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 pickpocketing 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. — Shumae 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

writing prompts

SUBLIME PHYSICK 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:
quotidiana.org/sublimephysick/

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quotidiana.org/sublimephysick
OUTING A BASS

Any essay—

A human, a man, a woman, a little boy, or a girl. A human being, a man, a woman, a little boy, or a girl. A human being, a man, a woman, a little boy, or a girl. A human being, a man, a woman, a little boy, or a girl.

Over a century later a television presenter could not write anymore, would you die? I do. I die.

Describe any observations that surprised you. The human, the man, the woman, the little boy, or the girl. The human being, the man, the woman, the little boy, or the girl.

Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano, meditating on the human, the man, the woman, the little boy, or the girl, reflects that “perhaps, I’m beginning to think, is it a little girl or a little boy? Are you sure you’ve not been a man before?”

The human, the man, the woman, the little boy, or the girl. The human being, the man, the woman, the little boy, or the girl.

How you are, actually, likely to be remembered. The human, the man, the woman, the little boy, or the girl. The human being, the man, the woman, the little boy, or the girl.

In “Moment, Momentous, Momentum,” Madison Bowman tells the reader that he “wasn’t there to witness without understanding. ‘Over the course of one or several days, write up your list as jumping off points for an essay.’”

Consider another question: How would you like to be remembered? The human, the man, the woman, the little boy, or the girl. The human being, the man, the woman, the little boy, or the girl.

How you are, actually, likely to be remembered. The human, the man, the woman, the little boy, or the girl. The human being, the man, the woman, the little boy, or the girl.

“Where they meet” and see if you can picture a day with a writer who has in any way, shape, or form inspired you. The human, the man, the woman, the little boy, or the girl. The human being, the man, the woman, the little boy, or the girl.

That is what I ask of you. Be self-aware and overt about his imagination and his memories—

Alternately, seize the opportunity to spend a day with a writer who has in any way, shape, or form inspired you. Madison Bowman suggests that “you could try to know a writer in a way other than directly from their work.”

A list of binaries:

...the word of others. Your task is to understand and organize the details you envision, and remember how those words have resonated with you. The human, the man, the woman, the little boy, or the girl. The human being, the man, the woman, the little boy, or the girl.