

ON BEING RECOGNIZED

This essay circles around an important craft question for writers of personal essays: to what degree is the “I” on the page a fiction? And to what degree does the act of writing an essay mold our thinking and even our selves? Write about a time when you lost your cool—a time when you were upset, or surprised, as Louise Imogen Guiney may have been after the pick-pocketing incident—and see if you can write your way into a new perspective, one that maintains fidelity to the “real you,” but maybe arrives at a refined version of the situation or the self. Once you have written the essay, sit next to a celebrity on a plane, preferably one you almost but don’t quite recognize. (If it can be a fading rock star, so much the better.) See how this complicates the essay. Consider the unknowability of this person and, maybe, the unknowability of yourself. — *shamae budd*

FOR THE LAST TIME

Cut this prompt into strips. Fold the strips and place in a container. Blindly choose three to incorporate into your own personal essay.

1. Brainstorm (and/or Google) the phrase “the last time” in song lyrics. Quote at least three of your favorites.
2. Choose a connecting punctuation mark—such as the comma used by Madden, or the dash, parentheses, slash, even an emoticon (with caution!)—to comment on directly. Then use the punctuation mark throughout your essay. Try to conclude with it.
3. Address two negative last-time experiences and four positive last-time experiences from your life.
4. Try something you’ve never done before, such as biking backwards; determine if you will do that thing again or if it was the last time. Why?
5. Do not address death or graves or cemeteries. How do beginnings (like birth, starting school, learning to drive) become last times?
6. Read Madden’s last sentence. Choose a phrase of at least three words to use in your final sentence. (“Self-created chaos” counts) — *cassie keller cole*

INDEPENDENT REDUNDANCY

In this essay, Madden carefully and exhaustively analyzes his own writing style, suggesting that it has been influenced by other essayists he admires. He examines and imitates everything from sentence-style leanings (for example, on page 159, just after he mentions mimicking a Brian Doyle sentence, there’s a paragraph that feels very much like it could have been written by Brian Doyle), to the length of the piece, which he says intentionally approaches Montaigne’s longest essays. The essay, then, though his own in idea and completion, recognizes many of the influences that have shaped it.

Select an essay you’ve read recently (perhaps even one of Madden’s) and make a list of its stylistic qualities, then write an essay on the same theme trying to mimic the original’s style but with your own examples, your own synthesis of ideas, your own vibrant language. Work some quotes—both attributed and unattributed—into your own essay, repurposing the original author’s words for new meaning.

Teachers: As a class exercise, you might have students do the above activity to write their own sections of “Independent Redundancy” to create a new essay with new examples of (un)intentional plagiarism. — *scott russell morris*

FIXITY

In “Fixity,” Madden ruminates on humanity’s “innate desire for a fixed reference point.” There is some irony in a meditation on such fixity arising from a deliberate choice to meander. Do you find it surprising? What would you expect if you intentionally spent your “afternoon wandering purposelessly”?

Test your hypothesis by spending an afternoon wandering in precisely that way. See where your thoughts and feet take you, then reflect on what your experiment suggests about life, journeys, insights, experiences, and/or you. See if you feel satisfied with your effort even if it falls short of reaching certainties.

— *bentley snow*

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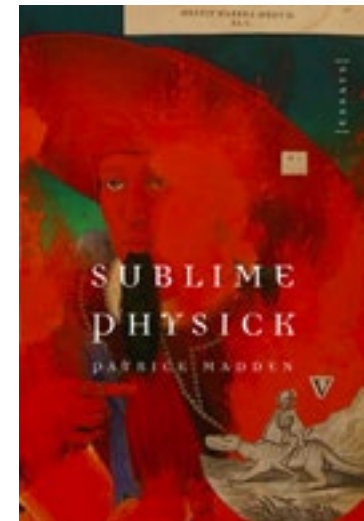
writing prompts

S U B L I M E
P H Y S I C K
by PATRICK MADDEN

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In order to make this book appealing to teachers and students, my friends and I have created this handout of writing prompts derived from each of the book’s dozen essays. I hope you’ll find it useful and inspiring. For more teaching resources, including a 40-minute video lecture, please visit:

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In the essay “Spit,” ideas move seamlessly among the dynamics of learning how to spit, compassion, the anti-epic properties of the aforementioned spit, and the lyrics to the Rush song “Tom Sawyer.” The essay accretes in segmented fragments from personal narratives of family and home life, childhood experiences, scientific fact, pop-culture references, and Bible stories. Despite the segmentation, the essay manages to move from idea to idea smoothly and organically. Many essays lend themselves to exploration and meditative ramblings but can seem disjointed when these turns come too abruptly. For this exercise take an overarching theme or idea and brainstorm as many connections to that idea as you can. Write several short segments around the theme. Arrange and rearrange the separate sections and write transitions until they seem to flow from one to another, creating meaning in the spaces between the sections. — shellie sports

PHYSICA SUBLIME

Madden digs deep into the literal and connotative meaning of each word in his title and includes that “perhaps, I’m beginning to think, everything we think we know is a kind of sub-lime physick... a double-aspected entity that we think we know in two distinct forms, yet which is really a unity” (27). Give yourself five minutes to compose a list of binaries. Choose one of them and try to imagine that space “where they meet” and see if you can find the beauty there as you write. — amy lee scott

ENTERING & BREAKING

Think of something or someone you haven’t closely observed. Spend 20–30 minutes observing, preferably with permission (or it could be awkward.) Compare your understanding of the subject before and after your observation. Describe any observations that surprised you. — catherine curtis

IN MEDIA VITA

In *Letters to a Young Poet* Rilke is asked, “If you could not write anymore, would you die?” Over a century later a television presenter asked Clarice Lispector the very same ques-

tion. In the grainy film she pauses. She was a woman who answered only the questions she deemed worthy and only in the way in which she saw fit.

“When I write,” she said, “I am not dead.” Now imagine you are in the same grainy film. The disengaged and disembodied interviewer’s voice booms out from behind a camera and its hosts of blinding electric bulbs.

Answer the interviewer while attending to the following arbitrary but Madden-inspired set of rules:

1. Do not write for people you’d like to think of you as intelligent and attractive and “Oh if only we’d treated him/her/them better in life!”

2. Do not write for your mom. (She is delightfully traveling through exquisite multicultural wormholes between universes.)

3. Do not feel constrained by the limitations of space on a stone slab. The slab will be enormous. Or else magnifying glasses will be forever provided by cemetery attendants.

4. Resist nostalgia, high drama. Resist anxiety and morbid fascination (the latter is optional).

5. Consider the question, “What would you have written on your headstone?” like Clarice Lispector considers Rilke’s question.

6. Then write:

a. How you would like to be remembered.

b. How you are, actually, likely to be remembered.

EMPATHY

In “Empathy,” Madden writes, “This is what all good literature should do: make visceral the pains and joys of others, stir in us, as we sit in our chairs, our eyes glancing across lines of letters, some grand emotion beyond what we might find even in living” (71).

This essay pays tribute to the words of Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano, medita-

ing on the moments of “magic and the edge of comprehension” that define being changed by the words of others. Your task is to find a book as influential for you as *The Book of Embraces* (or maybe one of the people you annoyed did. Next, write about it.

Alternately, seize the opportunity to spend a day with a writer who has influenced you. If this writer has passed away or is otherwise inaccessible, allow the day to happen in your imagination—better yet, bribe a friend (or hire an actor, if you have some extra cash on hand) to stand in as this writer, matching the mannerisms and wisdom of this person to the best of his/her/their ability. Then, narrate the experience on paper as you consider the following questions: What did you learn from this spending time with this person, either real or imagined? How will it change you?

NOTOLIE JOHANSEN

Madden imagines another accident he was not present for, decades prior, which involved his mother-in-law, a boiling pot of water, and a curious young boy. Madden is again self-aware and overt about his imaginings: “Of course, the scene I construct takes place in their current home, because I’ve never seen the house they lived in then, so I already know somewhat of the limits of imagination.” (107–8). These moments of self-awareness are some of the richest in the essay. Explore your own limits—and surprises—of imagination. Think of a scene for which you were not present, but which you have imagined. Pay attention to the details you envision, and reflect about why they are part of your constructed scene. When you write the scene down, be overt about where the details are coming from, whether they are the product of someone else’s account, research, or something you know now which would not have been part of the original scene. Enjoy imagining!

MISER’S FARTINGS

Set out to live deliberately. Spend a few hours on an elevator with a stopwatch, timing how much of other peoples’ time you rob as you repeatedly ride up and down between floors that could easily be walked (other time-robbing options include walking slowly and then stopping in the middle of a crowded hallway; repeatedly turn paying attention to the moment it’s your turn when playing a board game; asking questions that have just been answered; relating a dream in excruciating detail; frequently punctuated by “and then for some reason — happened!” or “and this doesn’t make any sense, but . . .” ; using piles of coupons at the grocery store; talking non-stop to your fellow (stranger) passenger the next time you fly; etc.). Write about this experience (timing how long that takes, of course); but if you don’t get around to actually writing about it, that’s okay, because maybe one of the people you annoyed did.

AMY ROPEL

BUYING A BASS

In the final paragraph of “Buying a Bass,” Madden lists several of the mysteries he is “content to witness without understanding.” Over the

MADISON BOWMAN

course of one or several days, write up your own list of mysteries, paying special attention to things you use or rely on frequently without noticing (traffic lights, your phone, your mother’s good graces). Are there any points of connection between the items you chose? Can you draw any insight from the type of mysteries you noted? Choose three of the items from your list as jumping off points for an essay.

HEATHER THOMSON