



PEGASUS

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PEGASUS LITERARY MAGAZINE

2025

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Editor's Note

When I enrolled at Delaware County Community College two years ago, I would never have dreamt that I'd be ending my degree as the editor of the school's literary magazine. Coming out of several gap years between first attempting college and choosing to try again, I was firm in my decision to become a Mathematics & Natural Science major. It only made sense that I would spend the next two years learning what it meant to be a scientist, but I was devastated that it cemented writing and literature as little more than a hobby. Despite my choice to dedicate myself to this academic path, writing remained a constant source of inspiration and joy. I submitted a few poems to Pegasus on a whim in 2024 with no idea that it would lead to my position as editor. It gave me a chance to balance my passions for STEM and the arts.

My project this semester has been to establish an archive of past editions. At the same time, our graphic designer and advisor worked to kick off the magazine's website. Working backwards from the 2020s to the 1960s, I've had the opportunity to travel in time. I've read published works by folks who, while younger than myself then, are now old enough to be my parents. I've seen the way themes and styles have evolved over time: from the students of the 2010s with their focus on social media's effect and cell-phone sunset photos, to the musings on the Vietnam War alongside high-contrast film in the 1970s. A few months ago we unveiled the website with the archive linked. We now have decades of student voices available to anyone in the world with an internet connection. It seemed only natural that the theme and cover of our edition would end up being an homage to the archival process and the vintage issues of DCCC's past. Many of the works in the 2025 edition embody a sense of reflection: back in time, within oneself, or on life as a whole.

The 2025 issue of Pegasus couldn't have come together without our amazing team. I want to thank Professor Paul Pat for gifting me the opportunity to reconnect with my love of writing, and for introducing me to so many wonderful people and opportunities throughout the semester. I want to thank graphic designer Robin Broughton for her creativity and vision, and for always being open to the team's changing whims. You truly brought the issue to life! Finally, I would like to thank Pegasus co-editor Gillian Keener for her organization and idealism, always interweaving the creative process with practical suggestions and bountiful excitement.

I hope you enjoy connecting with our stories and students this year. If you're a writer, or ever wanted to be, I urge you to pick up the pen. Literature has a way of transcending time. A published work never changes, but will tell you a new story as the years go by, as society changes and progresses, and with it, its meaning. Writing is for everyone, including you. I can't wait to see what you create!

Wishing you inspiration from the past,
Parker Lane
Editor, 2025

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To the One Who Stays

by Taylor Smith

Come to me with hands unshaken,
A heart that beats without a mask.
Let your words be open windows,
Never locked behind the past.

I have loved in shadows before,
Been tucked away behind closed doors,
A quiet secret, half-remembered—
But I am not made for dim-lit corners.

Love me loud, love me honest,
Not in whispers, not in doubt.
I am here with arms wide open,
Teach me what love's about.

Tell me your dreams in the late-night hush,
And I'll hold them like they're mine.
Show me the fire inside your chest,
And I will match you, spark for spark,
Never fearing how we shine.

Work beside me, hand in hand,
Not just lovers but a team.
Ambition humming in our bones,
We build our life; we chase our dreams.

But don't come to me with half a heart,
Don't choose me just to have someone.
I will never be a last resort,
A settling place when hope is gone.

If you stand with me, stand fully,
Not with one foot out the door.
Love me first, or let me go—
I am no one's second choice, no more.

Show me loyalty, the kind that stays,
The kind that never shakes or sways.
Not perfect love, but present love,
Through quiet nights and messy days.

And when the world feels heavy, love,
When the storms begin to rise,
I won't flinch or turn away—
I will stand there by your side.

So come as you are, and I'll do the same,
Two souls who refuse to hide.
No secrets, no silence, no half-truths,
Just love that stands with pride.

Because love is not a fleeting thing,
Not a game of cat and mouse.
Love is steady, love is certain—
Love is choosing, here and now.

My Life as a Teen Mom

by Rachael Gascoigne

“You better be getting an abortion, or you need to get out of my house,” my mom said to me. That’s not exactly the way I pictured my first pregnancy announcement to go, but I was 19 and my boyfriend and I were expecting a baby.

Colin and I met in study hall during our senior year of high school. I always sat at the opposite end of the table as his friend group, and we gradually moved closer together as the weeks went by. One day, he took my hand and said, “A prince and a princess are on opposite sides of this wall. How will they meet?” “How?” I asked. Colin said, “I don’t know. I just really wanted to hold your hand.”

We were almost inseparable from that day on. We graduated high school together, and Colin started classes at West Chester University the following fall. My dad encouraged me to “take a year off” when he decided against paying my college tuition the week before classes started. I got a job as a sales associate at a clothing store, and Colin and I spent lunch time together when we could. We watched movies on my bed, and he always brought Subway sandwiches.

Our lives changed forever the day we discovered I was pregnant. We both lived at home and were financially unstable. Colin’s mom sent me daily text messages telling me to get an abortion. Repulsed and disappointed, my mom was afraid of what people would think of her having a pregnant daughter. “You’re not living here with a baby,” she said. I later found out that one day, she called Colin over and told him to leave me. My mom went to great lengths to end the pregnancy. I had no one to confide in, and I cried every day, but I stood my ground. I had decided to keep my baby.

When the reality of the situation set in, my mom agreed to let me live at home until Noah was born. Noah—that was what we decided to name our baby boy. Colin’s parents eventually accepted our decision and gave us their support. They had their basement finished so we could live with them, and they said we were welcome to stay indefinitely. Colin’s cousins (whom I had never met) were so kind as to throw us a baby shower at a local restaurant. We were spoiled with beautiful gifts and necessities for our new addition.

Excitement built within me as my due date approached. Although my journey to motherhood wasn’t the one I envisioned as a young girl, I couldn’t wait to become a mom. Still, I felt as though I had to hide my joy. Society typically does not act kindly towards young parents. Nevertheless, I determined to overcome the stigma. I set a goal to work hard and provide my child with the safety and love he deserved. I was convinced that everything was going to be okay.

The night Noah was born was filled with joy. Everyone surrounded my hospital bed to get a glimpse of our sweet baby boy. Sleeping peacefully in my arms, he looked like a porcelain doll. Nevertheless, I couldn’t dismiss the feeling that something wasn’t right. My “mother’s intuition” must have kicked in straightaway, because the next day Noah was suddenly rushed to the Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP).

Petrified, we followed the ambulance to CHOP. We were admitted into the NICU, and time slowed down as we followed the corridor to find Noah. We were surrounded by the sterile scent of Purell and the incessant beeping of vital signs monitors. When we reached the dimly lit NICU room, we were greeted by Dr. Doolin, a kind-eyed, older surgeon with a bushy grey mustache. He was short and straight to the point, but I immediately trusted him. Dr. Doolin explained that Noah was born with pure rectal atresia, an extremely rare birth defect where there is a blockage at the end of the rectum. "It's a one in a million condition," he said. Noah needed to be taken into surgery immediately. I tried to hold it together, but I sobbed over the little plastic incubator that held Noah. We weren't allowed to hold him, and all I could do was touch his tiny hands. Colin and I had no one to turn to. Something was terribly wrong with the baby no one wanted me to have. I only had myself to blame.

Noah had to have a colostomy, a procedure where part of his large intestine was brought to his skin's surface. Stool passed directly into a small bag that sat atop his belly. A medical procedure that sounds grotesque to many, saved Noah's life. Noah's nurse, Dara, taught us how to empty and change the bag. I could tell from the disapproving looks Dara gave us that she thought we were too young to be capable of caring for Noah ourselves. We were young, but like any NICU parents, we needed kindness.

We weren't allowed to stay at CHOP overnight, so we traveled back and forth to Philadelphia every day for the first few weeks of Noah's life. The first time we got home after having to leave Noah, I collapsed out of the car onto the driveway. I wasn't supposed to come home without my baby. The NICU staff gave us a form to fill in with a list of names of people we would allow to visit Noah. We left it blank.

After weeks of waiting, we were told Noah was ready to go home. We brought his car seat to the hospital, and I picked out a striped blue and grey hat for him to wear that said, "Born in 2011." Dara watched us intently. She didn't need to say that she didn't trust us to care for our baby; we knew it was true. Despite feeling hurt, we were thrilled to take Noah home.

One day, a home healthcare worker visited to check on us. Everyone was healthy, but she smiled and said, "You need to get married." I smiled back, but the wheels in my mind started turning. "Are we not a family unless we're married?" I wondered. "Does marriage make a couple better parents?"

Eighteen months and three surgical procedures later, no one would have guessed anything had ever been wrong with Noah. When we returned to CHOP for a follow-up visit, Dr. Doolin said, "Act like it never happened." Noah was just a normal toddler, except for the raised red scar on his stomach. We still tell him that when anyone asks (because they do), he should say he won a fight with an alligator or got attacked by a shark. We're just kidding, but he deserves a cool story to explain his battle wound!

We may not have been a traditional family, but we loved each other and were happy. Colin was a full-time student, a stay-at-home dad, and a part-time sales associate at a school supplies store. He stayed home with Noah during the day while I worked, and then we switched places in the evening. We were like two ships passing in the night. Luckily, Colin's mom babysat when our schedules didn't align.

I felt like I couldn't find my place, though. I didn't have friends, and I felt like other

moms avoided me because I was young. One day, I took Noah to the neighborhood park, and there were some kids who looked to be around his age. One of the moms pointed at Noah and enthusiastically asked me, “Are you his babysitter?” “No, he’s mine,” I responded with a smile. She exchanged glances with her friend and asked, “Oh, you’re his mom?” Then, they gathered their kids and quickly left. How could someone be so quick to judge me? People assumed I was a bad mom just because I was young and didn’t wear a wedding ring. Despite knowing I loved my son and was doing my best, I felt lonely and isolated.

Colin took a paid internship when he graduated college, and I was promoted to assistant store manager. We finally felt like adults once we moved into our first apartment. It was finally just the three of us, making memories in our own little home. We got married, not because we had to, but because we wanted to. Our real-life Disney Fairy Tale Wedding was a dream, and Noah got to be a part of it. He held a little red helicopter as he looked up at us in awe as Colin and I exchanged vows. We spent our wedding night swimming in The Seas with Nemo and Friends, and people-watching “across the pond,” as we chowed down on fish and chips in Epcot.

Noah is now in eighth grade, and Colin and I have been happily married for ten years. We welcomed a sweet, healthy baby girl in 2016 and bought our forever home in 2018. Noah is one of the kindest humans I know, and it is such a privilege to be his mom. I can confidently say I have no regrets.

Colin and I may not have lived the “right” way in society’s eyes, but I wouldn’t change anything about our journey. Despite feeling judged by people who don’t know our story, we have overcome obstacles most parents are never faced with. I wish I could tell teenage Rachael how proud I am of her. I would look her in the eyes and say, “You are so much more than a label. You can do hard things.”

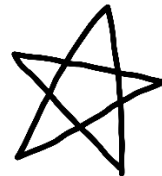
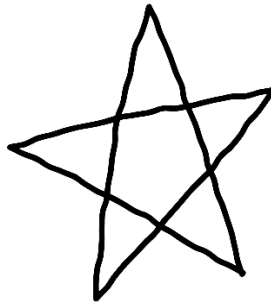
Singularity

by Helena Evelyn Romer

To Gold, lamenting,

To worship
Mortal gods, small and many,
Is to revere quantity.
Swarming greed obscures our fates,
Taints our love.
We share great sorrow
In knowing all things must
Take to live,
And together we weep,
Surrendering waters
We feel unworthy of.

Awaiting,
Your faithful Correspondent



Apollyon

by Zye Scheer

I am inevitable, the great conclusion
I discriminate against neither man, woman, or child
I usurp what I deserve, for it is mine
Nobody escapes my grasp, for I am the finale

I bring grief in my wake and the end of times
I break hearts, I break families, I break psyches
I feel no remorse, no guilt, no sorrow
I am the reason so many don't see tomorrow

Asteroids hurl towards the land with a crash
Volcanoes will erupt and engulf the skies in ash
Cerulean waves sweep over the cities with a splash
And the earth will draw her last breath as all ends in a flash

Ragnarok has come, born from cataclysm and greed
No light remains in the box of Pandora, but only a hopeless plead
We could've been united as one, for humanity was your creed
But now, billions of people must bleed

I am Apollyon
I am disaster, harbinger of demise
I bring down the heavens and let Hades rise
I am the end of the macrocosm, the silencer of cries
I am the finale, so let that be known as everything dies



Closed

by Charlie McFlea

Closed.

I didn't even know.

The place

Where my day and nightmares

Will always smolder

And thrive in its shadows.

The place

That occasionally fills my lungs with smoke

Or at least

Catches my breath

As unexpectedly as its first

Grip around my throat.

It will always be

Grounded by drunks

Drenched in crackheads

Weeping live music

And topped with my family

Garnished by my heroin

Unbeknownst to them.

Flitting morning flashes

Of fire and lights

If I could remember, I'm sure

I was there.

Daytime, words said

Eyes wide, breath held

If I could remember, I'm sure

I was there.

But now

I end up here. *Closed.*

Standing

Staring

Holding my camera

Thinking

About haircuts.



Image by Charlie McFlea

The Hardest Place to Leave

by Amy Pugh

I look at you and feel my body slowly starting to relax, your messy sheets inviting me in to drown, never to surface again. I stumble as I make my way to you, each step heavier than the last. Once I reach you, I sit on the edge, taking deep breaths to prepare myself for the steadily rising wave of comfort to drag me down. Holding my breath, I slowly recline, wrapping myself in sheets and blankets as I start to drift. My head hits the pillow, and everything disappears. I feel weightless, floating through an ocean with the most serene warmth, simultaneously anchored by the distant thought of how fleeting this moment truly is.

I exhale, burrowing my head deeper into the pillows. They whisper to me, “The day’s over, relax, just let go.” I instantly release all my worries and let my mind wander. I go over everything, what I did and didn’t get to do that day, and start creating a small list of things to do for the next day, calming myself in the process. Slowly, I progress to setting bigger goals for further in the future as I get sleepier and my limbs get heavier. Before I know it, I’m asleep, coasting through a multitude of random scenarios, each one more bizarre than the last. The dream moves rapidly, yet leisurely, in a dizzying fashion; each scenario transitions so smoothly into the next, I can’t keep up. It goes on for so long, it feels like an eternity, like it’ll never end, and I hope it doesn’t. I hope I never get to leave the intoxicating landscape hand-crafted by my bed and mind.

Then it all goes dark, and there’s nothing. No new scenario, no lightheadedness from the ever-shifting tempo of time. My head’s completely blank, and I bask in it. Bask in the sudden warmth closing in on me. It rises up and swarms me, charging my mind and body like a battery. I relish the calming power up, this is my favorite part about you. The energy boost you give me, creating a new person out of the drained shell from yesterday, recycling me. The way you make me feel like I can leave and be perfectly fine on my own. I cherish this moment so much that I almost miss what it means.

I’ll be waking up soon. Once I realize this, everything shifts. The warmth dulls, and I start to get uneasy. I can feel myself slowly regaining consciousness, my limbs twitching back to life. I fight it, stilling myself to keep from moving. It doesn’t work, and I start to dig deeper into the bed, refusing to accept that I have to wake up, but it’s already too late.

My alarm goes off. I don’t move. I let it ring, the bright melodic sound of my ringtone filling my room. I try to let the sound lull me to sleep, but I remember my parents hate when I leave my alarm going since it wakes them up too. I open my eyes, trying to muster enough strength to roll over and turn off the alarm. I turn it off and lie there, staring at the pillows and stuffed animals splayed around me. I take a deep breath, closing my eyes, trying to recall all my dreams from the night before. I exhale when my mind comes up empty, opening my eyes.

I look around the room and remember that I have to get up. Remember that I have to do the one thing I hate most, leave you. The safest place I’ve ever known, my source of comfort. You provide so much warmth and security in these fleeting moments. This is what makes leaving you worth the struggle, since it means I get to come back to you, the hardest place I’ll ever have to leave.

The Second

by Brian Garrison

For the second is elated by a prospect —
That all is harmonized and tranquil.
Completely devoid of pain and suffering,
The second moves through the gathering crowd.
Eyes now meet with the meekest of gavels.

Hands reached out: folded over and around.
The second embraces an interlacing silence.
Like a furrow of dreams seeded by unifying tears,
A beauty is kindled like never before,
And a love never to be discovered again.

In the second, a million-year debt is atoned.
Sorry fills the winds with heads bowed,
And a ratification cuts through the trees, mountains, oceans, and deserts:
The next million years must be swaddled and adorned —
For the second passes with our new prospect in hand.



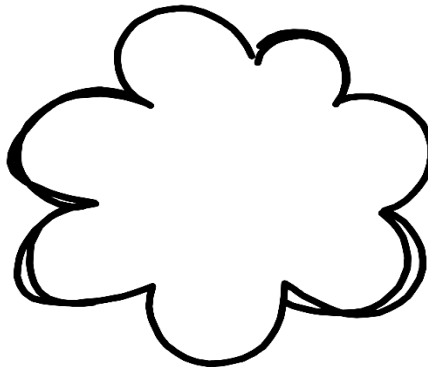
Goodbye Lullaby

by Bella K

Couldn't say the word because I knew it was goodbye
The meaning of any word can change over time
April hasn't felt the same since up above shined
Now the house I grew up in is swallowed up in vines

The hardest thing to comprehend is your version of me
The person that you left and the one that you'll never see
Maybe I should be glad that you finally got free
But the selfish part of myself will always disagree

Generous and selfless is the greatest legacy
I think about it all the time and what that really means
Because every day I forget I'm no longer 17
The older you are the harder everyone is to please



A Laugh Engraved in the Heart

by Minerva Labbad

It was another evening with the electricity gone again, the only light in the room was the one coming from the gas mantle lantern, fading little by little, as if the sun was setting inside the living room. All of us were scattered around the room; my mom, my aunt, and I were on a sofa, my grandma lying down on the other, and Uncle Wesam, who was like my father, sitting on the mattress on the floor, leaning on the pillows next to him. Merely seeing him there every day made my world so safe.

Everyone was sometimes talking, and sometimes the only sound you could hear was the clock ticking; while the 11-year-old me was staring at the white, pale wall as if it was some kind of artwork.

"What's wrong, Mony?" my mom asked when she noticed my expressionless face.

"I'm bored," I said with a heavy sigh.

"It's ok, we all are. Hang on a little, the electricity should be back in an hour or so."

I sighed again, then I heard my uncle's voice, his thick yet so warm voice with that little tone of sarcasm, "Do you want to play a game?"

A spark of light jumped out of my eyes, as if I had just found a treasure. I knew that that phrase meant it was time to have fun, and he knew it was time to tease me, and we'd all laugh.

"Alright, let's have a bet," he said with a challenging smile on his face.

He brought his lighter and placed it on the floor; he knelt a little away from it, put his hands behind him, and leaning forward, he touched it with his nose. He made it look so easy, like he wasn't even trying.

"Ok, Mony, your turn. I bet you do the same without losing your balance."

"Easy," I say with a confident look. He did it so easily, why would I not?

I followed his exact steps, and as I leaned forward, I started tilting, and then "Bam," my head met the hard floor; it felt like my brain went on vibration mode. Everyone burst out laughing, including me, laughing tears started running from my eyes. I don't know how he would do that, but he was the only one who would manage to make me laugh so much; otherwise, who laughs after hitting their head like that?

"Alright, kid, go bring papers and pencils," he said while still laughing at my fall.

I didn't have to ask him why; I knew it was to either play Scattergories or Connect the Dots.

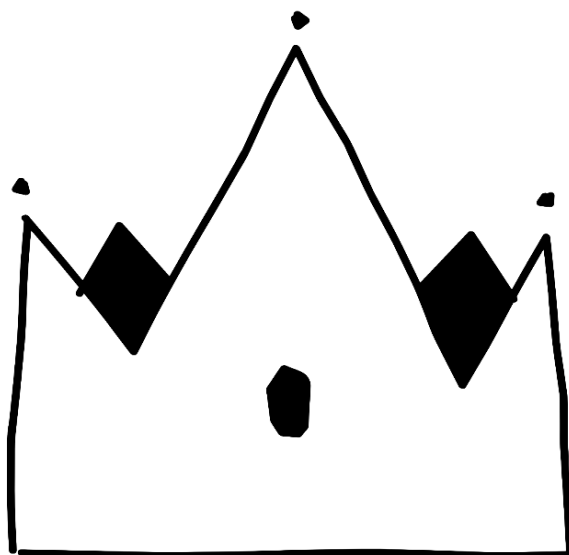
I rushed and brought them, we decided it's Scattergories this time. Each of us drew our charts and named them: letter, name, animal, plant, thing, country, and the total. I got to pick the first letter, and we started.

"STOP," I shouted with an evil laugh because I finished writing first. Little did I know back then that he had already finished writing but intentionally left a column empty so I'd get to be the winner. We spent the evening like that, at one moment we're both stuck at that one letter no one knows a plant that starts with it, and at the other, I'm trying to read my grandma's lips to know what's the answer she's secretly giving me.

Then the electricity came back, the "one hour or so" that usually seems like a month for me was

gone in the blink of an eye. We calculated our score, and yeah, as always, he's the winner, despite all the help I got from him and grandma. But I didn't care, because spending time with him was never boring; it only brought fun and joy.

Thinking back on these days, I wish I had spent even more time with him. Just like I didn't know he was helping me win in the game against him, little did I know that in a couple of months, I would miss those days forever. Little did I know that I'd never see him sitting on that mattress again, and that the only time I'll be able to see him again is when he visits me in my dreams.



Running After the Skyline

by Amanda Frescoln

Coming home after the day, staring out the window
Minutes and seconds go by, moments I can never get back
Slowly and slowly getting out of my reach, never seen again
The clouds cover the horizon, blocking the show
I have things to do, but don't have the energy to get through
Shoved away onto a stack, another thing out of my reach

I used to fantasize of days like this, having the world at my fingertips
But it's not everything I ever thought it would be like
On most days, it's worse than how it used to be
It wasn't even bad back then, I just wanted something new
Now I'm stuck dreaming about the past, it's funny how the tables have turned

Sometimes I wonder if I ran far enough, I could go back in time
Running until the clouds are no longer in view
Running until I can't even feel how things are now
Only stopping when things are how they used to be
But it's unrealistic, and I know that, but there's no pain in hoping
But you know what they say, hope breeds eternal misery

Tripping and falling down so hard, everything turns different
I get back up and feel the way I used to, and everything is fine
Until my eyes open and I wake up in the same place
Where nothing has changed, the same way I left it
But things aren't even bad, I just like to reminisce

No matter how sad it can make me, it's a nice way to remind myself
Of the different person I used to be, the different view I used to see
I can only look back and thank my old self for leading me into this direction
No matter how much I might hate it some days
I wouldn't change it for another life because it's not fair to the old me

The me who worked hard to get to where she is
The me who has fought for what she wants in life
Trying to always do the best she can, and I thank her for that every day
But for my sake, I'll keep chasing after the old times.

Passing Away to Heaven

by Munevver Elif Isman

This little girl always got excited for Sundays
climbing down the building's stairs.
She moved so fast as if the floor
was greased in oil, her little body sliding down the steps.
Her joy was so much—
that it reveled within cheerful lyrics
streaming out of her humming lips.
Happiness grew inside her so much that
it overflowed with her favorite spring song: *kis bitiyor artik bahar gelecek*
“Winter is done, spring has come.”
Song and laughter echoed through the pine hills,
mommy's head peaked out from the car window,
inhaling the fainting fragrance of blossoms
and freshly growing oregano herbs
by the hillsides.
The girl said, “I will pick spring flowers for you and grandma, mommy!”
The old lady was watering her bright geraniums and white petunias.
“Babanne! We are going to a beach house picnic!”
The girl found grandma on the balcony, a gentle breeze
fluttering her white head scarf away.
The air carried a mild Mediterranean scent, smelling of salty seaweed.
At this peaceful home, Granny opened her arms wide to welcome her beloved
granddaughter with a tight comforting embrace.
This abode would be little Elif's safe haven for years to come...
until a day when she would learn the news that would turn the taste
of granny's baklava into a bitter Turkish coffee—of learning the news
of Grandma's passing away to Heaven.

Pomegranate

by Maliha Ali

You cut me open, rip through my flesh, my remains staining you
Marks of what was left of me fade
You tore through my thick and thin
But for what? Just for a taste?
To leave what's left of me in the trash, tossed and used as plastic
My blood lingers, scenting the air, staining deeper than the blade
But it's okay, at least you got a taste
Some think if I'm handled right, I'll pour freely
But they don't see the scars left on the knife and your hands
Splatters on the cutting board, my exposed pieces—
Fragments of what I was
Discarded, forgotten, forever wounded because of you
They tell a story, left in my stains, marks that won't wash nor fade
An imprint—A memory of each slice and tear



Image by Maliha Ali

Saving for a Rainy Day

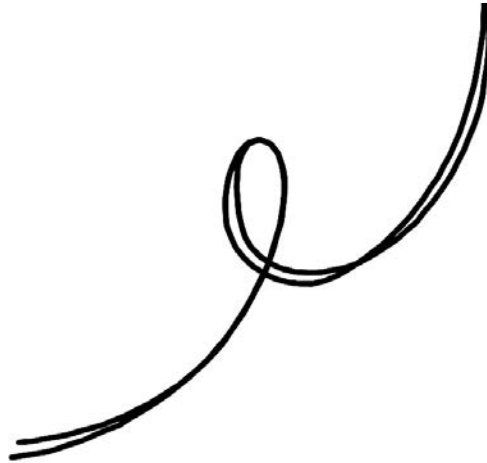
by Tabitha Shatney

I'm saving for a rainy day
When mud and wet and sky of gray
Take all my hopes and dreams away
Of going out today

I'm planting for a sunny day
The sun will scare the clouds away
Dear seeds, come up without delay
Your blooms I shall display

But rain or shine—it matters not
In both of them, I'll find my spot
In puddles, I might splash and play
With sun I'll just enjoy the day

I'm saving for a rainy day
Or for the sunny—either way



Youth Is Like a Sunset

by Bridget M McCann

I got bored and drove four hours
Just to see the ocean
The sand was cold underneath my feet
And the water was freezing
Early March, the boardwalk almost empty
Dulled by its off-season.

And the beach itself was different
So much smaller it looked
Without a sea of umbrellas
And people everywhere
Just some surfers in the gentle waves
Making what they can of it
The moon hung proudly in the sky, full
The queen of the tides
I guess she doesn't like to pull
As hard in evening-time.

As I walked closer to the ocean
The sand began to change
The way it always does
When you get closer to the waves
Softer underneath my feet,
But then I paused in shock
The sand became a little cliff
A dent, wouldn't you know!
Where when the tide will lengthen
It becomes an undertow.

I walked until I found a spot
Where crossing wasn't so difficult
I still wondered if I would fall
And gratefully, I stayed upright
The water shocked my whole body

Though it only touched my feet
My only regret is not letting it
Touch every part of me.

But I had no towel—
Actually, I brought not much of anything
I even took a longer route
So I didn't have to pay the toll
I went into town
At 5:30
The coffee shop closed at 6
Turns out they charge summer prices
No matter the time of year
At least I made it in before they closed
But the coffee was not as sweet as I remembered
And the girl behind the counter looked like she
wanted to be somewhere else
I know that feeling well
But I wanted to tell her
I came from far away!
Just to get a coffee
And watch the sunset
You could do that every day.
I put a dollar of coins in the tip jar
And then went on my way.
Parked right next to the boardwalk ramp
And didn't give a damn about the meter
Time is running out!
I'm just in time to see the sun before it's gone.
This is the show I was waiting for!
What a heavenly song
The ocean sings
As it breaks itself over and over again
On the shore.

I was scared to be alone
Should I pretend I walk here all the time?
I held my shoes in my left hand
My coffee in my right
I kept my distance from the strangers
The surfers, the little kids playing
While their parents sat on the sand
Watching the same thing I came here to see.

Do the seagulls starve to death
When no tourists come around?
Or are they better off
When no tasty scraps abound?

The colors of the sky were just as I wanted them
to be
Muted pink and yellow
The moon as pure as snow
The sand was gray in looming twilight
Beautifully slow.
I stared out at the infinite horizon
Where does it go?

Daylight fading fast now
I have no choice but to leave soon.
I return to the boardwalk
The ocean is still pulling me in.
The sky has turned to a deep blue
Dark and sad, telling me
Night is coming.

So I stay and watch it longer
This time from a bench
It's not the same angle
I sort of have to crane my head
My ears are still just as caressed
By the wooshhhh, shhh, shhh...

But as I watched the waves
I heard the clinking of coins
I thought, that's a shame
I want to hear the ocean
Not a clamoring arcade
The sound of what's manmade
From a pizza shop
Bragging to be open year-round
And I even hear the yelling
Of men
In a nearby park
Competing with each other
In the almost-dark
Shut up, I want to say
Can't you hear it?
I could
Even when
I was far,
I sensed it.

And even now I think about
How the ocean is still moving
Without me there.
The waves are crashing
With no one watching
Moving
A concert with no one attending
Eerily consistent, never changing
It gives me chills to think about it.

What is it saying?
I am mine, it seems to say
I belong to me
But I will bring you pieces of my beauty
And leave them in shattered shells
Underneath your feet
So you can pick me up
And look at me
Although you will never swim in my deep, deep,
deep.

You will still fall in love
With the very beginning.

Once I dreamed that they blew up the moon
And it fell out of the sky
I would rather die
Than live in a world with no tides
If the ocean stopped singing,
So would I.

It's time to go,
I can't wait any longer.
The day has no chance now,
The dark is getting stronger.
I walk alone back to my car,
Or so I think.

Two lovers in the street
They don't notice me
I have to drag my feet
I feel guilty for intruding.
He looks back
Am I sneaking up on them?
He moves her away to walk
In the middle of the road.
Good, I think
I'm glad he knows.
And smile when he holds her close.

Now it's just me
Getting into my car
Time to drive back home
In the dark.
The day has died
Never to return again
Old men on bikes
Returning to their sleeping beds.

The sunrise tomorrow
Will be a newborn child
That by high noon
Will be restless, stubborn, and wild
And by mid-afternoon
Will have not tamed at all
Just as reckless,
Grown tall.
Then by dinner time
Awash in an evening glow
The child longs for night.
For the blanket of maturity
With gorgeous stars in sight
But what comes in between?
Don't you know it?
Can't you see?
That the fleeting light of day
Is as precious as can be?
Oh, regret and pain to know
They ask the night To hurry on!
Youth is like a sunset
Only missed
When it is gone.

I've Lost My Mind

by Rhiannon Woodward

My mind's eye resides halfway between the mist and the trees
I look down upon myself
Reaching to rest a hand on my own shoulder
I'm smaller than I once was
Not younger, just weaker
The dew in the air fills my lungs
and one last time, I trace the veins on my legs
They trail up and down like roots
I wonder how long ago it was
that the sun on my back made my heart buzz warmly
Rather than scorch my bones from the inside out
When things used to feel right and nice
before everything in me turned to hate
My mind left long ago
She likes it in the trees, more than she ever did in me.





Nostalgia

by Thurston Moon

Jack and Jill (from on the hill) came down into the town
to visit Jenny, John, and James and take a walk around.
They looked into the shops as they walked along the streets.
A woman that they passed gave them candy as a treat.
“It sure is nice outside today,” said Jack to Jill and John.
James said, “Let’s go climb that tree that sits in Jenny’s lawn.”
They climbed the tree just as they’d climbed a hundred times before,
and then off to the beach, where they walked and played along the shore.
They sat along the water and waited to watch the sun set.
This paradise was all they knew, so they didn’t try to not forget.

Now they are all grown, and their quintet is down to four.
Jack was killed while fighting in some foreign country’s war.
Jill now teaches children not too different from herself.
James became a stockbroker up to his thinning hair in wealth.
Jenny fell in love with John, and then became a nurse.
John married Jenny, brought a boat, and named it after her.

Jenny now sails upon the water that she once sat beside
with a purple heart painted on her aft for her friend,
Jack, who died.

Absence

by Bethany Eva

When someone you love is an addict, you have a front row seat to watch the entire foundation of who that person is being dismantled, brick by brick. Addiction roars into the life of the user, breaking windows, peeling wallpaper, and flipping tables. The most cherished pieces of them get buried beneath ego, manipulation tactics, aggression, and deceit. My brother has been addicted to Methamphetamine for five years now. Before his descent into addiction, he was my best friend. The person I trusted most in the world. The person I looked to when I was afraid. He was boisterous, accepting, generous, and full of life. He loved to share pieces of himself with those around him, from small things like running to the kitchen to make me a breakfast sandwich, so I would agree to watch anime with him, to sleeping outside with one of our friends because that friend was kicked out of his parents house and my brother wouldn't let them be alone.

The brother I have now is anything but those things. Most days, I find myself wondering, how am I supposed to keep pushing through this? It's something that millions of people ask every day, millions of people who are in situations exactly like mine. The only answer I have ever found to this is to take the good moments when they come. Take them, savor them, then tuck them away deep inside where they are safe. Somewhere, even he can't corrupt them.

One of these moments happened only two months ago... It was Christmas Eve. We had given him an ultimatum the week prior: stay clean for a week, drug test now, and drug test the day of, and you can come home for the holiday. We were all shocked when, for the first time ever, he was able to do it. While we were all still prepared for the almost inevitable dropping of the other shoe once all the Christmas cheer and extended time with family came to an end, we knew that this was something we needed to take advantage of. Who knows if we will get another opportunity like this. Our older sister and her boyfriend, who had flown in from California together, my boyfriend, and my brother were all sitting around in my living room playing Cards Against Humanity. For the first time in years, we were all together in the same room and were able to just enjoy each other's company. I was able to see my brother's smile, though chipped and worn and missing the sparkle it once had, and I was able to hear his laugh. For three days, I had my brother back. We were able to talk about music, anime, books, my paintings, my writing, him wanting to get back into guitar, everything. We talked about the future. Then, those three days came to an end, and he left.

In the days since, we haven't spoken. The brother I got a glimpse of disappeared a few days after he left our house. I hope I will get to see him again someday. Until then, I will spend my time making his signature breakfast sandwiches, listening to our favorite songs, and doing my best to watch anime without feeling his absence beside me. It's hard to love him, it's harder to miss him, but I will keep going and keep hoping.

"The constellation of these impulses that we call love feels like a miracle. The miracles do not cancel out evil, but I accept evil in order to participate in the miraculous."

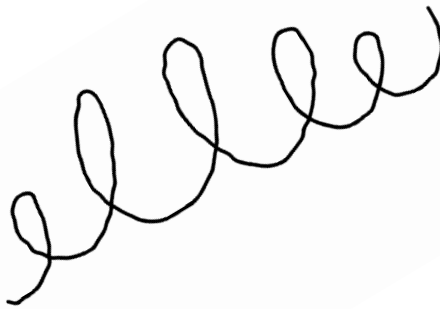
—David Sheff, author of *Beautiful Boy: A Father's Journey Through His Son's Addiction*

How Terrible!

By Kimi Kohler

How terrible that would have been!
If I had finally become perfect,
And gotten you to love me.

I would have never found out!
How it feels to have someone love me,
With all my imperfections, still here with me.



Mirror Talks (to Me, Myself and I)

by N. E. Knight

Jumping over obstacles, climbing mountains, swimming over waves, and pushing through shields of doubt. Not only are we in a fight not with the masses, our foes, the devil, but this fight is within ourselves. Are we going to succumb to the outliers that are already seemingly opposed to our motion to move forward and onward? Are we going to raise our flag in submission to the antithesis of our need to succeed? On the contrary, we are not conquerors but MORE than conquerors. Look within yourself—it's okay to talk back. The Rage that I have is the realization that the Rage to have fallen I will use to push me up. The Rage that I have to sigh in agony propels me to return again. Yes, I've fallen, but I can get up. I must muster the will to do it. The Rage will not be rejected, but it is the zest and spark that I need; it is the inner push that I will use to propel myself to the winning side. It has been stated, "One falls seven times but gets up eight." The conversation to myself continues, "You will succeed, you shall prevail, the Rage within you is the drive that speaks with a resounding cry, *You can* and *You Shall*. . . I can and I shall." Success is not evident by merely succeeding, but a veil of strength emerges about the inner soul and speaks ever so softly to remind oneself that they are fearfully and wonderfully made.

The Rage is a reminder that You are NOT aveRAGE, but within you is the result of couRAGE. The only Rage you need is the Rage to succeed, the reminder that within you lies the seed of success that will fuel you until the next stop on your journey. The ability and sticktoitiveness to exceed even your most minute victory is still a victory. And when you reach this momentous occasion, remember the jump, the climb, the swim, and the push. Discern what is really happening to you because what you have is the Rage to Continue and the Courage to Succeed!

letter 2 u: newer balance

by Leiffa Padmore

i'm well acquainted with this feeling
i've been here before
it felt almost as if it would never return
how ironic it is to dread pleasure...
from the death of one's life
stems the rebirth of another
stripping away what once was...
a necessary cleanse.
For without loss, no gain can be received...

i received you.

governing my life, fear latches on tight
afraid to exhale
afraid to venture into the unknown,
afraid of anything new.
in a different life, i've been here before...

a veil that i desire to remain,
afraid you would loathe what resides
underneath...
a veil that you long to be rid of,
this is the only thing that stands between us...
what others found disposable,
you chose to cherish.
be careful, my heart is fragile.
a replica of shattered glass, proceed with caution.

poetic, yet this isn't a poem
this is my letter 2 u.
you make me hopeful,
hopeful of what could be...
i tell you that you scare me,
yet with you i'm unafraid, unashamed
you challenge me
to let go of my past life,
discard any hurt that lingers on.
to be with you is to feel bliss.

i've been here before.
a feeling so familiar, yet foreign

a newer balance.

To Dream

by Cindy Ruth

To dream is to be brave, to stand up after every fall, to be heard, and to never throw away a failure or a win.

To dream can stop oppression and tyranny.

To dream doesn't back down in the face of adversity.

To dream is a mantra of all great men and women who came before us.

Without dreams, our will is diminished, our voices, unheard, and our lives stagnate without a future.

To dream brings hope while never forgetting our past mistakes and promises a better future.





Butterfly Weed

by Elias Burrell

If I promise to stay silent, will you let me live?
Do I have to ask more? Do I have to plead?
My stem, it aches. My stigma, it bleeds.
My petals float away like autumn leaves.

My last petal boasts a shimmering gold,
So I won't give in. No, I won't fold.
But you should. Is this game not old?
This flower isn't weak, no, I'm quite bold.

I'll say it again. Let. Me. Go.
Let me be free to fly,
Don't tell me no.
I'm older now, no longer a delicate seed.
So just let go,
Of your precious butterfly weed.

It Just Is

by Adrian Bruce

It looms giant, unmoving, uncaring.
It just is.

It cannot be controlled.
It just is.

It cannot be contained.
It just is.

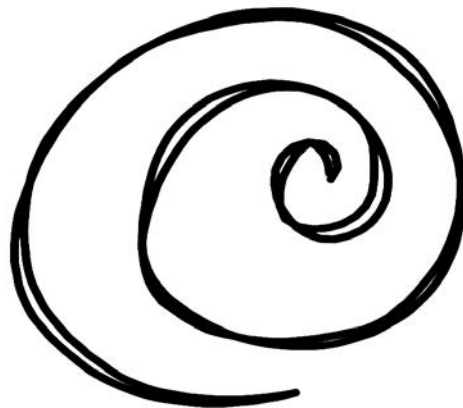
It cannot be outrun.
It just is.

It cannot be outsmarted.
It just is.

It has no will.
It just is.

It holds no malice.
It just is.

All you can do is accept it.
It just is.



Ticks and Beeps

by Khuzema Hussain

There is a wall clock in my home. It hangs on the north wall exactly on top of the window overlooking the road outside. It used to be beige when it was installed over fifteen years ago. Now it has accumulated dust and memories that have become a part of it as much as the hands and numbers. I remember when Abba brought it home. He stumbled on top of the one-leg-short stool with a hand on my shoulder for support as he steadied himself. He removed the old clock and gently placed the new on the nail that had lost its original color to rust three clocks ago. He climbed down, ruffled my hair, and, crouching down to face my little sister, said, "Now wait and watch."

The time was 2:55pm. I sat there with my sister and five cousins with our hands cupping our chins and eyes locked at this clock. As the minute hand moved to twelve, it began singing. It played a tune that we would soon learn to hum along with the other eleven melodies that the clock would play every hour. We gasped in unison and clapped at the wonder. The clock's sound would wake us up, signify our play time, homework time, sleep time. It dictated our lives to us, one note at a time.

The clock showed 8:25pm, about eleven years since that installation. Ammi's phone rang. It was Abba. As she picked it up, I could hear faint sirens from the other side. A few seconds in, and her face drained; her eyes widened as instantly as the scream she let out. Her trembling hands had just enough strength to pass the phone to me. Every second, it felt as if the room was shrinking, the air being pulled out, the walls closing in with every tick of the clock.

"Bhaiyya, get to the district hospital as soon as you can," said the voice from the other end.

"But, what's wrong? Tell me." My mind racing through every grave possibility.

I heard more commotion at the other end, but he went silent for a second, as if to contemplate how to phrase what he was about to say.

"We found this phone with a man lying on the side of the road and a scooter a little far away. We suspect it is a hit-and-run. I can't tell you much right now, just get here as soon as possible."

Everything was at a standstill, the fan stopped, the voice from the TV fizzled down, every car and bike on the road had decided to stop blaring their horn at that instant; the rain that had been tormenting us the entire day was now not even an inconvenience. All I could hear was the second hand of the clock moving, continuing its mechanical journey oblivious to the turn now unraveling in our lives.

I called my uncles and recounted to them the situation as best as I could, and ran to the neighbor, Abba's closest friend. He called other members of the neighborhood, and soon I was standing next to a car ready to take me, Ammi, and uncle to the hospital. To this day, I do not know who arranged the car; nor anyone else who kept thrusting money into my hand and pockets as I sat in the car. I have little recollection of the journey; all I remember is the wind and rain thrashing on the windows and Ammi's recital of the Qur'an and chanting of her rosary.

When we got to the hospital, the man from the call hurried towards us and, without a word, led us to the general E.R. My feet felt heavier with every step I took towards him. I wanted to run, but something held me back, as if reaching him would make this real. My heart pounded louder than the beeps and blips of the machines, each one pulling me further into this nightmare.

The others moved back when they saw us approaching. There he was. The gauze wrapped around his skull, deep brown spots staining through, drew my breath away. His face looked sullen, almost in introspection, but scratched and bruised. I reached for his hand—his fingers were cold beneath the bandages. My eyes moved to the tattered shirt we had given him last Father's Day, now soaked with blood. Each detail hit like a wave, pulling me under again and again.

From the corner of my eye, I saw Ammi crumble to the floor, her knees giving way as if the weight of it all was too much. The room was filled with muffled sounds of people talking, wondering, pitying our family, but Ammi's cry cut through the chaos, sharp and raw. The room smelled of antiseptic and something metallic, like the air itself had turned sharp. Every machine in the room beeped in disjointed rhythm. The cold fluorescent light made everything seem harsher, too bright for the grief that filled the space. I ran my fingers through his beard, feeling the knots of blood that clung to his salt-and-pepper strands. I whispered "Abba," not expecting a response but needing to hear it. A hand landed on my shoulder, firm but gentle. "The doctor wants to talk to you," the policeman said softly, as if afraid to shatter the fragile moment.

"He has three fractures in his skull," the doctor said, his voice steady but distant. He stood in front of a flickering lightbox, pointing to a CT scan. The bulb above it buzzed faintly, casting a weak glow on the images of my father's brain.

He kept talking—mentioning more terms, words I used to know but now slipped past me like background noise. One word: "ventilator," cut through the haze, sharp and cold. "We need to do it sooner rather than later," the doctor added, turning briefly to glance at me.

My fingers throbbed, and I realized I had been gripping the edge of the chair. I forced myself to let go, feeling the ache settle into my palms. My uncle leaned forward and continued the conversation with the doctor. I didn't catch much of what they were saying—just fragments, words like "pressure," "risk," and "stabilize." They all floated around me, distant and heavy, like everything else in the room.

My uncle turned to me as we walked back to Abba. "Get some rest," he said solemnly. "It's going to be a long night."

In those moments, I couldn't stop wondering what Abba would do if he were me. What would he say? How would he carry us through this? The question gnawed at me, relentless and unanswerable. He had always been the anchor in our family, the one who could take the chaos of life and distill it into calm, deliberate action. Even in the face of uncertainty, Abba had a way of finding clarity. It wasn't just his words—it was his presence, steady and unshakable, like the earth beneath our feet. I thought back to a story that was practically legend in our family—one that Ammi loved to recount, especially when praising Abba's strength. Years ago, my grandmother had fallen critically ill. It was the kind of situation that tested every nerve and demanded immediate action. I was too young to remember much, but the story had been etched into our family's collective memory.

She had collapsed at home, her breathing shallow and erratic, her frail body unable to endure the toll of her illness any longer. Abba hadn't hesitated for a second. He scooped her up in his arms—despite her protests that she didn't want to trouble him—and carried her to the car himself. My uncles recalled how he barked instructions with precision, organizing everything from securing the oxygen tank to calling ahead to the hospital to ensure there would be a doctor waiting when they arrived. The drive to the hospital was harrowing; the roads were packed, and time seemed to be slipping through their fingers. But Abba was resolute. Where others would have panicked, he was calm but firm. He honked, pleaded, and navigated through impossible traffic jams as if the universe itself would bend to his will. And when they reached the hospital, he didn't stop to catch his breath. While the doctors worked, he was on the phone with relatives, ensuring that everyone was updated and that any additional resources were secured.

Later, as she stabilized and the immediate crisis passed, he sat beside her, holding her hand and reassuring her in a way only he could. "Everything's fine, Ammi," he had said. "You're going to be okay. Just leave the worrying to me." And she had believed him, because his presence was enough to make anyone believe that everything would somehow turn out all right. That was who Abba was—his decisiveness wasn't just practical; it was a kind of love, a testament to how deeply he cared for the people in his life.

Now, here I was, faced with a similar situation, and I felt like a pale imitation of the man who had carried our family through so much. My grandmother had made it through that crisis because of him, and I couldn't help but wonder if she would've survived if someone like me had been in his place. I felt paralyzed by the enormity of the choices in front of me, torn between the fear of making the wrong decision and the crushing guilt of doing nothing. Abba wouldn't have let fear stop him. He would've acted swiftly, and decisively, because he understood something I was only just beginning to grasp, that sometimes, there are no perfect answers—only the courage to do what feels right in the moment.

The next morning, the doctor summoned us to the ward. His voice was composed, yet heavy with an unspoken finality; "We've done all we can with what we have here," he said, his words deliberate and measured. "If you want better care, you should consider transferring him to a larger facility." I nodded, but my eyes were fixed on Abba, lying there, looking smaller than I'd ever seen him. His face was cleaner now, the gauze freshly replaced, but scrapes and bruises peeked through, reminders of how far we'd come in just 24 hours. The room carried a faint, medicinal tang of iodine, clinging to the air as if it were woven into the walls. My little sister stood beside me, her fingers clutching mine tightly, her grip a quiet plea for strength. Ammi was rooted by his side, as immovable as a mountain. She whispered into his ear between sobs, her voice trembling with prayers and memories only they shared.

The new hospital felt like an entirely different world. Towering white walls, polished floors that reflected every harsh fluorescent light, and a relentless buzz of activity. They wheeled Abba in, a blur of white coats and murmured questions. "How long has he been on the ventilator?" one doctor asked, scribbling furiously on a clipboard. Another frowned at the CT scans we had brought. "This shouldn't have been delayed. These clots could've been prevented if surgery had been done sooner." Their words came like daggers, sharp and unrelenting. I felt my chest tighten with guilt and frustration. Every decision we made felt wrong under their scrutiny.

They didn't see the countless nights we had spent fretting, the desperation in our every move. To them, we were just another case. To us, he was everything.

Days turned into weeks, and the city hospital became our second home. Despite their efforts, his condition stagnated. They prescribed stronger medications, ran more tests, and shifted blame to the earlier treatments. Every doctor seemed to have a different opinion, but none had a solution. In a final attempt, we transferred him again to a specialized neuro-center. This new hospital was quieter, almost eerily so. People began to visit, friends, neighbors, even distant acquaintances. They would stand at his bedside and recount stories of his kindness, his integrity, his unshakable faith. "He's the kind of man who'd give his last rupee to help someone," one visitor said, their voice breaking.

Through all of this, my mind became a storm of memories and emotions. I thought of the time Abba taught me to ride a bicycle. I was eight, and impatient as ever. "Pedal, pedal, don't look back!" he shouted, his laughter echoing down the empty street. I fell, scraped my knees, and cried. But he knelt beside me, brushing the gravel off my legs. "You'll never learn if you're afraid to fall," he said, smiling. That lesson stayed with me, but now, I felt like I was falling endlessly, unable to get back up.

After two months of shuffling between hospitals, we were told there was nothing more they could do. The words were clinical, detached, but they shattered us all the same. "We recommend home care," the doctor said, his gaze steady but void of the empathy we so desperately needed.

Back home, our lives adjusted to a new rhythm. I learned to feed him through the catheter, carefully measuring each liquid meal, and waking every two hours to clean him. My sleep dwindled to three hours a night, the rest filled with the beeps of the machines we'd brought home, the soft rustle of Ammi's prayers, and the ever-present tick of the wall clock. My sister would sit beside him, reading aloud his favorite verses from the Qur'an, her voice steady despite the tears glistening in her eyes.

One night, as I sat by his bedside, I thought about infinity. The concept had always fascinated me, but it wasn't until a recent math class that the idea truly clicked. Our teacher had been explaining Cantor's proof, how some infinities are larger than others. At first, it sounded absurd—how could something infinite be bigger than something else that was also infinite? But as the class went on, the logic unraveled itself like a revelation. Cantor showed us that there are infinite whole numbers: 1, 2, 3, and so on. But between 1 and 2, there's also an infinite set of numbers 1.1, 1.11, 1.111—and between 1 and 3, an even larger infinity. It was staggering to think that between just two points on a number line, there were endless possibilities. That day, I had stared at the rows of numbers on the chalkboard, feeling my perspective shift. I realized infinity wasn't just a mathematical abstraction—it was everywhere, hidden in the spaces between moments, people, and choices.

Sitting beside Abba, I realized his life was like that. To the outside world, his years might seem like a single span—a single "infinity" marked by dates on a calendar. But to us, his family, and to everyone he touched, his infinity was far greater. It was a series of endless connections and quiet acts of love, kindness, and wisdom that multiplied with each person he met. Every handshake he offered, every child he taught to ride a bike, every neighbor he helped in their

moment of need—all of it added to his infinity. Even the smallest moments were profound. Like how he always knew when to step into a room with tea for Ammi when she looked stressed. Or the time he stayed up with me the night before my exams, quizzing me on formulas while pretending not to notice my growing frustration. These weren't just isolated memories—they were threads woven into the fabric of a life that reached far beyond its surface.

As I sat there listening to the rhythmic beep of the monitor and the steady tick of the wall clock, it struck me: his infinity wasn't diminishing, even as his body grew weaker. If anything, it was growing. Every visitor who came to see him, every whispered prayer, every tear shed in his honor—all of it became part of the legacy he was leaving behind. Cantor's proof showed that infinities could coexist and interact, each unique and boundless in its own way. Abba's life was like that—a bigger infinity between the finite markers of his years than anyone could truly measure. Even now, confined to this bed, he was still teaching us lessons. Resilience. Love. The immeasurable value of time. He had the ability to make every moment matter, to fill it with something that rippled outward and became something greater.

The thought comforted me. It was as though I could see the patterns forming, like constellations in the night sky. His life wasn't ending—it was continuing in ways we might never fully comprehend. And in that realization, I found a small measure of peace. Even as I held his hand and felt its warmth slipping away, I knew that his infinity was still expanding, touching the edges of our lives and the lives of everyone who knew him.

Weeks passed, and Abba's condition grew worse. His skin became almost translucent, the pallor of his face a haunting canvas of frailty. His breathing, once labored but steady, began to falter, each inhale thinner, each exhale quieter. I could feel the weight of the inevitable pressing down on all of us, though no one dared to say it aloud.

One night, as the world outside our home lay silent, the stillness in his room was shattered. He started vomiting—a violent, guttural sound that shook his fragile body. The room erupted into chaos. Ammi screamed his name, her hands trembling as she tried to steady him. My sister froze in the corner, her hands covering her mouth, tears streaming down her face. I leapt to my feet, grabbing the oxygen mask from the table beside his bed. My hands fumbled as I tried to fit it over his face.

"Hold on, Abba," I whispered, my voice cracking. "Please, just hold on."

But as I reached for the oxygen cylinder to adjust the flow, the strap slipped from my grasp. It hit the floor with a dull clang, rolling out of reach. Panic surged through me, hot and suffocating. I scrambled to retrieve it, but by the time I had the mask secured again, his breathing was slower, his body weaker. The faint rasp of his breath sounded like a whisper fading into the night. I pressed my ear to his chest, desperate to catch the faint rhythm of his heartbeat. For a moment, I thought I heard it—a soft, fluttering beat—but then there was nothing. Just silence. The kind of silence that isn't just an absence of sound, but a void that consumes everything around it.

I knew then, in some deep, unshakable part of me, that he was gone. But I couldn't bring myself to say it. Not to Ammi, whose hands clung to his arm as if willing him to stay. Not to my sister, whose tear-streaked face looked at me with a hope I couldn't bear to extinguish. So, I did the only thing I could think of—I started chest compressions. My hands pressed against his

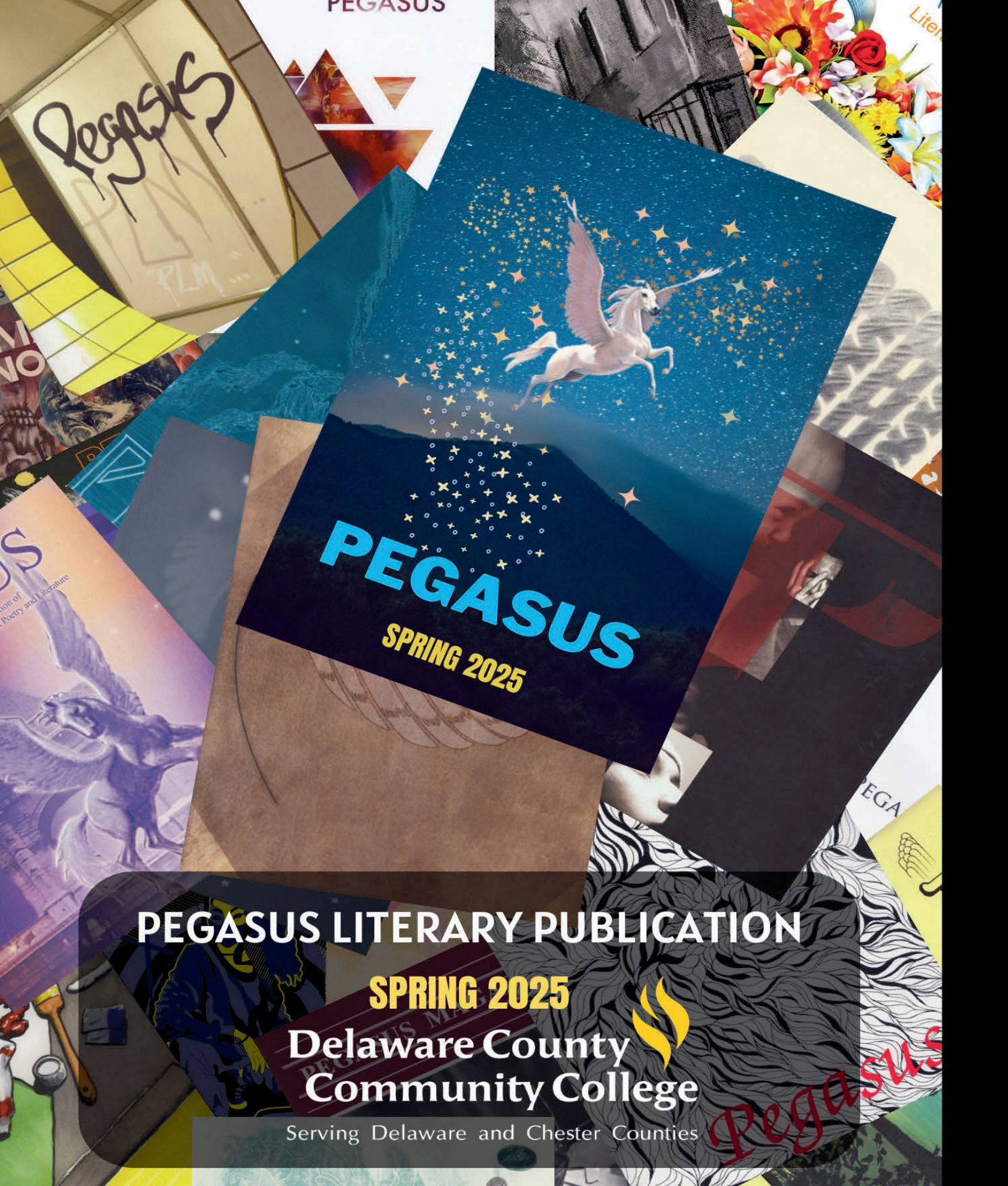
chest, firm and rhythmic, as the tears blurred my vision. “Come on, Abba,” I pleaded, my voice breaking. “Don’t do this. Stay with us. Please.”

I counted under my breath, trying to remember the technique, trying to convince myself it could work. But with each compression, the truth settled deeper into my chest like a stone. His body, once so strong, so full of life, was now unresponsive beneath my hands. The machines in the room began to falter. The steady beeps that had monitored his life for weeks now grew sporadic, faint, and finally stopped altogether. The room was eerily still, save for one sound—the tick of the wall clock. It filled the space, relentless and indifferent, each second dragging me further into the reality I couldn’t yet face.

I don’t know how long I stayed like that, pressing down on his chest, whispering his name. My arms ached, my breath came in shallow gasps, but I couldn’t stop. It felt like stopping would mean accepting, and I wasn’t ready for that. Not yet. Eventually, Ammi’s hand rested on my shoulder, her touch soft but grounding. Her sobs had quieted to a hollow silence, her face a mask of grief. I turned to look at her, and for a moment, neither of us spoke. We didn’t need to. The weight of the moment said everything we couldn’t. I leaned back, my hands trembling as they fell to my sides. The oxygen mask slipped from his face, dangling uselessly. My sister collapsed onto the bed, clutching his hand as if it were the only anchor in a storm. And still, the clock ticked on, a cruel reminder that time didn’t stop, even when our world had.

The room felt colder, emptier, as if the very essence of him had left with that final breath. Yet, in the midst of the heartbreak, a quiet realization settled over me. He had gone in my arms, surrounded by the love that had defined his life. And though I couldn’t bring him back, I would carry him with me—his lessons, his kindness, his infinite love—for the rest of my days.

The clock ticked again, and I sat there, letting its rhythm fill the silence as I tried to come to terms with the void it marked.



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