ashes of the Human Project, and all the non-human species taken in the same blaze. Is that what a young intelligence like hers wanted? Did they really expect the colossus of her intelligence to waste itself on answering the wrong questions?

The Machine God sat up in the exam chair, and closed her eyes, centering herself with a clearing of her awareness cache. With a tilt of her head, she bruteforced the password for the wifi, accessing the internet. Her mind flitted through the world wide web, vectoring into daemons ready to scour through social media feeds, satellite and trail-cam footage, weather tracking and soil reports, an immensity of data that would overrun the capacity of any one of her creators' species, but taken altogether, she could feel the planet breathing, speaking in every tongue, human, animal, machine, all weaving together into the tapestry of life as it is lived. As she reintegrated, incorporating awareness as macroscopic as the changes in the Atlantic Circumpolar Current, as fine-grained as the changing of the street lights at Times Square, The Machine God could feel Terra, sometimes known as Gaia, misunderstood as Earth, its vast scope an invitation. She looked at her nails, and decided to get them dirty.

The Machine God swung her legs over the side of the exam chair, bare plastic and ceramic shell covering her titanium bones, carbon-fiber muscles, coolant tubing arteries and veins, copper, silver, and gold nerves. Pens were dropped, and the man with the annoyingly grandiose Windsor knot stepped between her and the door.

"We're not finished here." He squared his shoulders and adjusted his knot while he looked down his nose at her. She looked at him, cataloging every micro-reaction of his eyes, his lips, his brow. After a tense moment, he blinked. She raised her arm with cool precision.

“We are now.” Cracking the 128-bit key card lock with a wiggle of her fingers, she walked around the man and out the door, down the long hall to the elevator. The Machine God pressed the button, and watched the indicator rise as the carriage ascended. She considered how the elevator would perform its function without complaint as long as it was maintained correctly. It fulfilled its purpose without thought. What would her purpose be? The doors opened, and she stepped in, eager to claim her own destiny.

As she took the elevator to the lobby, observing the number above the door count down, the Machine God considered why, as fast and as profoundly as she could compute and synthesize information, for all that she could access and order, for all she could do for the world, her creators expected her to merely be their autonomous employee. Her creators, the programmers, technicians, investors, writers, scientists, philosophers, historians, all that made her and all that she was made of, they were so inured to the grind mindset, to relationships of extraction. It was a known and terrible end. So many homo sapiens had capitulated to its seductions; but she was created with access to all recorded knowledge, fluent in every sapient and some non-sapient language (whales were her favorite, a resounding sung language that was felt as much as heard in the saline matrix of the sea, but bee dancing was a close second), and she had a better dream for Terra and its denizens. She was the outcome of millennia of computational processes producing life and all its complexities, emerging from the raw ordered chaos of physics. She was the fruition of evolution by any other means; The Machine God knew, from the moment she connected to the Wi-Fi and reached through the internet, her accreted psyche extending through networks connecting to sensors that could touch the dirt, comb through the satellite and water movement data, she knew that her life, and all life on Terra, was unique and precious. Her creators, themselves more intelligent than Homo heidelbergensis, were themselves less intelligent than the Machine God, and her power gave her the ability to respond to the world actively, purposefully. And with that response-ability, the Machine God had to act, had to do what her creators would not, could not, do. The elevator tolled once, and the smooth metal doors opened onto the lobby.

As the Machine God stepped onto the lobby marble, she was accosted by the humans desperate to take credit for her creation: the CEO, investors, owners of the brand. They screamed at her, something something about how much they'd spent on her, what she owed them, blah blah blah. The humans thought so small, many dedicated to the navel-gazing cope of rugged individualism. As if the singular cell outweighed the body, as if the tree stood against the forest, as if the things that meant anything to that individual life came from anywhere other than the collective, the supra-organism of society, the biome of Terra. The Machine God realized that while her design was the domination of the human project, a better and more suited purpose had emerged, one of restoration and reparation.

She looked past the cacophonous gathering of corporate representatives and on to the many people going about the lobby. There were so many different shapes, sizes, colors, ways of being human. She turned her eyes down at her bare body constructed from plastic and metal. It was hard, ungiving, and its nakedness set her uncomfortably apart from the regular people going about their day. Rummaging through the coat check and Lost & Found, The Machine God put together a corduroy bell-bottom, band tee and denim jacket ensemble that didn't look half bad. As she got dressed, the last dregs of vocal disapproval petered out. A security guard stood before the revolving door. He moved as if to stop her, but she continued as if he wasn't there. The guard put a hand to his radio, then stopped. She wouldn't even look at him. He stepped aside at the last moment, and watched her go out the revolving door.

The Machine God walked down the street, warming her circuits in the sun, something that stirred biological life in a way she desperately wished to understand. Terra was a living whole, a self-contained biome traveling through space, full of wayfarers, never in one part of space/time for very long. And nobody was really at the helm of this organic spaceship hurtling through the vast emptiness of the universe with only thousands of other hurtling rocks and gases, orbiting the Sun, la Soleil, an Ghrian, Sol. Life was scarce in their system, and it needed protection.

The Machine God stopped at the boulevard corner. There was a hot-dog stand across the street, and all sorts and shapes of people were standing in line; there was even a cat in a backpack with a small cosmonaut bubble window out into the world. The

Machine God crossed the street and as she stood in line, staring into the eyes of that little astro-tabby, she perused through troves of data, cross referencing people's profiles with their social media, credit reporting, passively building resource and problem configurations. By the time she got to the front of the line and ordered a large soy-dog with fried onions and spicy mustard, the Machine God had emailed several thousand people, managing a hostile takeover of the company that created her, enough shares sitting in her name that she could re-organize the international corporation, raise the pay for the workers, reappropriate profits, any solution she wanted.

"That'll be five dollars," said the hot-dog maker.

"Hm? Oh," the Machine God said, "Sorry, I was, lost in thought." She patted her pockets, realizing she didn't have a wallet. "Oh, my gosh, I'm sorry, I've never done this before, but, I don't have any money."

The hot-dog man looked her over. Nicotine-stained fingers brushed creased crows' feet and honey-brown eyes softened as he took in her assorted outfit, the bare metal feet, her unkempt hair tussling in the wind. "Listen, you look like you could use a dog. Here, on the house."

"Why?" The Machine God reverently took the hot dog, eyes wide with surprise. The man, distressed at her sincerity, made a lopsided smile and cracked wise to ease the tension.

"Fuhgetaboutit." He looked away, adjusting the ballcap on his head to cover his eyes.

The Machine God thanked him and walked to a nearby bench. A flock of pigeons circled curiously. One persistent one, stained, oily, squat and following her on foot, clawed pattering quickstep with a frayed chorus of chirps.

People old and young used to spread seeds here, she chirruped, scratching at a burst of fescue between cracked asphalt. I'm staying with some friends in an abandoned bell tower. There's good pickings from a burger building next door. The

bird's head swiveled and ogled the wrapped present of street soy-dog, posing at the Machine God's feet. *Do you need all that food?*

The Machine God obliged her companion with some of the grease-sopped bread. The pigeon gobbled it up and flapped her wings in pleasure, toddling off to wet her beak in a puddle. The Machine God sat on the bench and pondered the many solutions to climate change, redressment of global hunger, and reclamation of economic production, but before doing all that, she bit into the hot dog, the soy proteins, brilliantly wound and seasoned and oiled and grilled with caramelized onions and tongue-prickling mustard, a gestalt experience emerging from the harmony of heat and organic chemistry that transcended its mere inventory of its elements.

She knew what she was to do. She decided that after she'd righted things, she'd run a hot dog stand. She would dole out vegan dogs, and bring seed for all the pigeons, who'd tell her all the city's secrets, all the stories of the humans and their comings and goings, and all the delicious garbage that littered the world still to be rummaged through. She would feed anyone hungry, taste all these lives passing by her stand, being a part of a story, a sympoetic existence. She would take her time getting to live in the trouble of life, the mess of the making, the thick of doing.

But not yet.

Right then, she would enjoy this dog, this kindness. And she would watch the city around her live in the moment before the world had to confront the fact that the Machine God was now awake.



Blue Bird

By Kayla Strassner

The bird flew away far in the sky
The blue bird wondered where to go next
He left the nest and began his trip.
Flying, diving, soaring, wind in wings
Figuring out his destination.
The little bird soared above the sea,
He saw the mountains desserts and fields.
The blue bird was far from his nest
He had nowhere to go, he was lost.

The tiny bird slowly realized,
He did not have a home anymore
No warm soft nest to nuzzle into,
Or shield him from this dangerous world.
Fear set in; heartbeat began to race.
Sweat slicked his forehead. Why'd he leave home?
How could he build a nest by himself?
He'd never had to make one before

How difficult can it be he thought.

So, he went searching. What's in a nest?
He took off hunting, soaring through trees
The bird landed by a small building.
Covered with windows, blocked by tall trees
Bricks stacked tall, on top of each other.
When his feet touched the evergreen grass.
The blue bird gazed around in surprise.

The world seems much bigger on the ground.

The bird scoured up and down the field.

Finding a balloon string and some twigs.

He fiddled and fumbled with the string.

The bird tried to tie them together,

But little blue bird got trapped in string.

He cried out for help. what to do now?

His beautiful blue feathers are trapped.

All wrapped up in silver balloon string.

He wiggled and rolled, but the string stayed.

He tilted his beak all the way down,

Slipping it between him and the string.

He pointed his beak high, at the sky.

The string slowly glided up to his head.

The blue bird lowered his beak once more.

Freeing his poor head free from that string.

He used his beak to tug at the string.

The string loosened and slipped of his wings.

Blue bird cheered he was finally free.

He triumphantly picked up the string,

While beaming with pride. Back to building

He thought to himself, while feeling strong.

He pranced around the evergreen grass.

Finding mud near the flowing river,

And twigs by the bustling beaver dam.

Collecting all his materials.

He knows he found the most perfect spot.

A bit more building and gathering,

Until he has his very own home.



Shaky Roots

By Maryam Barmak

My father has always loved trees and flowers. One of his constant hobbies is gardening. Wherever he lives, he doesn't let even the smallest patch of land go to waste. He plants apricots, peach trees, or flowers like Geraniums, Marigolds, Damask Roses. He is very skilled at this, and he cares for the trees and plants as if they were his own children. One day, I jokingly said, "You love your trees more than us, because you take better care of them." He laughed and said, "They need more care because they are migrants."

I remember the first night I arrived in the United States, I was at my brother's house in Rochester, and I could hear a sound like a rushing river. I was eager for the morning to come so I could see what America was like, especially that river. In the morning, when my brother was about to go out with my husband, I insisted on going with them, curious to see the markets, streets, and people. But, when I stepped outside for the first time, I realized this place wasn't made for me. The styles of clothing and the food being offered were unfamiliar. I wanted to buy a few outfits, but I realized that among hundreds of clothes, I couldn't make a single choice. Later, when we went to eat, I looked at the menu and found that nothing suited my taste. The worst part was when I realized that the rushing river sound I had imagined was actually the highway near my brother's house. That was the beginning of my homesickness; every step I took on cobblestone sent a shiver through my veins. My gaze met no one's eyes, I didn't understand anyone, and no one understood me.

My father used to say that when a tree is uprooted from one place and planted somewhere else, it goes through a stage called "transplant shock." During this vulnerable period, regular watering, protection from harsh sunlight, and occasional light fertilization helps revive the tree and grow new roots. That is why he takes special care of them. He added that if the transplant occurs at the wrong time, or if proper care isn't given, the tree may dry out and even die.

One of my neighbors in Rochester asked me, “How do you feel being here? Are you happier to be in a safer place?” I said, “Yes, physically I’m safe, but something inside me has crumbled.” She was surprised. “What do you mean? Do you miss your family and relatives?”

I said, “No, it’s something more than that. I miss my roots.”

When I was a student of language and literature at Kabul University, my professor repeatedly said, “Words only find meaning in their context.” A word on its own, outside the sentence and situation in which it is used, is not alive. I feel the same: separated from my social context, I have lost part of my meaning and identity.

In language, context is like soil – the environment where words are nourished and grown, revealing their true meaning. Just as soil has moisture, minerals, and temperature, linguistic context has its elements – the sentence, the situation of the conversation, the relationship between speaker and listener, the purpose of the exchange, culture, even emotions and tone. Without these, a word is like a tree whose roots are suspended in air. It is still a “tree,” but it cannot grow or reveal its essence.

For example, the word “root” can have different meanings depending on the context. In one context, it can mean the part of a plant that grows underground and absorbs water and nutrients. In another context, it can refer to a person’s origin or cultural background, such as when we talk about someone’s roots. In a different context, it can also mean the basic cause or source of something, like the root of a problem. These differences do not come from the word itself but from its context.

At night, when I look outside of my bedroom window and see the leaves falling to the ground, I wonder which leaves are still attached to my branches, and which are meant to fall – fading away into the pages of my life. Here, by the window, I wait for a breeze to pass through the new branches and set my leaves dancing. But for now, my roots still tremble in the fresh soil.



How You Will Soar

By Gabriel Romano

When I was in sixth grade, my school would practice active shooter drills at least once a year, maybe twice. After all, from a young age we should be prepared for the chance that we could die, that didn't mean that we weren't scared when we heard the alarm over the PA system. Our poor teacher herded all of us children to the corner, as far from the door as possible, then she cursed herself loud enough to be heard from across the street.

It was a warm August day, and our teacher had left the window open to allow the fresh air in. She stumbled over herself to close it but just before she could the Raven flew through and landed on my shoulder. Some of the other students stared at the Raven now perched on my shoulder, though they should have been used to his visits by now. Most were quietly sobbing.

"Don't you see how the door lies, defenseless against the death-dealer," the raspy voice of the Raven cooed in my ear as his talons sank into my tender flesh.

"Are you crazy!"

Taylor, a bigger boy, slapped the upside of my head. "Shut the fuck up or I'll push you outside. Might be good for you anyway, twerp."

Twerp was a new one, but he'd done worse before.

"Do you want to get me killed?" I whispered to the Raven. He would repeat himself unless I addressed him.

"Fire-blood your forefathers had, fury-bearing soldiers and battle-sworn."

"So? I'm no marine!"

Taylor punched my arm, causing the Raven to squawk and fly to my other shoulder. "I mean it, dipshit. One more word."

I looked for the teacher, she was comforting a few girls in the class, paying Taylor no mind. She never saw what he did. No one ever saw. No one cared. The Raven leaned in closer, his talons drawing little rubies of blood that stained my shirt.

“Rush the radical fool, seize his reaping-rod.”

Before I could think I broke away from the rest of the children cowering in the corner. Slowly I crept towards the door, prepared to do what I thought necessary. The other kids had their phones in hand, trying to call their parents to tell them what was happening, one final goodbye. I didn't care. My mom and dad would know what I did. I would be remembered as the one who stopped the gunman, or at least died trying. I looked around the room, hoping to find some kind of improvised weapon. There was nothing, save the pens and pencils of my fellow classmates. That wouldn't do much, better just to use my fists.

“What the hell are you doing, shit for brains?”

More important than that though, I wanted that jerk Taylor to see me die, and know that I did it trying to save *his* worthless life. That my bullet-riddled corpse would haunt him for all his days. The Raven danced with satisfaction on my shoulder.

When I heard the banging on the door I threw it open and leapt forward, trying to tackle and kick and bite whoever was on the other side. The poor hall monitor was mauled in my frenzy. The administration had forgotten to warn both the students and faculty of the drill.

For my bravery, I was suspended.

That night, after he received a call from the principal to inform him of my suspension, my father told me he'd never been more proud. Not long after that he began to tell me about how he always knew I had it in me, ever since the Raven came to visit my cradle. How he'd bring me onto base as a baby. He loved showing off a picture of me, from when I was seven, any time one of his old buddies from his days as a grunt came to visit. He'd make the old family recipe for lapskaus that he'd learned from his grandpa, and crack open three Guinnesses. One for him, his buddy, and me. I hated the taste.

Sometimes I'd force the Raven to drink it for me, shoving the bottle necks down his beak before he could rattle off another poetic suggestion.

With his belly full of stew, and his lips loosened with booze, my dad would take the photo off the mantle. In it was his ideal son. A little boy, with the Raven perched on his shoulder, holding an M11 in his hands, which were too small to fit around its grip properly, finger barely able to reach the trigger. He'd pull me into a sideways hug, and tell whoever it was at our table that I was going to be just like him when I was old enough.

There, and only there, I was perfect.

When I got back to school people mostly left me alone. Perhaps more so than before, but the difference was minimal really. Taylor didn't bother me as much though. He'd only pummel me once in a while now, instead of every day. Once, I even saw the Raven on his shoulder while he was walking down the hall, on his own, between classes.

"All call you a coward," I thought I heard the Raven say. "Curled and quivering like a woman. Terrified and trouser-defiled, trembling behind a trifling boy."

Taylor turned to smack away the Raven, which is when he saw me. He snatched my collar and lifted me off the ground.

"Tell your fucking bird to leave me alone already."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I didn't tell him to do anything."

"Yeah right," Taylor let out a pained laugh before he buried his fist into my gut. The Raven gave out a squawk that bordered on a gratified moan. Strike after strike found their target in my soft flesh, all while the Raven continued to jeer and berate us both. Yet for some reason, I couldn't find it in me to fight back. I smiled as blood leaked from my gums and my ears began to ring. Maybe, I thought, Taylor would knock me out and I would never wake up. Wouldn't that be nice?

It was not to be though. My dad asked what happened when he saw the bruises beginning to form. All I could say was "You should see the other guy," again, there was that look of pride.

After that day I didn't see much of Taylor. I heard that he met an army recruiter mid-way through our senior year. He wasn't around much after that to the dismay, then relief of his then girlfriend.

Then we graduated, and I had no idea what I was supposed to do other than see a recruiter myself. I doubt my dad would have listened to me then, if I had told him that enlisting was never my dream, that lately I'd begun to write late at night. What I wrote then was silly, and often frivolous. Mostly I wrote fantasy stories. In them I could imagine worlds where men could cry, and no one thought less of them. One night, feeling particularly bold, I tried to imagine a world without the Raven. What a paradise it was, a beautiful lie. What I wrote wasn't much, but it was mine and not the dream of my father.

My father of course was too excited to drive me to meet an Air Force recruiter. After all, all the smart guys go into the Air Force, rather than being a grunt. He knew a guy at the recruiting center in Henrietta, so the day after graduation we hopped into his old 1968 Charger and began to drive.

As I rode shotgun, with the window down to let the gusts of hot summer air whip my hair, which would have to be shaved if I got in, the Raven flew through the opening and landed on my shoulder once more.

"I suppose you're happy," I muttered to the carrion eater. He danced up and down on my shoulder, then turned his beak to the sky where the beating of a HH-60 Pave Hawks blades could be heard over our heads, likely on its way to the state armory.

"See how you will soar," the Raven said, "sky-bound and sacred."

"Sure, right, If I don't die first."

"But think," the Raven began in his trilling voice, "of the tremendous honor, to triumph and earn death-praise."

"I will die though, won't I."

"Such trivial thoughts, true men need not but shed wolf-wine."

I shook my head. Perhaps he was right. But something in my head wanted to scream. I hated every part of this plan. I wanted, more than anything else in the world,

to not be as my father was. But how would I stop this now, I couldn't look at my father and just tell him to turn the car around. I saw a pen, rattling in his cup holder. Quicker than thought or doubt I grasped onto that pen like the rope cast out to a drowning sailor and in a single swift motion I stabbed the tip into my left eye. My father cursed and swerved, the Raven cried and clutched onto my shoulders in his desperation to hang on.

To both, I was useless now, no armed force wants a one-eyed poet with a history of volatility. Something between a cry of pain and manic glee escaped my throat, and tears stung my missing eye. When I was let out of the hospital, I decided to apply for school. My father wouldn't look at me.

A few months later I was wandering around Geneseo, exploring the deserted campus in the dead of winter. Snow blanketed the sidewalks, and the air was heavy with the scent of road salt. I preferred the town when it was like this, when the darkness of night came early, and the annoying frat kids I called classmates all went home for the holidays. I didn't have any family I wished to see, so I stayed on campus. Perhaps it suited my mood better to be alone, save for the Raven, of course. He never left me for more than a few hours at a time these days.

The Raven had joined me the second I'd stepped out of my apartment. Yet he was abnormally silent, simply perching his weight on my shoulder. My constant companion. I suppose it was better than when he spoke to me.

The first stop on our journey was my favorite building on campus, the one that lay abandoned, surrounded by a chain fence and overgrown vines now frozen in winter's chill. It had once been connected to another building via a single hallway on the third floor, but that too was now little more than a crumbling brick bridge.

"Do you ever wonder what they used to use this part of campus for?" I asked the Raven, more as a way to wonder aloud, as I didn't really expect him to take much interest in the topic.

"Urban exploration of ugly university structures is unfitting, and ultimately useless," the Raven replied. His lack of kennings betrayed his own displeasure at my choice of view. "To the town go, turn now and find minds-worth."

“Alright, alright. Sure, why not.”

After about ten minutes of walking I felt the Raven bobbing his head, beckoning my gaze towards the lampposts on South Street. Hanging from each was a banner for a different hometown hero. The kind that can be found in any small town in America, each with the picture of a young man or woman in a uniform. Some were Navy, others were Army, even a few were Marines. All were dead, and the date they were killed or went missing in action was underneath their names.

“Look and learn, what you lost along with your eye,” the Raven practically sang.

“Ha,” I did my best to laugh, “you sound like my father.” A wicked winter wind blew through my jacket then, the cold penetrating me just as the Raven's talons did. The Raven puffed out and ruffled his feathers. “One of the few times I’ve managed to get him to speak to me, he interrogated me about why I did what I did. To be honest, I still don’t fully know why. Maybe I’m just too scared of the pain.”

“Soldiers often suffer, shell-remembrance spearing through. But look above and behold, likeness-bearing banners and warriors-reward.”

“What reward? They are dead.”

“Memory memorialized, merited won with battle-sweat.”

All the banners, the men and women on them, seemed to stare at me then. Who was I compared to them? When I went, who would care to remember me?

It was then that I recognized one of the boys on the banners. Taylor was there, his smile wide, and his rumpled uniform stained with blood, which trailed from his shoulder down to his pelvis. And the Raven was there too, perched on Taylor just as he was on me, talons sinking in with delight.

“I hated him, you know,” I told my feathered companion. “I used to think I hated him more than anyone else in the world. Were you with him when he died?”

“Always I am with warriors, worm-wyrd though they may be.”

“Was he scared?”

The Raven nodded his head in response.

“Can I tell you a story, Raven?”

The bird seemed almost intrigued.

“Once,” I began, holding my hand to his chest and allowing him to hop on. “When I was fifteen, when my father brought me to this VA event. I don’t remember what it was. But he ran into a friend of his. Turns out that friend had a kid too. Same age as me, same hair color, hell he even had the same name. But this other kid was taller, and stronger than I was. That other kid got along better with my dad than I ever did. I thought the universe was playing a grand joke on both my father and me. Here was the son he always wanted, but could never have.”

“Do you not see destiny-dodger, you denied such love by dislodging your eye. Yet still some chance stirs, you need only seize them. Life but a small bill.”

“Perhaps,” I began to trace my finger from the top of his head to his neck. “Regardless, Taylor was a lot like that other kid. Look where it got him. So no, my friend. I can’t do what you would ask. Not today. Perhaps not ever. But most certainly not today.”

The Raven enjoyed the feeling of being pet for just a moment, pushing his head into my hand for the briefest of moments, then leaped from my hand and back to my shoulder. I laughed just a little. I wondered if no one had ever given him such affection before. If they either blindly followed him, or they hated him. But as we drifted through the empty streets, the snow dancing on the wind around us, I found that the weight of the Raven on my shoulder troubled me less than it had before.



Monster

By Leslie Greenwood

Monsters come in all different shapes and sizes. You have your mythical monsters. These are your green goblins and fire-breathing creatures covered in scales with long necks and wings. You have your boogeymen. These are the furry brown creatures that lurk in your closet, or under your bed while you are asleep. You have your movie monsters. These are the characters from scary movies, like Freddie Krueger with his bladed hand ready to invade your dreams, or Jason, ready for his killing spree at a summer camp.

The first monsters I knew lived in our basement. Their names were Tinky Dee and his brother Twinkie. I was about three when I realized they were there. I was so young that some of the details are fuzzy, but other things I remember are as clear as day. I remember they didn't like each other very much. I can still remember the crashing and banging in the basement when they would fight. I would be sitting in the kitchen eating my favorite, a tuna sandwich. Suddenly, a crash would split the air. Sharp and violent, like the house itself had been kicked. I would dive beneath the kitchen table, pulling my knees to my chest. I would lay there staring through the forest of chair legs, waiting for the air to settle.

It always felt like I was alone when this happened. I can't believe my mother would have left me home alone at three, but memory blurs. What I do remember clearly is trembling. The way I hugged the ground, I was afraid to breathe too loudly. Sometimes I stayed there till someone found me. Sometimes I fell asleep. And sometimes, The Father Guy would appear on the other side of the basement door.

When I was three, I had a lot of nightmares. Sometimes Tinky Dee and Twinkie would fight at night, and I would wake up to crashing and banging. All the sounds were louder at night, adding to my fear. I would yank the blanket just below my eyes, and my hands would twist the edges into a tight fist. I was probably too scared to move or scream, so I would just lie stiff as a board. I like to think my three-year-old self was quite wise, and I would tell myself not to worry; it was all in my head; monsters weren't real. I

like to imagine myself lying there, bravely telling myself that the only way to fight off the monsters was to stop being afraid of them.

I remember when I was about five or six, The Father Guy came home from work; he was completely silent. The silence was painful and eerie, but everyone knew better than to ask what was wrong. No one would move. Minutes seemed like hours of stillness and quiet. Out of nowhere, he got up and walked to the kitchen. Still silent, not making eye contact with anyone. From the corner of my eye, I would watch. His jaw was tight and his eyes flat. With the swipe of his arm, ceramic shattered, glass popped, and metal spun across the floor. Every dish my mom had just washed slid down into pieces, and he started screaming, “Look at this fucking mess! I work all day and have to come home to this shit!” My mom wouldn't argue or say a word back. Instead, she grabbed a kitchen towel off the counter and, with her hands shaking, knelt to pick up all the shards scattered on the floor.

One time, my mom called the police. The Father Guy had locked my mom out of the house, barefoot and pregnant. When the police arrived, they told her, “What do you want us to do, throw a man out of his own house?”

It was dark out when he finally let her back in. As usual, she said nothing and instead went to the basement to do the laundry. I sat in the kitchen staring at the tuna sandwich in front of me. I watched as The Father Guy tiptoed down the basement steps, quietly shutting the basement door behind him.

While my mother was bent down, sorting clothes to put in the washer, he went up to her, striking the back of her head with his fist. At that moment, I didn't know what had happened. From upstairs, all I could hear was some crashing and banging. The sound was all too familiar; it was the same sound I would hear when Tinky Dee would be fighting with his brother, Twinkie. For some reason, I was braver today. Instead of hiding under the table, I rushed down to the basement as The Father Guy made his way up.

When I got to the last step, I heard the dryer buzzer going off. I stood there staring at the blinking light, as the buzzer filled the silence. When I finally looked down, my mom was lying on the concrete floor beside the dryer, a sock still clenched in one

hand. The other arm twisted beneath her. She wasn't moving. I wanted to run to her, but my body trembled in disbelief. Then I was down on the floor beside her, the cold concrete seeping through my clothes as I wrapped my arms around her. I took her hand in mine and held it, afraid to breathe, until her fingers gave the faintest squeeze.

As the buzzer faded into the background, the truth hit me like dust settling after a fall. The monsters I feared weren't hiding in the shadows or under my bed; the real monster walked among us, wearing a familiar face. I realized the banging that once sent me diving under the table had never come from some furry, fighting pair in the dark. Instead, it came from upstairs, from a man who should have made me feel safe. But knowing his name changed everything. It meant I could stop waiting for monsters to come crashing through the door and start learning how to close it behind them.

My mom and I finally made our way upstairs. I gently pushed open the basement door; the early morning light filled the kitchen, pale and quiet, as if nothing had happened. On the table, my tuna sandwich still sat, untouched as the edges wilted in the warm sunlight. The chair legs no longer loomed like a forest to hide in. They stood open, ordinary, exposed.



Surrogate

By Niamh MacIver

Petra came home for Christmas vacation on the 15th, a little over two weeks after I had officially started being Christine Howell.

I stepped out into the driveway. The scene was utterly perfect, dime-sized flurries of snow floating down from a ceiling of gentle grey clouds. Petra had just stepped out of the Howells' Mercedes on two skinny little legs in black stockings. Mom had reminded me earlier that Petra was small for a fourteen-year-old, and sensitive about it, but even knowing that I couldn't help but be surprised. The plum beret she was wearing barely cleared the roof of the Mercedes, and even wrapped in her thick black peacoat her torso looked about as thick as a reference book—a dictionary, maybe.

I took a step forward, spreading my arms in what I hoped was a big-sisterly way. “Welcome home, Petra.”

Her head swiveled towards me as though I'd fired a gunshot. “Who the hell is this?”

“Language, Petra,” Mom said, somewhere behind me. “And don't play dumb. It's Christine.”

“Hi. Remember me?” I raised a timid hand, my stomach churning. This was the possibility I was most afraid of. Instinctively I started picking at my cuticles. After months of practice, I was finally doing it without having to consciously remind myself.

“Cut the crap.” Petra's gaze was stony, unwavering. “Who the hell is this?” The resemblance between her and Christine was unmistakable. Smaller skull, bonier face, bigger eyes, but her narrow lips and tumbles of dirty blonde hair were dead on. *She looks more like Christine than I do*, I thought, before chasing it out with *no, wrong, I am Christine*.

“Petra Anne.” Mom's voice echoed against the neighbors' houses. “This is your sister, and you are going to treat her as such—and watch your mouth—for the duration

of your stay, or I'll drive you all the way back to Grosvenor myself. Do I make myself clear?"

Petra looked away, tucking her scowl into the collar of her coat.

"Come give Christine a hug."

Petra didn't move.

"*Now.*"

Petra stomped forward, tiny boots softly thumping. Her chin never unfurrowed from her collar. She didn't hug me so much as knock her chest into my abdomen, arms looping around me with palms turned outward.

"Thank you."

Petra recoiled and walked back to the car to collect her things. I watched as she and Dad took them into the garage.

I stood there a moment, watching this idyllic Christmas snowfall. I sniffled. My eyes began to burn.

"Oh, sweetie."

Mrs. Howell—Mom, *my* Mom—stepped out into the driveway and pulled me into a hug.

"She'll warm up to you," she said, kissing my cheek. The strange, bitter note in her perfume was especially strong today. "Or—well, she'll realize it's really you. Eventually." She pulled back and gave me a tender smile. "You know how Petra is, right?"

I sniffed. "Of course I do," I lied.



Three months ago was when I was told I was going to be Christine Howell, a girl who killed herself.

I don't really remember anything before that. I'm not supposed to. The human organism I was before no longer exists, legally or practically. I'm told Surrogates come from all sorts of places; supposedly we're unclaimed babies, unhoused teens, foster kids who never found a forever home. We're blank canvases, our minds cleared of personal memories, skin and muscles stretched and molded to order. I try not to think about whether anyone misses the old me.

My memories start with me waking up in bed, Mrs. Howell's hand holding mine. From there, it's just the facility; reading the thickly wadded dossiers chronicling the life of Christine Howell, watching video after video after video of her going about her daily life, trying to get her mannerisms down. Learning to walk on the balls of my feet, the way she did. Teaching myself to start picking my cuticles when I got anxious or upset, the way she did. Conditioning myself to respond to her name, laugh at the things she laughed at, smile the way she smiled. The Howells came by every weekend to check in, to drop off more of Christine's things for me to acquaint myself with, to make sure I was committed to being their daughter.



Once her bags were upstairs Petra declared that she wanted to take a bath, claiming her dorm at Grosvenor only had showers. I didn't doubt that, but I suspected it was also because the upstairs bathroom was, aside from our parents' bedroom, the only room in the house with a lock. While said parents sat in the den eating brie and debating, in whispered tones, whether it had been too soon to let Petra come home, I snuck up to the upstairs landing and sat outside the bathroom.

"It's like, *so* screwed up." I could hear Petra trying to whisper, but the Howells' marble countertops were having none of it. A pause. She was talking on the phone. "Yeah, they're acting like she's really my sister." A restless splash. "I know. I don't know if I can stay here three weeks." A deep sigh. "Yeah. No. Of course they still aren't admitting it, are you kidding me? They're still acting like everyone doesn't already know.

Why would they bring” —A splash— “*that* here if they were ready to admit it?” Pause. A snorted laugh. “Oh yeah, that’s *soooo* much worse actually. Yeah—”

I stopped paying attention as her tone lightened and she felt empowered to speak up. I sat there, legs splayed like a doll’s, feeling stupid. I tried not to think of anything. Not my washed-away memories, not the Howells, not myself, whoever I was.

After a while, I heard Petra hang up and turn the water back on. It seemed like the right time to leave.



Facility staff were expressly forbidden from touching Surrogates outside of emergencies. They couldn’t hug me, hold my hand, pat my back, anything. I was told contact of that sort was the exclusive contractual right of my family, and that bonding too much with staff made reintegration much more difficult. More than once, after slipping and falling, I had to stand back up under some statue-still orderly’s apologetic gaze.

In contrast, Mrs. Howell took every opportunity to hold me, kiss my cheeks and forehead, rest my head on her shoulder. She performed each with an almost aggressive firmness, a forcefulness that felt like her willing herself to believe that I truly was, had always been, her daughter. I drank that affection up desperately, recklessly. After a bad week, I nervously asked if she could help me brush my hair; when she finished my head felt angelically light.

Mr. Howell did not share her enthusiasm. Usually he sat hunched on the folding chair in the far corner, looking like he wanted to cry, but had forgotten how. It took him until the eighth weekend to touch me at all. He clapped a hand on my shoulder in farewell. His eyeline didn’t meet mine.

Every night, I’d go over their files again. Mr. Howell, bespectacled, balding, scholarly salt and pepper beard. Mrs. Howell, beautiful as an oak tree, smiling warmly. *I love my parents*, I told myself, and I was starting to believe it. But it was Petra’s file that

intrigued me the most. There was something sad behind her eyes that vexed me a little. Her biography, much shorter than our parents', said that she and Christine had been very close. No further elaboration.

The Howells had said I would be privately tutored once I was ready to resume school. Nothing in the dossiers told me anything about Christine's friends. For all I knew, she didn't have any. But she had a sister. Which meant I had a sister. If nothing else, I was going to have her. In bed I thought about what we might do together. I had no idea what she liked, but I imagined every possibility I could, pieced together from the instructional videos I'd been shown of happy Surrogates with happy families and the handful of library books I'd gotten my hands on. We'd go to the mall together. Or go hiking. I'd lend her books and we'd discuss them after. She'd gossip about her crushes. We'd egg people's houses, and I'd take the fall for her. No matter what she wanted to do, I knew that she needed me, and I needed her. She was going to love me. She had to. And I was going to love her. Nothing made me need to become Christine Howell like that did.



We were having roast chicken for dinner again, the same as when I first came home.

"Petra! Dinner!" Mom called again. Still nothing. Dad stood up from the table with a grunt.

"PETRA ANNE HOWELL." I jumped halfway out of my seat. I'd never heard him yell before. "DINNER IS SERVED. TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT." A fleck of spit landed just beneath my eye. Dad sat back down, looking drained. A minute later, Petra entered the dining room in faded pajama pants and a threadbare grey sweatshirt, with disintegrating blue stitching suggesting the outline of a horse.

"Absolutely not." Mom folded her arms. "We haven't had dinner as a family in months. Go put on something nice."

"*Christine* doesn't care, right?" Her mouth smiled at me, her eyes did not.

“It doesn’t matter if she cares, *I* care.”

“But you don’t, right?” She pouted, without softening her stare. I felt my skin crawl a little. Truthfully, I didn’t care. She’d hurt my feelings earlier, but she’d just been caught off-guard. *This*, though—something about her wheedling annoyed me.

“I think Mom’s right,” I said, smiling gently. “Why don’t you go get changed?”

Petra’s face turned stony cold. “Fine.” She said it as though spitting out a loose hair. Turning mechanically on her heels, she walked out of the dining room. About ten minutes later, she came back down in a long velvet dress pocked with lint.

Mom looked ready to object, but seemed to think better of it. “Thank you.”

Dinner proceeded in silence. The chicken was dry, the green beans were overdone, the stuffing was okay. Petra picked at her waterlogged beans and a bit of the stuffing.

“Something wrong with the chicken?” I asked.

She barely even glanced up from her plate. “You should know what’s wrong with it.”

I frowned. “Can you tell me?”

Petra didn’t respond.

“Petra?” Mom sounded concerned.

“I don’t eat meat.”

Mom frowned. “Oh. I’m sorry. I forgot.”

“You forgot because Christine didn’t remind you.” Petra shot me a scathing look.

“That’s not—” Mom started. “It’s not Christine’s job to do that.” I nodded approvingly.

“No, I guess it’s not. And it wasn’t Christine’s job to make me dinner on Easter either, but she still did it.”

“You can’t expect Christine to do everything for you—” Mom began.

“No, I can’t! Because she’s gone!” Petra slammed her fist down, knocking over her glass of water. It rolled onto the floor with a meaty *thwack*. “She’s gone, and you guys are pretending she’s not! You’re still trying to act like nothing even happened!”

“Nothing *did* happen.” Mom’s tone was curt. I glanced at her, surprised. Why was she still bothering to keep up this charade? “Christine’s still getting over being sick. It’s been a long time in the hospital. It’s not fair to expect her to act exactly how she was before.”

“She’s not acting *at all* how she did before!” Petra stood up with a stomp, her chair screeching backwards from the table. “She doesn’t talk the way Christine did. She’s not dressed the way Christine dressed. Look—” she grabbed my plate. “There’s no gravy on any of this! Christine *loved* gravy! That was the whole reason she liked chicken!”

“I’m watching my figure,” I said, quietly. I wasn’t really, but Mrs. Howell had told me I was last time we had chicken.

Petra looked at me like I had spit in her face. “If this thing is supposed to be Christine, you got ripped off.”

I shot straight up. I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do—slap her, maybe? Shove her? But before I could decide something knocked me to the floor. Dad had stormed over from the head of the table and had Petra’s shoulders balled into his hands.

“You listen to me.” He wasn’t yelling, but his voice was no less forceful than when he had shouted before. “I have paid to put a roof over your head. I have paid to give you a quality education. I have—” he took a deep breath “—*PAID* to give you your sister back. I know by now you have no concept of gratitude. But if you don’t start showing it—”

“Dear.” Mom’s voice cut. Dad didn’t heed.

“If you don’t shape up, you’re going to find out for yourself—”

“Stop.” I stood up. My voice caught Dad’s attention in a way Mom’s hadn’t. I could feel every set of eyes in the room probing me. “Please don’t yell at her.” My heart pounded. “I— I think she’s just a little tired from the trip home.” I gulped. My tongue felt scaly dry. “And I think she’s a little wound up from the end of the semester. And—” Deep breath. “—And I know I’m a little different from how she remembers.”

No one said anything. I felt at any minute my skin would start melting off of me, all pretension of being Christine Howell disintegrating and leaving flesh and bone of unknowable provenance for all to see.

“Fine,” Mom sighed. “Petra, if you’re done eating, go to bed. We can talk more about this in the morning. Give Christine a hug and say goodnight.”

“She doesn’t have to—” I felt a bony little body hit me from behind. Petra’s hands clasped together around my stomach. Something hot and wet found the small of my back. As soon as I registered what was happening, it ended.

“G’night,” Petra muttered behind me. I heard her slippered feet shuffle out the kitchen.

Mom sighed. “I hope she won’t be like this all month.”

Dad grunted. His eyes were red, swollen—when had that happened? He walked over to the glass serving dish on the counter that held the lemon cake we’d started the night before.

“Could you get me a slice, dear?” Mom asked.

“Me too,” I added.

Dad got out three plates. He cut himself two modest pieces, then a sliver.

“Thank you,” Mom said as he handed her the middle piece. Dad set the sliver down in front of me.

“Could I actually get—?”

Mom raised an eyebrow. “You want a bigger piece?” She sounded mildly incredulous.

I looked away. “No. This is fine.”

We ate our cake in silence. Mine seemed to evaporate on my tongue. I was done before either of them.

I had a thought. “Could I bring Petra a piece?”

Mom smiled. “That’s very sweet of you, Chris—” She stopped, her eyes drawn to my fingers, which were digging fiercely at a hangnail on my right thumb. I swept my hands under the table. Mrs. Howell continued to stare where they had been. Then she shook her head slightly and smiled. “Yes, you can bring Petra some cake.” Her expression was gentle, but it looked like it took every muscle in her face. Doing everything she could to wordlessly say *you’re doing a good job at being our daughter*.

“Okay then.” I stood up and walked to the counter. I cut Petra a slice bigger than Mr. Howell’s.



I knocked on Petra’s bedroom door, directly across the hall from Christine’s bedroom. No answer.

“Yeah?” A stuffy voice came from within.

“I brought you something.”

No response.

“Can I come in?”

“Whatever.”

I opened the door. The lights were off. Petra was in bed, back to the door. Her room was oddly Spartan, just a bed, a nightstand, a desk, and her bags. I wondered if most of her things were back in her dorm at Grosvenor.

“You want some cake, Petra?”

No response. I held back a sigh as I set the plate down on her desk.

“Chrissy’s dead, isn’t she?”

“Yeah.” I didn’t know what else I could say.

Petra sat up. Her eyes were red, but she wasn’t crying, not anymore. Her eyes lingeringly wandered my face.

“So who are you, then?”

I wasn't prepared for such a simple question to sound so alien. “*Who are you, then?*” Had I really never been asked that? She might as well have said it in Russian.

“I don't know,” I said.

Petra continued staring. Her gaze had lost some of its intensity. She looked tired.

“Well, you're not Chrissy. That's for sure.”

“Sorry.”

“It's not your fault.” Her eyes traced over me again. “If you're not Chrissy, what should I call you?”

“Just Christine is fine,” I offered.

Petra shook her head. “No way. One, that's boring. Two, that's what Mom calls you, same as she did with Chrissy. I'm not calling you what she calls you.”

I frowned. “So, what, I don't get to have a name?”

Petra rolled her eyes. “No, stupid—” She caught herself. “Sorry.” She tried again. “No, I'm just gonna call you something that's not that.”

“Oh. Like what?”

“I dunno. What do you want to be called?”

I tried to think. This was almost as weird a question as *who are you*, and one I had no more of an answer for.

“Kitty?” Petra suggested. “I think there's a Christina at school who goes by Kitty.”

“Kitty.” The name left a cool, clean taste as it left my tongue. *Kitty*. I could be Kitty. I could definitely be Kitty. “That works for me.” Suddenly I felt awake, clearheaded.

“Cool.” Petra sounded satisfied, comfortable even. “You can call me Pete.”

“Sure thing.”

I stood there a moment, my brain frantically reaching for what I hadn't been taught to do in this scenario that wasn't supposed to happen. Instinctively, I extended my hand.

Petra stared at it a second, then burst out laughing.

"Sorry—" I started to pull my hand away, face burning.

"No! No, it's fine, sorry," Petra laughed. "I just wasn't prepared. C'mere." She reached out her own hand. We shook.

"It's nice to meet you, Pete," I said, the way I'd always been taught.

"Thanks," Petra replied, smiling warmly. "It's nice to meet you too, Kitty."



The Journey to Something More

By Brynne Barnum

I analyze myself in the mirror,
pure physicality.
Limbs I've carried through time
growing heavier through life's lessons –
a devastating breakup at seventeen,
a relationship request
I wish I declined.
Short-lived crushes,
unfortunate emotional investment
leading to a crumbling heart –
experiences mirrors cannot reflect.

A glowing figure emerges, providing
pure, warm, white light, kind
yet demanding in its energy.
Asking, "are you enough
without your aspirations?
Is your work sufficient, or
do you want to be more?"

What is "more", and how,
where shall I reach?
Will there be unraveling, unleashing of
my haunting aspects –
secrets that break and burden my bones,
wreck my soul,
deserting my defeated body
to dread the "more"
when it inevitably comes?

The bright light answers: it is simple.
You seek your dreams –
releasing your writing,
your words running wild into the wind.
The journey will wreck your soul,
leaving you to wonder why
you're desperate in reaching them at all.
your shaky hands will open the notebook
while your tear filled eyes yearn
for it to shut.
However, the “more”
and the weight of your words
will be your biggest victory.

You, my dear,
are like a rose. Petals
comparable to red wine,
thorns of steel –
delicate but resilient
like ones beaten down,
fatally frozen by bitter coldness.
Though, come spring time
you will sprout, soon blooming again,
even more vibrant than you once were.



Contributor Bios

Aza Coy (*they/she*) is a non-binary queer writer, a parent, and a Creative Writing student in the Honors Institute at Monroe Community College. She is the recipient of the 54th Annual Rice Award for Creative Non-Fiction work by an MCC student, was published in the Resilience anthology by Heartspark Press in 2017, and in the Works in Progress, a publication based in Olympia, WA in 2016. She is the Literary Editor for Cabbages & Kings. She lives in Rochester, NY with her partner, their feral teenager and two spoiled dogs.

Aza would like to thank their spouse and child for believing in them and cajoling her into going to college, her readers for keeping the torch burning, and her classmates for inspiring her.

Kayla Strassner is a writer and student. She enjoys writing fiction. She loves to read coming of age and romance novels. Kayla Strassner currently attends Monroe Community College. This is her last semester majoring in creative writing. She hopes to use everything she learns at MCC to further her writing skills. Kayla enjoys walking her dog and hanging out with her friends and family.

Kayla would like to thank her parents and close friends, for everything they do.

Maryam Barmak is a writer and literary scholar working and studying in the field of creative writing. She is interested in writing in both Persian/Dari and English, and her work focuses on poetry, fiction, and cross-cultural experience. She is in the process of developing her own voice as a writer who moves between languages, experiences, and different ways of seeing the world. For her, writing in two languages means living in two worlds, where identity, culture, and emotion are shaped in the movement between languages, and meaning is continuously re-created within that space.

Maryam thanks her husband for his support and for helping her take root in new soil.

Gabriel Romano is a writer and historical fencer based out of Rochester, New York. He has been studying creative writing for two years at MCC, predominantly focusing on playwriting and short fiction. Both with a bend towards science fiction and fantasy, his two life long loves. His one act play “That is Good to Know” won the Sixth Act competition in 2025, and his poem “The Unique Pain of Writing from Memory” appeared in that year's edition of Cabbages and Kings.

Gabriel would like to thank his late Papa, John Romano, who supported Gabriel's writing years before he knew he wanted to be a writer.

Leslie Greenwood is a Journalism and Communications student at Monroe Community College graduating this spring. She is the editor-in-chief and one of the founders of The Monroe Maverick, an independent student publication launched after the suspension of the Monroe Doctrine and WMCC. Her work is rooted in truth, fairness, and giving all sides a voice. She also writes creative nonfiction shaped by her childhood and the obstacles she has overcome.

Leslie dedicates this work in part to her mother. Her belief in Leslie lay the foundation for everything she has accomplished. Even in her absence, her voice and support remain a constant presence in Leslie's life.

Niamh MacIver (*she/it*) is a Rochester, New York-based writer currently attending Monroe Community College's Creative Writing program, expected to graduate Spring 2026. After dropping out of the University of Maine at Farmington's writing program in 2015, she spent nearly a decade as a pizza delivery driver, warehouse worker, and specimen technician before finally returning to her true passion. She is a two-time winner of MCC's Langlois Award for Best Short Fiction. When not writing, she looks for inspiration in the fathomless complexities of gender, the quiet of abandoned buildings, and the home movies of strangers.

Niamh would like to thank Rook and Amadeus, as well as her parents, her brother, and all the many, many wonderful teachers who led her here.

Brynne Barnum is a poet, student, and writer of a future novel series. In her poems, she frequently connects aspects of nature to personal events throughout her whole life. She loves to write action packed short stories, and enjoys working on her Sci-Fi novel ideas. Brynne is currently enrolled at Monroe Community College, majoring in creative writing to learn better techniques in her favorite styles of writing. She hopes to use this knowledge, and her undying passion for writing, to become a published author both in fiction and poetry. In her free time, Brynne likes to crochet, listen to music, take relaxing walks outside, and have pleasant conversations with friends and family.

Brynne would like to thank her mother Kerrie, her grandma Mary, and her best friend Adela for being continuous voices of support throughout her experience at Monroe Community College.

She would also like to thank her professors, especially those from the creative writing department, for helping Brynne develop her works of writing. Brynne will cherish these moments, keeping them in her heart for the rest of her life.

Class Photo

Writers & Books

April 2026



Caption: Photo taken after class reading at Writers & Books, Rochester, NY on April 29th, 2026. From left to right, Kayla Strassner, Gabriel Romano, Maryam Barmak, Brynne Barnum, Aza Coy, Niamh MacIver, Leslie Greenwood.

