

Student Life During COVID:

Creative perspectives from those who lived it

Edited by The Community Student Engagement Group at the University of Alberta

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The Community Student Engagement Group at the University of Alberta respectfully acknowledges that we are situated on Treaty 6 territory, traditional lands of First Nations and Métis people.

Dedication

This book is dedicated to all the University of Alberta students of the COVID pandemic for their resilience and perseverance.

I should be searching
for the symphonic formula which fits our time [...]
then I could
return to music and decency
regain a hold of myself
of all the beauty
which has not ceased to exist
despite my oblivion
and my deceptions

Melissa Morelli Lacroix. Excerpt from “Voiles,” from
A Most Beautiful Deception: Poems.

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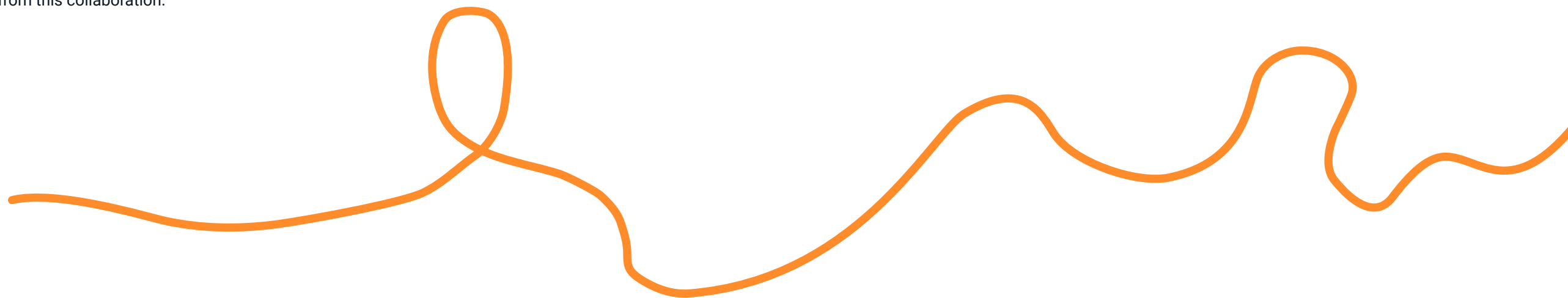
Preface

March 11, 2020: the World Health Organization officially declared the novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19) outbreak a global pandemic. The international community scrambled to adjust to a new mode of living, working, and functioning. The University of Alberta was no different; within days our community had fully transitioned to an online learning environment.

One year later, the COVID pandemic was still in full force, and in interactions with students, library staff witnessed how the pandemic was taking a significant toll on students' mental health. A group of librarians from U of A's Rutherford Library decided something needed to be done. We conceived of a community arts initiative where students could connect with each other in a safe and supportive online environment and creatively explore and express their experiences of being a student at the University of Alberta during the pandemic. With this germ of an idea, we reached out to the Wellness Supports Team to help bring this project to life, and Student Life During COVID emerged from this collaboration.

Students were invited to creatively express themselves in whatever medium they wished and submit their creative works to what would become this publication. We also distributed 25 art kits and invited students to participate in four online workshops in May and June, 2021. The workshops were intended to provide opportunities for students to engage in creative activities with peers, and to offer direct support for maintaining their health in all dimensions of wellness (physical, social, cultural, spiritual, academic, financial, environmental, political, emotional, and mental).

Submissions of creative works were accepted until October, 2021, to coincide with World Mental Health Day events. The creative works published in this volume include drawings, paintings, digital art, collage, poetry, and music, and will serve as a permanent artifact of the experience of student life during the COVID pandemic.



Acknowledgments

This book would never have been realized without help from so many champions and supporters. Thanks first of all to University of Alberta Wellness Supports for believing in this project and providing funding through the Heroes for Health Program. Thank you also to Christine Cabildo, Health Promotions Coordinator, Student Services, for her ongoing guidance.

We would also like to thank the University of Alberta Library Leadership Team for their enthusiastic support for this project, including Dale Askey, Vice-Provost (Library & Museums) and Chief Librarian, and Sharon Murphy, Associate University Librarian.

To all of our library colleagues in Administration, Financial Systems, University of Alberta Press, Digital Initiatives, and Information Services (a special shout out to the Communications and Engagement Committee for getting the word out!): you are too numerous to name, but you know who you are...your help has been invaluable.

To Alysha Ross, student and graphic designer extraordinaire, thank you for joining us in this learning journey, and for sharing your inspiration and talent towards preserving and celebrating the students' creative expressions of their resilience during the COVID pandemic.

And finally, we would like to thank every student at the University of Alberta for their resilience and perseverance. To all the students who requested an art kit, participated in the workshops and/or contributed their works for publication: thank you for your courage and creativity!

The Community Student Engagement Group at the University of Alberta

The Almighty

Ishan.A

Undergraduate Student

Alberta School of Business, Bachelor of Commerce

My creative work is a poem that I wrote in December 2020, just after the completion of my first semester as an undergraduate student at the U of A. I had commenced my studies in September 2020 and had not been able to travel to Canada due to Covid. I wrote this poem just around Christmas when I let all my fears, anxieties and worries related to my dream of traveling to Canada go. I put my faith in Lord to make things work. The poem portrays a sense of calm one might feel after giving their best and leaving the rest into the hands of the almighty.

He who cannot be seen, blesses all unbiasedly
The rich, the poor; the brave, the weak
The prestigious and the homeless on a street.
He brings hope to the bereaved and joy to the grieved
Entangled in anxiety surrounded by fear?
Call upon him and your path shall be cleared
Amidst the darkest nights through the hopeless dawns
Enlighten to his wisdom and carry on
No suffering can outweigh his affection
No evil can rebel his love
No sorrow can weaken his faith
Believe in him and let him answer your prayers
Surrender yourself to him and let your miseries fade away
For he will be there to challenge the storms that may cause you dismay
Who is he?
A messiah or a learned priest?
Is appearance more salient than his presence that we feel?
Perhaps faith and belief are all we need
To acknowledge the almighty who cannot be seen
Just follow into his lead and see your life turn into a magical dream

Faculty of Arts, Department of Modern Languages
and Cultural Studies

In my creative outings, especially during Covid times when all aspects of life blur into one another, I often find myself writing in three languages at the same time. As a result, this poem started out as a single, trilingual poem, which I then turned into a self-translation in Dutch, English and French.

Les yeux me faisant mal, je l'éteins
« Configuration en cours
4% effectués
N'éteignez pas l'ordinateur », je lis
alors que la mise à jour de mon corps, cerveau et de mes émotions
est une fois de plus reportée

5)

Wait

Jordyn Frederick

Undergraduate Student
Augustana Campus, Creativity and Culture

My experience with online classes in the 2020/2021 academic year.
This poem depicts my struggle and frustration.

6)

Sit at my desk
Power up my laptop
Log in to my computer

Okay, good, Zoom is up and running
Now I just have to wait
Here
In this so-called waiting room

I wait
And wait
And wait some more

Finally, the teacher lets us in and—
But no, there's a technical issue
The professor keeps pausing on my screen
As their internet cuts in and out

I stare at my computer in frustration

Now the issues are dealt with
Class starts
...And almost immediately, I'm bored

I try to pay attention
I take notes
Engage in discussion
But still, my mind drifts to everything and anything
That's not related to this class

If only I were in a classroom
Able to look over at my classmates
And have a proper discussion with them

But I'm stuck here, in front of my computer
Staring at the same person for over an hour

The class ends
I don't feel as though I'd just attended one
Not really

For my next class, I log in
Yet again

I wait

Overwhelmed

Andrea Larsen

Undergraduate Student

Faculty of Arts, Department of Art and Design

Medium used: Pastels on pastel paper

I created this self portrait during the summer term of 2021, in my last drawing class. It was my final assignment and we could create what we wanted. The entire class was online. It was every day for 3 hours and was very exhausting. Doing art online and submitting online is very daunting. I also had my kids home for summer break and had just left my husband the day before the class started, we had been together for 20 years.

I was trying to get as many classes done in the summer as I could because I wanted to be there for my kids when they went back to school in the fall. I found that my mind and spirit were very low during this time. It had been the first time in 7 years that I didn't go camping with my kids and left my home of 10 years, where I would spend a lot of time on my back patio in the summer. I was feeling very low and had minimal contact with the outside world. This depicts me with bags under my eyes, my hands, one for my mind and a closed fist for the pain I felt. I was supposed to create beautiful art, so instead I created something to show how I felt. This is a pastel painting on dark grey pastel paper.



Time Ghost

Mari Alice Conrad

Graduate Student

Faculty of Arts, Department of Music



Standing Wave Chamber Ensemble, Vancouver, Canada

Christie Reside: flute; Vern Griffiths: percussion; AK Coope: bass clarinet;
Rebecca Whitling: violin; Allen Stiles: piano; Cristian Markos: cello.

Time Ghost was written in September 2020 for the Standing Wave Ensemble of Vancouver, Canada, and was a way for me to process everything that was going on during the pandemic shutdown. It was inspired by a message shared by Alberta's Chief Medical Officer of Health, Dr. Deena Hinshaw, regarding the covid-19 pandemic:

"...Covid is out there waiting for us to be too tired to wash our hands, too distracted to notice whether we are within two metres of someone else. . ." (cont.)¹

I wanted to capture the invisible "corona-soul" that seemed to embody a disturbing and lurking personality that preyed on human complacency. The restlessness, slippery, ghost-like movement of the melodic lines are paired with mischievous and stalking rhythmic figures exploring time and dynamic extremes that parallel the confusion, loneliness, restlessness, and frustration experienced by those fearfully avoiding its contact. The work is built on a nineteen-note melodic framework to mark the year 2019. The piece captures the invisible soul of the "spirit of the age" or "zeitgeist" (which translates to "Time Ghost") and expresses its voice that continues to haunt an unprecedented time in human history.

¹ Dr. Deena Hinshaw, "Update on Covid-19 – July 27, 2020," YourAlberta, streamed live on July 27, 2020, YouTube video, 00:07:20, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rs7MKCAjcts>.

[Click here to access the score](#)

[Click here to access the performance video and audio](#)

Transcendental Space

Holly Munn

Graduate Student

Faculty of Arts, Department of Media and Technology Studies

Medium used: Digital image of collage in Origami paper and glue

My grandma used to make quilts out of old clothes. She would make blankets that not only kept us warm and safe, but also reminded us of the people and events that connected us. This square is from the dress I wore to your cousin's funeral; this is from your baby jumper; this is the dress your mom wore when she dated your dad.

As I was considering what to create, I thought of all the different experiences I was having and how they were all drawing together to make my graduate experience. Like most of the world, I had expected 2020/2021 to be very different.

I wanted to stitch together the parts of my experience and make sense of it. The straight pieces in a square pattern represent the things I wanted to do and did. I cut the strips freehand — doing the best I could, much as I handled COVID! The random pieces represent how my life started to blend with school — instead of coming to Edmonton for a month, I spent hours on zoom in my son's bedroom. Instead of having the luxury of free evenings to study and write, I sourced face masks and food for my elderly parents.

At the end of the day, this represents my graduate and life experience in 2020/2021.



In my Room

Gabriela Roth

Undergraduate Student

Faculty of Education, Secondary Education

Medium used: Fine tip marker and watercolour on watercolour paper

I've got to know my room very well this past year. Online school has held me in my room which has been peaceful but also quite cramped and confined. I've spent lots of time with my cat, Momo, and he loves hanging around as I do homework, or art.



lockdown is making me draw so many flowers

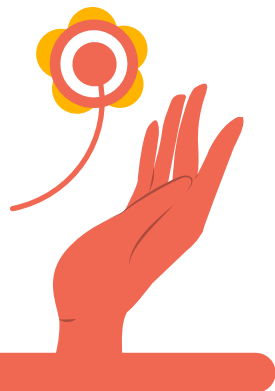
M-A Murphy

Graduate Student

Faculty of Arts, Department of Women's and Gender Studies

Medium used: Digital image of drawing using pen and paper

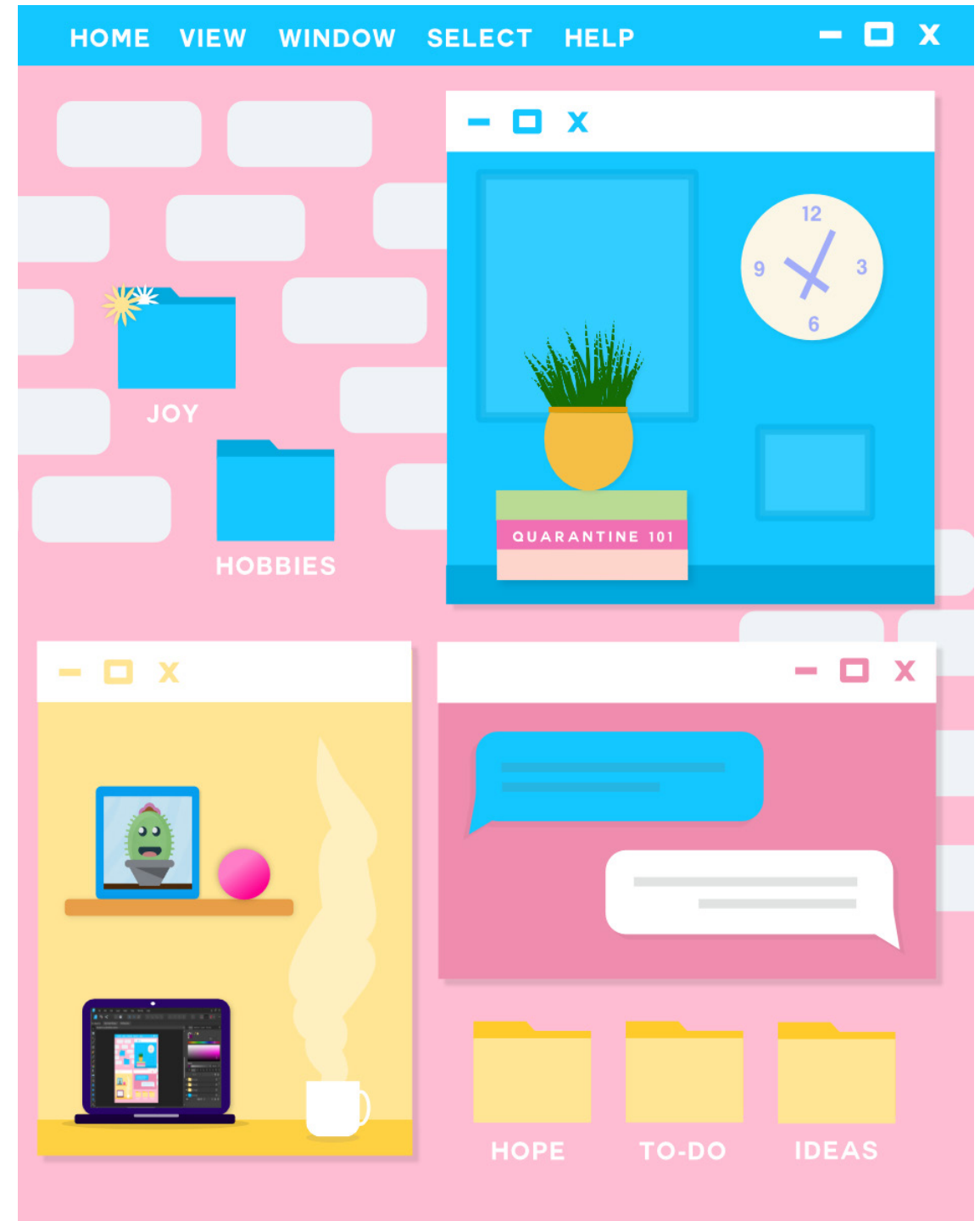
Covid hit when I was in the second last semester of my Master's Degree. I remember feeling incredibly overwhelmed and didn't know what was happening. I started making art with lots of colours — I believe to help me cope and stay hopeful, particularly through the cold and isolating winter. Creating colourful images, as well as writing poetry, helped me to stay grounded and to eventually complete my capstone paper. Creativity saved me. It always does.



*lockdown is making me
draw so many flowers*

Medium used: Digital (Vector) Art

Virtual Windows is a testament to the resilience, creativity, and innovation I saw in and around me during the pandemic.



Code Red

Neha Vashist

Undergraduate Student

Faculty of Science, Psychology Major, Sociology Minor

My poem discusses how my relationship with the concept of mental health evolved throughout this pandemic. Isolation, death and grief on a global scale was something that I never imagined I'd live through. There was no handbook or manual on what to do because there had never been a COVID-19 pandemic before.

We were all inside our homes as the world around us collapsed. We were alone with our thoughts. For a while, I stopped exercising and felt very anxious. Uncertainty about the future kept me up at night. That's when I began to question whether our thoughts are our greatest weaknesses or our greatest strengths. The truth is they're not mutually exclusive; they coexist. We have the power to redefine ourselves every day. It's important to understand that many people need help from professionals or medication to do so- which is okay! Many people implement strategies independently, without professional help— which is also okay! A pandemic creates distress for people in different ways. That's why there's no one-size-fits-all solution.

Taking care of your mental health looks different for everyone.

They teach us in school how to protect ourselves—
drills on what to do

in case of a code red
a fire
a stranger
a tornado
or if a fight breaks loose.

But in a war against yourself, who is the true enemy?

Are you your greatest weakness
or greatest strength?

An indecisive
crisis

Like a snake we shed our old skin.

We tear ourselves apart to emerge brand new-
to rebuild

But we can only rise if we realize
the power we carry
lies within.

Just Getting Started

Morgan Wong

Undergraduate Student

Faculty of Science, Department of Biological Sciences

This piece portrays one person's struggle against an assailant and depicts feelings similar to those of a person fighting against COVID 19. My poem communicates patients' strong will to live, but also the resignation they face near the end. My mother works in healthcare, and as a student it was challenging to see her leave everyday and return exhausted. Despite not seeing patients in the flesh, I could feel their pain, alongside my mother's, and also the pain of family and friends watching helplessly. Reading my poem immerses you in the position of the watcher, unable to assist, as I was during the pandemic.

Sharp fingernails scratch
At my skin and claw at my hair. They pinch.
Draw blood and I can taste its iron tang.
Starbursts dance across my eyes. They tango with black spots and you—
A blur one second, and crystal clear the next.
A pounding at the back of my skull.
It throbs and pierces. Like my throat
Raw after screaming
I inhale, breath falls short, and I feel my chest compress.
Blood drips to the floor. Is it mine? Is it yours?
I hear my pulse in my ears and feel yours through your wrist.
My toes are tingling, numbness setting in.
Will the rest of me follow?

Last night I dreamed of a city.
I watched it sprawl out before me, and I walked along its streets.
I saw earth ships beside skyscrapers.
Robots walking dogs and humans in automated cars.
Floating libraries and hanging gardens.
I remember a waterfall, surrounded by giant trees.
An oasis. And the people? I remember them smiling.
They waved to me.
It was a futuristic city, so advanced, I thought I'd never live to see it.
Now I know I never will.
I wanted to grow old with you and see the dawn of a new era.
Right now, I'm hoping to see tomorrow's sunrise. I'm sure it will be beautiful.



