



Healing Reflection

Story by: Nora Schmidt, Student
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

Over the last 19 months, COVID-friendly “driveway parties” have become the all-too-familiar, go-to get-together. After becoming a world of shut-ins in the spring of 2020, we slowly emerged from our homes, venturing to grocery stores and even restaurants as we tested the limits of our 6-foot safety radii. We devised new strategies to see our loved ones, from Zoom meetings and Netflix parties to drive-by birthdays and driveway sit-downs. My family opted for the latter whenever possible, circling camping chairs around portable firepits to get a few face-to-face hours with friends and family. We passed the summer making calculated grocery store runs, sewing homemade masks, and drinking wiped-down bottles of Spotted Cow and Mike’s Lemonade. (It was always BYOB to avoid any cross-contamination.)

Fall finally came, and I returned to school at UWEC. The timing seemed perfect, as the cooling weather made it increasingly difficult to sit outside for long evenings; even with firepits and hot chocolate, the Wisconsin wind soon began to cut our driveway parties short. Even so, I happily welcomed fall, glad to get back to my friends and away from the claustrophobia of living at home as an adult. Unfortunately, COVID redoubled its efforts and pushed us back online by Thanksgiving. Not only was I back in my childhood bedroom, but I was again away from my friends, including my former roommate, Kacey, who remained in the dorms.

Although we haven’t actually lived together since sophomore year, “friend” seemed insufficient to describe how close Kacey and I are, not to mention that my family considers her our sixth member. We wanted her to come to Thanksgiving dinner as she had before, but, as many families found in 2020, such a gathering seemed out of the question; even a driveway party sounded impossible in a Wisconsin winter. If we wanted to celebrate the holiday together, we’d have to be crafty.

Just as in the summer, we adapted to the world before us. My dad worked out the setup: deck chairs covered with towels (to keep our backsides from freezing); two metal frames with tarps stretched across them, forming a cozy, open-air box to keep out the wind; three makeshift heating vents made from foam board insulation, with a hole at each end and a space heater in the middle to warm two chairs at once. Meanwhile, my mom baked cookies and prepared Thanksgiving dinner, setting aside leftovers to send home with Kacey.

When she arrived from Eau Claire, about an hour away, I was so happy to see her that, forgetting all expert advice from the last 8 months, I gave her a hug, holding my breath behind my mask until we pulled apart. My family joined us in our little outdoor den, and the six of us sipped on hot apple cider and chatted about the oddities of the last year. I looked over at my mom and saw her chuckling as Kacey and I talked.

“Whatcha laughing at, Mom?”

“Nothing. It’s just good to see you guys together.”

Artist:

**Elizabeth Huddleston, Student
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire**

**Mikan Miljovic, Student
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire**

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Healing Reflection

**Story by: Stephanie Janssen, Student
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire**

My name is Stephanie Janssen and Covid-19 messed up my life. I am a UWEC student; 5th year; Creative Writing and Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies double major.

When COVID-19 officially hit campus in early March of 2020, I was a junior, and I was very happy. I had just booked my flight to England for an immersion trip about King Arthur in July and was excited to go to San Francisco in June for the Frameline Film Festival, which was all expenses paid except for food.

I was an intern with the Gender and Sexuality Resource Center and an Usher-in-Charge with Usher Corps, a part of Event Services on campus. I had many friends that I enjoyed interacting with in The Bridge, the Gender and Sexuality Resource Center physical space on the second floor of Davies. I attended PRIDE, our LGBTQ+ student org on campus, every week. I enjoyed going to my classes.

When I got those emails from administration that the campus was shutting down and that I needed to go home to finish out the semester, my world landed hard on its back. My trips were cancelled, and everything I was involved in on campus got put on hold. No PRIDE. No GSRC. No Bridge. No Usher Corps. No trips. No life. All of my classes turned to online formats, which I had never experienced before, where I had to be self-motivated and do so much on my own.

My grades plummeted, and I was lucky to have passed the classes. My mental health was at an all-time low. I barely had motivation for anything and realized how many little things I had taken for granted. Not to mention that it was almost impossible to get work done with my dog barking up a storm, whether it was outside barking at the neighbors or inside barking at people walking by or wanting to be playful. I love her very much, but she really got under my skin. It was a real problem when my mom was working from home downstairs in the living room, and my brother and I were doing classes from our rooms upstairs. My dad got lucky and was able to still go in and work.

Though my own experience was very hard, it was difficult hearing others' experiences. Students, whether high school or college, not getting proper graduation ceremonies. Frontline workers having to quarantine themselves away from their families. Hundreds of thousands of people were dying every day. So many people were losing their jobs. Things seemed pretty hopeless. I think what really turned things around for me was getting those connections back, starting a relationship, not having online classes.

I'm Stephanie Janssen, and I really appreciate life.

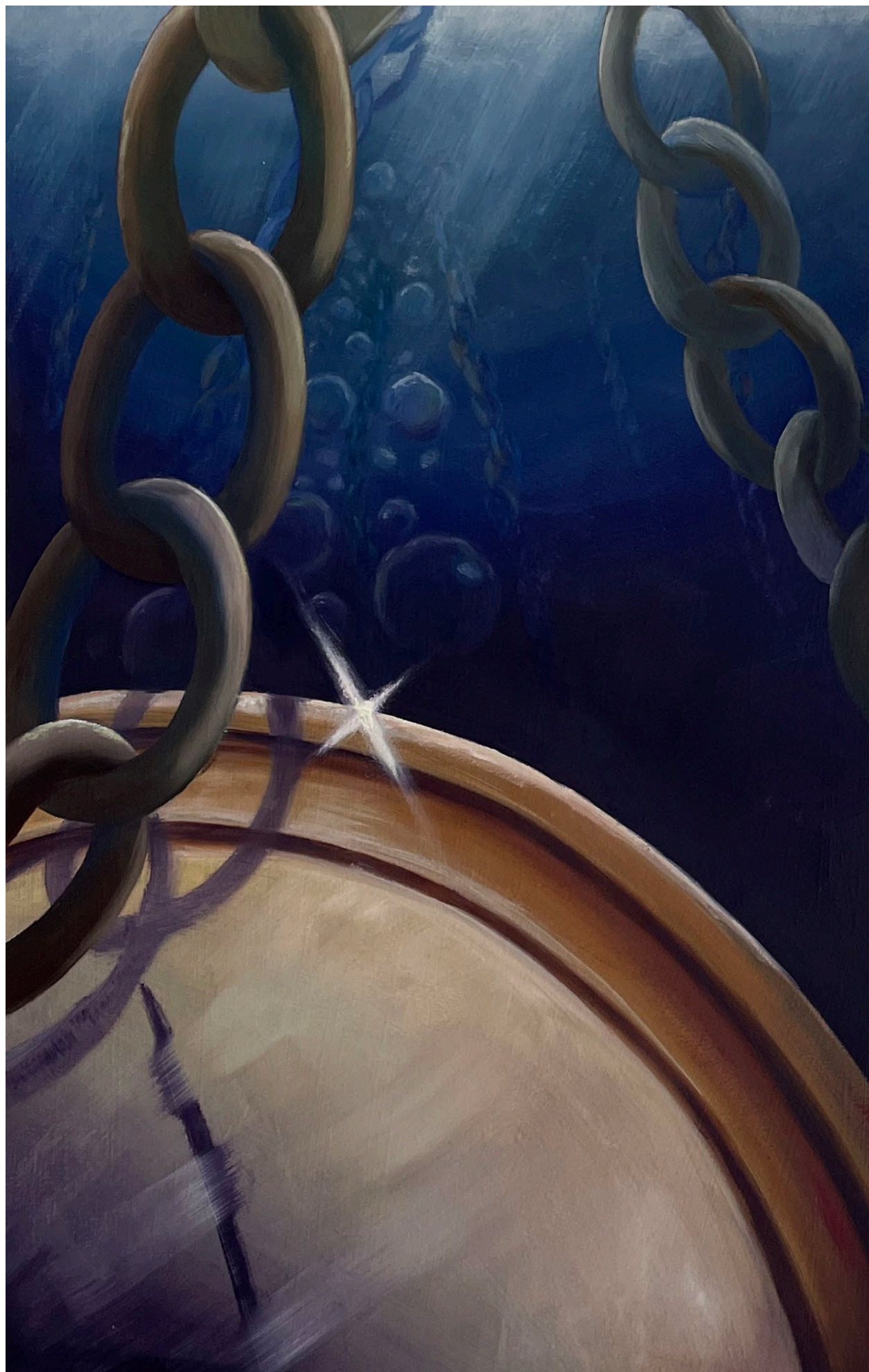
Artists:

**August Carlson, Student
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire**

**Jane Mohler, Student
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire**

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Six Feet Out of Reality

Story by: Charlie Roettger, Student
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire

My key to coping with the pandemic was taking my emotional distance as seriously as my physical distance. I filled every waking second with some form of media. When I wasn't zoning out to reruns of Malcolm in the Middle I was churning through podcasts, finding whatever noise I could to simulate spending time with friends. I spent a first date getting to know a girl over Facetime as we visited each other's islands on Animal Crossing. Heck, I finished Stephen King's The Stand, a 1050 page horror novel detailing an American apocalypse caused by a worldwide pandemic. Something about exploring the familiar suffering of a world adjacent to ours felt perversely comforting; I still can't articulate why.

While building this nest of fiction and escapism, I watched my Minneapolis neighbors get tear-gassed, shot at, and nearly flattened by a semi-truck, all behind a phone screen in my air-conditioned room. I sat there for days, paralyzed by the guilt of being so far removed from the violent uprising happening blocks away from the house I grew up in. Even when I tried to help, I protested selfishly and contributed little. Sure, I went to demonstrations, hoping to aid the voiceless and pressure the city into police reform. But honestly, I went because I missed people. I wanted to share the human connection that righteous indignation creates. The privilege of being an optional advocate allowed me to involve myself without straying too far from my detachment. It afforded me the cognitive dissonance of wandering through Powderhorn Park, seeing villages of tents sprawled alongside the lake, seeing hoodies and sweatpants scattered underneath clotheslines tied between cedar trees, seeing people passing around a gallon jug of fresh water with the label torn off, and thinking to myself, "What a strange place to go out camping."

There's so much more I could tell you if I hadn't immediately opted into delusion. There are memories I've let float for so long there's no hope that I could reel them back. Part of me is ashamed of how I've coped with everything. But twenty-one months have passed since the day of the outbreak, and I can't help but surrender to who I've become. None of us will ever deal with stress the same way we used to; Covid-19 has invariably changed that. Perhaps we'll indulge in our own silent vices and enable our vicarious habits, continuing on as if things were always like this. I will say this: I firmly believe that this behavior isn't a crutch, but a reactionary survival skill. Despite my temptations to remain half-present, 2021 has blessed me with friendships and opportunities that have grounded me back into the present. Sure, I'll walk across campus with one earbud in and wear out old TV shows like a tattered security blanket. But I can do so understanding that these things do not nourish my soul, they just keep me floating on in an ever-changing world that demands my acquiescence.

Artists:

**Sabre Sletten, Student
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire**

**Mayly Vang, Student
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire**

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Masquerade

**Story by: Abigail Rowe, Student
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire**

We all wear masks. However, that was not literal when that turn of phrase was used. When it comes down to it. The masks that we wore prior to the pandemic were often to protect our emotional and mental feelings. However, now we wear masks to protect ourselves and others from a physical standpoint.

When the pandemic first started, I didn't want to believe it, I thought it all a hoax and that it would never touch us, but I soon was proven wrong and began to see things differently. The wearing of masks became mandated, and I began to feel that the saying "We all wear masks" now was reaching a new level. I found my life completely turned around and didn't know what to think. However, even though I found it at times constricting and often bothersome to wear a mask out of my own home, I found that it could quickly turn into something fun.

When first beginning to wear the masks, they were the typical paper masks, with no color and often no telling people apart. However, soon after the pandemic was sure to become a "regular" thing, people started to create their own masks to help turn something eerie and gloomy into a ray of sunshine for those who needed something more than just a standard blue surgical mask.

I remember when my stepmom, Diane, began making masks, using scraps of fabric that she had stashed away from years ago. She was even able to develop a new way to wear the masks so that they could fit according to size of face for people. I can never recall just how many she made, but she was able to bring a little fun to an unfortunate situation. Before long, I found myself wearing a mask that was no longer dull and white, but now was colorful. I can't tell you the endless compliments that I would often get on them.

After a time, when the pandemic was still raging, I found myself beginning to loath the mask mandates and often would complain how it was hard to breathe, and I couldn't speak properly to people, which was hard to do when you worked in the retail business. However, after starting a job at my local Boot Barn, I had the chance to try out a different mask, created by one of my favorite brands, Ariat. This mask became my favorite go-to, and I quickly learned how to deal with wearing a mask while also being able to talk to people properly again. I could now smile with my eyes again and laugh as I once did and give people something to smile about as I served them.

I suppose the moral is that we all do wear masks, and now I can find some semblance of joy in that, because in the end, it not only protects, but it also can brighten someone's day.

**Artist: Ruth Cronje, Professor Emerita of English
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire**

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My Lungs Are Slaying a Dragon

**Story by: Isaac Dalhoff, Student
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire**

It is March 13th, 2020, and I am struggling to make it up the stairs to my dorm.

My mother always liked to comment on my immune system. It wasn't uncommon to see me walking into class sick. Half of the time, I was. My recovery from a simple cold usually took one month and two weeks before I stopped my sniffles and wheezes. Then, one month later, I'd feel another scratch creeping its way into my throat.

On March 11th, 2020, I expected that little scratch to come and go as it always did. One month, two weeks, potentially a slight pneumonia spell. Nothing I couldn't handle.

I wasn't ready for that flame that buried itself in my lungs. A cough that felt like a dragon spitting bloody fire—I can still taste the iron—brought to life every time I left my room. I knew this wasn't a regular cold.

I fought that dragon every day for one week. Any flight of stairs became a taste of its breath in my mouth. There were so many flights of stairs. I began to question who to call if I started to lose this battle.

By the end of the week, the first confirmed case of COVID-19 was found in Wisconsin: Eau Claire, Wisconsin. I chuckled through my flames when I heard that. I guess I had met the dragon before the state. I had its signature of early antibodies to prove it.

It is six months later. My taste is back, and my joints no longer hurt to move. But those flames never fully receded. Any coughing spell risks that taste of iron returning, and before I know it, I am on fire again. I watch myself on the stairs now. They're no longer mountainous, but my breath quickens much sooner. Even a deep breath fills me with dread. If I push myself just a bit too far, I'm forced to remember that dragon.

But I continue to push myself.

I love to bike. I love the feeling of those secluded trails where roads fade away and prairies sing with life. The wind brushing my face and fresh, cold air pouring into my lungs. For a while, I thought the dragon had robbed me of this. And for a while, it had. I could only make it a couple of blocks before I had to stop to hold off awakening it.

But then I kept going.

I tested it. I tested my lungs. And soon every expedition was just a couple of minutes longer. A couple of miles longer. I reached points in the trail that I had never seen before. Because now these lungs aren't fighting to keep me alive, they've fighting to live.

It is now one year later, and I can finally breathe again. Long and deep—never quite as deep as before—but these breaths are special. They come in spite and repose. These breaths know that they are slaying a dragon.

Artists:

**Megan Miller, Student
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire**

**Cody Vander Loop, Student
University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire**

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