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ENGL 2020

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August 4<sup>th</sup>, 2025

*Final Portfolio: Cover Letter*

For my first poem, *The Truth of an Empath*, as I completed my revisions I wanted to lean into the sound of each word. One topic we covered in our lectures was how the sound of a word affects the associated emotion. A peer review I received suggested that I emphasize the difference between empathy and helplessness, so I did this by changing the sound of the words.

For example, the way empathy is described through this poem is harsh. Empathy causes pain to its subject in part because of the struggle they are witnessing their friend go through, but also because there is nothing they can do to help. Empathy is the practice of feeling another's emotion to help them feel seen, without fighting their battles for them.

Since my speaker feels that empathy is the enemy in this poem, the words in the first three stanzas are harsh. As the speaker describes feeling empathy take over it is a sour feeling, but as they accept the helplessness of the situation, it turns softer. This shows the speaker's realization that empathy is in fact trust in another person to take care of themselves, and therefore you.

My second poem, *Star*, is a personality poem featuring a star looking down upon and talking to a human. I grew up loving the night sky and seeing, what appears to be nothingness, light up with life. Stars have always seemed like the most magical things and yet they are still connected to me and this planet.

I took advice from my peer reviews and expanded on this piece to include more details about the star's personality and feelings. I did not want to outright say what they're feeling because that is not how they talk. However, I hoped by adding some more details about their character, the reader could

extrapolate their emotions. I made these revisions while maintaining the same voice as the original poem and using the same soft soothing words.

My short story, *We are Defined by Death*, features a young woman struggling with the death of her childhood best friend. These characters are ones I have been thinking and writing about for years, however, I have never written this exact story. In revising my short story there were a few things I knew I needed to change.

First, I wanted to cut out as much excess storyline as possible, so I could make space for smooth transitions between the obstacles we learned about in class. Also, since the page limit is so much shorter than what I initially imagined for these characters, I needed to rethink how I would narrate their story. Even some of the characters needed to be tweaked to make this short narrative feel full. Concerns about the speed of my storyline and lack of transitions were reflected in some of my peer reviews.

Another comment I received was to make it clearer who Freya is and to develop her character. Since this story is about a woman mourning her friend, it is important for the reader to understand the friend so they can be emotionally invested. Since I already knew who Freya was when writing this story, I did not think to dedicate as much time to her. Making space in this story to tell more about this critical character and trying to find small places in the main character's thoughts where I could further mention her nature was another aspect of my revisions.

My personal essay, *Paradise*, is a deeply important piece to me. As I wrote, I considered the first presentation I watched for this class about creative nonfiction. The instructor highlighted that these essays should be personal but not private, however, I also learned in that lecture that in writing these pieces authors can find a way to move on from those events. This experience is tied to a larger journey that I am still working through, but after my revisions were complete I was happy with my decision to share this story. I received valuable feedback and since I originally wrote this essay based on the prompt "to write

about a story and the lesson it taught me”, I found a way to put some distance between myself and the place that has haunted me for five years.

After reading through my peer feedback, I realized I had written this essay for my eyes. To me, the story could never be too slow on paper since I was living it in my mind. I was reminded, through the creative nonfiction workshop, that this essay is for the reader and to keep pace and intrigue in mind. Based on peer suggestions, I tried a different start to the story, to immediately grab the reader’s attention. I then moved to the rest of the piece, adjusting to maintain the reader’s interest. This was a revision I struggled with, since to me every detail is important. However, I reminded myself that I have every memory from the six months I lived in this setting. From my eyes, each moment is interconnected and important; however, my reader only has five pages. With this in mind, I cut down on details that do not aid the reader’s understanding of the story.

I also took the peer suggestions and slightly changed the last paragraph of my essay. It was suggested that I ground my point of having a new identity in some concrete examples. I liked the idea of having a more well-rounded ending, so I highlighted some of the other big choices I made in my life since this experience that were based on gut instinct.

Overall, I am very proud of the pieces I created. Some of these works I knew had plenty of room to grow, and others I needed to challenge myself to bring new depth to my writing. Peer recommendations were very helpful for opening up my mind to details I may have missed and sparking new inspiration in writing I had already spent too long looking at. I am excited to share my work and know that from learning writing rules to poetry mechanics to creating imagery for all the senses, my writing has greatly improved through this class.

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*The Truth of an Empath*

Empathy is anguish.

It lives in the intestines

and slowly creeps up the throat.

Escaping your burning insides that panic  
without control.

It is seeing your friend break open

only inches away, but so lost in sorrow

there is no way to reach them.

It is hearing a scream that makes you want to fight

the invisible monster in the corner.

The one who is responsible for their pain  
and yours.

It is the strength of extinguishing the smoke

And blocking out the noise

Until the monster is clear for them to fight it.

The strength of knowing

you cannot fight the pain yourself.

It is trust.

*Star*

Hello down there.

You, with the wide eyes and open mouth.

Yes, I see you. I see my light reflected in your eyes.

I hear your dreams and I taste your wishes.

You are not afraid of the night. Of the endlessness before you.

You understand. I am one in an infinity and we are watching you.

It is our presence that wraps around your sphere.

Holding you in an embrace of light.

Our dust in your bones and our life in your eyes.

We long to hear your stories.

The drawings you make on this vast black canvas.

Regardless of your remembrance, I am here.

Gazing upon your journey, before you rejoin us.

We see you little one.

We are here.

*We are Defined by Death*

On Thursday night, I saw him across the bar.

He was one of those people you noticed walking in, looking well-kept, expensive, and clean-cut. But when I noticed him walking in and saw his lean face, defined cheekbones, and deep green eyes, I knew who he was. In my whole life, I never thought I would see those eyes again. Never wanted to.

Before he noticed me, I turned around to face the door and collected myself. Brushed off my black trousers and white button-down shirt. I redid my ponytail and adjusted my red tie, which completed my boss's idea of a classy uniform.

Turning around, I plastered a smile on my face and took a deep breath, walking towards the other end of the bar. "Jordan Richards!" I said gleefully, "Wow, I never thought I would see the day you were in a suit without Jenny forcing you into one." The second I said his name, his eyes turned to me. As his mouth parted slightly in surprise, I felt the memories rushing back. The ones I had worked so hard to keep away, to move past.

"Holis?" he asked. His response was drenched in so much surprise it looked like he was about to fall off the stool.

"Hey there. What can I get for you?" I asked. Business, this was just business.

"Um – gin and tonic, please. What the hell, Holis, what are you doing here?" Like it wasn't obvious? Instead of answering, I gave him my best smirk, then turned around to grab gin off the shelf. I grabbed a highball glass from under the counter and scooped in some ice. Pour in the gin.

I felt calmed by the routine of making a drink and finally looked back at him with a smile. I gestured to his dressed-up attire. “What’s got you all fancy? Hotshot job?” Tonic. Stir.

Color filled his cheeks as he blushed at my observation. “Not really, I’m working at HBSC. I’m an account manager.”

“Hey, man, good for you! I remember you saying you would be an astronaut, but hey, I guess not all dreams can come true.”

“I haven’t seen you since Freya’s funeral.” The blunt analysis punched me in the chest as I refrained from audibly gasping. I stuck a lime wheel into the glass and pushed it across the counter, simultaneously grabbing a rag from underneath to clean up.

The longer I stretch the silence, the dimmer his eyes become until finally he has built a wall between us. “Holis...you know Jenny would kill me if I didn’t insist you come home for dinner.”

Two days later, I am standing in front of a two-story blue cottage in Lavenham. I haven’t knocked yet. Instead, I am standing on the step, staring at an antique lion’s head door knocker. The brass giant used to scare me when we were kids. Freya and I would pretend it was watching us while we played in the yard. We imagined we were secret agents sent to collect classified information on the lion’s family, and to complete our mission, we couldn’t get caught by the lion’s stare.

Jordan would laugh at our childish creativity. Being Freya’s moody older brother, sometimes he would decide to scare us by jumping out of the front door, screaming. Other times, he would be our manager. Assigning us missions and taking our walkie-talkie calls.

Now, the lion's head was dull and small as I reached up and wrapped my fist on the door. I quickly realized I hadn't color corrected the bruises on my knuckles from the night before and shoved my hands in my pockets.

Jordan answered the door, and I immediately regretted coming when I smelled the potpourri Jenny always kept on the side table next to the door. I'm not sure why I agreed to come back here. Maybe part of me thought that I could find closure within these walls. Disappearing after Freya's death had been necessary at the time. It was necessary now. But I've always regretted leaving without saying a word. I should have warned them they wouldn't see me again, rather than making Jenny grieve twice.

"Holis?" Jenny's voice came from behind the tall body blocking my view and made me jerk my eyes over his shoulder. When I caught her gaze, whatever she saw in mine made her smile falter. Jordan and Freya's mom always saw me as her second daughter, but I know that's not who she sees now.

Maybe five years away made her see the stranger in her doorway. Someone held Freya as she sobbed after hearing the doctor's diagnosis of leukemia. Who wrapped her body around her best friend's back when she was balled up on her bed, hoping it would be enough protection to save her. Someone who still re-lived the day the vitals monitor released a long, monotone ring where Freya's heartbeat should have been.

Someone who remembers walking out of the hospital without a tear in her eyes, only to fall apart on the sidewalk. Slowly crumbling under the loss of her soulmate's spirit, under the knowledge that she would never hear her laugh again. Someone who found solace in turning her

inner pain into bruises. Taking punches freely if it means a second of not experiencing a world where her person was gone.

I hope Jenny doesn't see any of that in my eyes. Only a stranger. I want to be a stranger to her.

"Hi Jenny. It's so good to see you." I paste a smile on my face and don't care that my voice sounds fake. I would pretend to be okay for her, so when I walked back out the front door, I would have closure, and they would never see me again.

Five hours later, pain explodes through my jaw. The point just below my ear throbs and crackles in a web of enraged nerve endings. I feel my jaw threaten to dislocate and snap my attention into focus. Feigning a knock-out, I started to stagger, then took the opportunity to get low and give an uppercut to the chin. My opponent collapses in front of me, and the onlookers boo or clap while money changes hands.

Many people say they like fighting, but don't watch the real thing. They watch the polished athletes who train 24 hours a day to throw a few punches. The people here are looking for quick money or to blow off steam. I happen to fall into both categories.

Since Freya's death, I have been saving up to leave England and start over. A new name and a new life wait for me somewhere else, and now that Jordan and Jenny have found me, I intend to start that life as soon as possible. I just need a few more fights before I can leave my old one.

Leaving the cage, I walk over to the bar and signal for a water. "Do you have anything else for me tonight?" I ask the manager. He sits a few stools down from me as a tall brunette straddles his lap.

Sparing me a glance, he comments, “I don’t know if you want what I have tonight. Your face is already blowing up from that last punch.”

“That’s minor. I can go again. What’s the payout?”

“Two thousand,” he says. I blink at him, thinking he must be joking. Illegal fighting doesn’t mean millions of dollars in sponsorship deals. Usually, I’m lucky if a win gets me five hundred. Sighing, he continues, “From what I hear, he is pretty famous in Germany and has stirred up a crowd. There is a lot of betting that he’ll win.”

“Deal.”

The two-thousand-dollar pot should have been my first clue. I’m good at what I do. Really good. But when a man who must have been at least six feet five walked through the cage door, I started to panic. I tried to center myself. To practice feeling the floor beneath my feet and standing up straight, creating a line between my tailbone and the crown of my head. It was a technique I had learned to ground myself after Freya’s diagnosis started triggering panic attacks.

Despite his size, my opponent wasn’t clumsy or uncoordinated in his approach. He danced on his feet before me as he stared with deciphering eyes, as if analyzing every thought I had and move I might make. I could not lose this fight. I would get the money, and I would leave. I could not stay a day longer in this city, in this country.

After five minutes of exhaustive defense, I decided to go for the neck. It was my best shot at defeating a man this huge. The next time he bent his knees to gain power, I was moving, ducking under his elbow and using the back of his knee as a step stool. I flung myself onto his back with my arms around his neck, attempting to rattle him while pushing my feet into the bend of his knees.

My attempt to take his back and lower him to the floor was short-lived, however, when he grabbed my thigh, pulling me harder against his back. Before I could think, he was throwing himself backward, and in one of my stupidest moments, I tried to twist away from him instead of holding on.

Flames flew down my back the second I felt myself hit the mat. The pain was so unbearable that shadows crept in over my vision, and I eagerly submitted to their emptiness.

Hearing my heart beep on a monitor made my eyes fly wide. The beeping got faster as I slowly realized I was lying in a hospital bed. Monotone rings and sobs ripped through my memory as panic set in. I start pulling at the wires and tubes attached to my body. I have to leave. Need to leave before anyone sees me. I can't be here. The thoughts are racing through my head as a nurse runs into the room, followed by an older woman with close-cropped hair holding a clipboard.

"Shhh, honey, it's okay. You're okay." The nurse tries to soothe me as I fight against her strength. I reach over to the edge of the bed and try to twist myself out of her grasp, but the movement makes me scream. The pain in my back engulfs my whole body as the cry leaves my mouth.

"What happened to me?" I am partially sobbing from the throbbing in my back as I yell the question at the nurse.

"You were in an accident, honey. Leaving work last night. Your boss said you were hit by a car in the parking lot." Hit by a car? That doesn't make...oh. The memory came rushing back, and I guess it makes sense that my manager didn't explain what I was really doing when I got injured.

I tried to calm my mind and tone. “Right. I’m sorry I forgot. I’ll just take the discharge paperwork whenever you can get it.” Sympathy filled the nurse’s eyes and twisted my heart before the other woman stepped forward.

“Hello, Holis, I’m Dr. Carmichael. Unfortunately, I must advise against your leaving. The trauma from the car hitting you caused a spinal cord injury. We will need to continue to monitor your status to figure out the best form of care, then send you to a rehabilitation facility.” No. No. No. No. No. No. That two-thousand dollars would have gotten me out. I need to try again. Need another fight. Now Jordan knows where I am. Jenny will find me. They are going to keep me here.

I feel tears starting to roll down the sides of my face, but I wasn’t crying. Shock racked my body, and tears were the only sign that my world was crumbling around me. “There is a woman here to see you. I know this is a lot of information to take in, but maybe talking through the situation with her would help.”

“What woman? Why is she here?” I replied, completely confused. No one from the ring would be here.

“I think she said her name was Jenny Combs. She was your emergency contact in the hospital records.” My heart stopped at the mention of her name. I was sure the monitor next to me would prove that in a matter of seconds.

“No. I don’t know that name. Please ask her to leave.” Dr. Carmichael seemed confused at my words, but a familiar perfume filled the room as Jenny entered.

“You might not want me to know you anymore, Holis, but you certainly know me. I am the woman who cared for you in sixth grade when you went to school so sick that you threw up

in your homeroom trash can. I am the woman who took you shopping for your prom dress. I am the woman who held you when that idiot Beckett cheated on you in your junior year of high school. I am your mother, Holis, and whether or not you decide you can handle having Jordan and me in your life after everything that happened is your business, but do not ever pretend not to be my daughter.”

*Paradise*

I hear thunder rolling in the distance as rain pours down outside my window. I love the rain. I didn't always, but after living in the rainforest, I found peace in going about my day while the sky fell around me. Most of the time, I remember the warmth of the water on my skin, or the adrenaline that came when the water fell so fast that I could not see three feet before me. Occasionally, I remember the horror that water can bring. Sitting in a truck, hoping my next decision won't kill my friends.

Everyone has a different idea of paradise. At eighteen years old, my paradise was far from Carlisle, Massachusetts. In a town of 5,000 people, gossip and opinions were a constant shadow. It didn't help that I was the youngest of the family. My father was well-known, and people only remembered my sister's name, never mine. I grew up being known as her miniature, and I took that label to heart. I idolized my sister and did everything to be like her.

It took me a long time to realize I was only a projection of who other people wanted me to be, and when I graduated from high school, I took the chance to get far away from that person. At the time, it seemed like a great idea. I thought if I got far enough from those opinions and the sister everyone confuses me for, maybe I could figure out a life for myself.

During this journey, I found myself in the rainforest on the big island of Hawai'i. I volunteered on a farm animal sanctuary in a place that would be photographed next to the Merriam-Webster definition of "paradise". It never occurred to me that beautiful places don't always hold beautiful memories.

Each week, the volunteers were allowed one day with a truck to leave the sanctuary. In a world where seeing the same four people daily was expected, these days were heaven. Exploring beaches, volcanoes, the rainforest, and old towns. On this day, however, we were told to be back early. The owner said that a storm would hit, and we wouldn't be able to get up the driveway if we got back too late.

Four of the volunteers were off-site that day. Jill and I returned in one of the trucks at nine o'clock with the other pair of volunteers not far behind. We pulled through the gate marking the start of

the gravel driveway up to the farm. As we drove, my heart suddenly seemed to seize in my chest. Halfway to the farm, we found the storm had already done its damage. We were flooded out.

The problem with living in a rainforest on the side of a mountain was that we often couldn't leave the farm when the rain hit. The driveway crossed a ravine, so when the gulch flooded, the driveway became the bottom of a river. Not only that, but the steep drop-off downstream of the concrete bridge meant that crossing at the wrong time would lead to the car being swept off a 20-foot ledge, then down a mountain. We got flooded so much, in fact, that a metal post had been installed on the side of the driveway with level markings to show when it was too dangerous to cross.

Flooding was a common occurrence for residents of the mountain-side town. At the country store, we would hear stories of someone getting swept away after trying to drive across one of these ravines. I never knew the number of people who died from these incidents. I never wanted to ask.

Most of the time, we could survive not leaving the farm until the water had cleared, but tonight the four of us were stuck on the wrong side of the river. At eighteen, I was the only one in the group of twenty to thirty-somethings who knew how and when to cross in these conditions. I had been working here the longest and needed to make the call. Would I drive across and risk their lives? Or would I say we needed to sleep in the cars and hope the rain had stopped by morning?

I was in a similar situation a few months into my time at the sanctuary. I had gone out on errands and returned to find that the drizzle I had left behind was now a downpour. I had no idea what to do. I kept looking at the post, then the water rushing, creating rapids at my feet. I stared off the driveway's edge into the jungle, being swallowed by the river.

I enjoyed exploring these forests. The ravines are so steep I could shimmy down the side, catching myself on trees as I went. Guava trees were common around here, small enough to grow densely but thick enough to support my weight. One of my favorite things was pushing off the gulch's edge and climbing down on the trunks that curved out from the near-vertical side.

It was not excitement I felt looking into the jungle this time; however, I had heard of the people who were hurt or even killed from making the wrong call in the moment. Luckily, it wasn't my job to make the decision this time. Soon after I pulled down the driveway, the owner's husband arrived. I barely saw him; he worked as a pilot and was gone most of the time. He showed me how the post stuck into the ground next to the driveway was submerged far past the highlighted safe zone. However, he also explained how to read the water. How deep it looks and how fast it is going. There was no clear procedure on how to move forward, but after analyzing for a few minutes, he declared we would cross. I couldn't understand how he did it. Trusting some instinct that was invisible to everyone else. There was no secondary opinion or hard evidence that we would be okay. Only a feeling.

He explained that we would cross in the truck I had taken. It was bigger, meaning the spark plugs were higher and had a better chance of not getting wet. He told me how important it was to time our acceleration. We needed to start fast, but not too fast, so that we would hydroplane. But if we were too slow, we would get swept up. We needed to accelerate while in the water, but not too early or too late. None of it made sense. Then he told me to sit in the bed of the truck. *In case we go over the side*, he said. *So you have a better chance of getting away*.

When I realized he meant a better chance of surviving, that he would be in the cab and likely not be able to get out, the full force of what we were doing hit me.

I tried to remember this crash course in trusting my instinct when the others expected me to make the call now. The sun had already set, and I could barely see the other side of the water, let alone how deep it was. There was no one else to ask, either. No second opinions. My instinct was the one that mattered.

I decided we would sleep for a bit, and after waking up at one in the morning, I stepped back out into the rain. I pointed the flashlight uselessly. The dark swallowed any light until I couldn't even see the post, so I stared at the moving nothingness before me. I couldn't help feeling that we couldn't stay here all

night. I took a deep breath and noticed that the chaos in the air was somehow less now. Like the water had calmed enough that the spray wasn't disturbing everything around me. The less I saw, the more I felt and heard. The roar was duller than before, and the rain was letting up.

I have no evidence to support the decision I made. Only that some part of me said it was okay. It told me that if I drove correctly, we would make it.

I went to the trucks and woke everyone up. We got all our things into the cab of the bigger truck, and I instructed them to sit in the bed as I had once done. While they shivered in the rain behind me, I looked out the windshield. The wipers were moving furiously to help me see. Trying to give me the reassurance of sight. The proof that I was right to do this. I thought of everything the pilot had told me in those moments. How fast I would need to hit the water to have power and weight on my side. The slight bend in the driveway when I needed to accelerate again to make it up the steep incline that started in the middle of the river and would cause me to slow down.

I visualized the road in front of me at the bottom of this river. The one I had driven countless times over the last five months. The one I knew I could drive on even if I could not see it. I knew where it bended and I knew its width. At least I hoped I did. I didn't care about myself in the cab of the truck, or the totes piled into the space behind me. If the rest of them could swim away, I didn't care. I realized that is probably how the pilot felt when we crossed that day. Me, in the bed, and him, staring at the water from behind the steering wheel.

We made it across that night. Whooping and hollering that we hadn't died. The steering wheel was still sweaty from where I gripped it and hoped I was doing the right thing. But I hadn't hurt them. My friends were safe and hopefully would never know the weight of holding lives in their hands.

It hurt when I found out the owner knew we were out there. When I learned she was mad we had come back too late and chose not to help us. She left four of her volunteers to sleep on the wrong side of

the river and me to agonize over how to bring them home safely. I had wanted her there. I wanted her to tell me if I was making the right decision, but in her act of punishment I learned I didn't need her to.

That sanctuary wasn't the paradise it looked like on paper, but I got what I wanted. I found an identity for myself that I had to fight for. I brought it with me to San Diego, where I stayed for several days on a whim when I was supposed to be going home. I brought it when I moved to South Carolina, a state I had never been to, for college. I have used it every day since leaving Hawai'i, and it is unequivocally mine.