Instructions: write out each passage by hand, paying attention to *how* the author writes--their vocabulary, their grammatical habits, etc. Then, once you're done, summarize what you like and dislike about their style--do they frequently use a word you dislike? Do they use a certain sentence structure you find effective? How would you characterize the style, and is it compelling?

Goal: To better articulate your taste, so you can produce writing in accordance with your taste

1. 9/20, Eric Harvey, "The Social History of the MP3"

Considering all the new music we have to sort through so far in the 21st century, we've sure been focusing an awful lot lately on two of the biggest stars of the 20th. Decades after their respective popular peaks, recent events reminded us, neither the Beatles nor Michael Jackson have loosened their grip on our imagination. Yet one particular thing I noticed amidst the nostalgia surrounding the latest (and likely last) Beatles CD reissues, and Jackson's sudden passing was a sense of resignation that the eras within which both stars emerged seem highly unlikely to happen again. The Beatles, in 1963-64 and 1967, and Michael Jackson in 1983-4 arguably represented for pop music what World Cups, the Olympics, and Super Bowls do for sports, and what blockbuster summer hits do for movies: the ability to command everyone's attention at once.

The latest chapters of these two long-running pop narratives not only celebrated their art and pop-culture impact, but also—with MJ posthumously topping the Billboard charts and millions preparing to shell out again for new copies of *Revolver* and more—commemorated the ritual of *paying* for it. It's a way of framing these events that could only happen now, at a time when mp3s and file-sharing networks have allowed millions of disparate global collaborators to create the largest shadow economy in history, which has eaten away at the music industry like termites on the foundation of an old house. In its place, an unstable infrastructure that has created infinite new demands for our attention, yet is far too unstable to support world-conquering superstars. We've all read the trend pieces and editorials lamenting the record industry's poor decisions and crumbling business model, the fact that kids don't value music anymore, and the outmoded strategies used to try to win back paying customers. So omnipresent have these discussions become, in fact, that it's possible the past 10 years could become the first decade of pop music to be remembered by history for its musical *technology* rather than the actual music itself.

Like: colon phrase at the end of a paragraph as a transition/hook

2. 9/21, Ezra Klein, “Happy 20th Anniversary, Gmail. I’m Sorry I’m Leaving You.”

There is no end of theories for why the internet feels so crummy these days. The New Yorker blames the shift to algorithmic feeds. Wired blames a cycle in which companies cease serving their users and begin monetizing them. The M.I.T. Technology Review blames ad-based business models. The Verge blames search engines. I agree with all these arguments. But here’s another: Our digital lives have become one shame closet after another.

A shame closet is that spot in your home where you cram the stuff that has nowhere else to go. It doesn’t have to be a closet. It can be a garage or a room or a chest of drawers or all of them at once. Whatever the space, it is defined by the absence of choices about what goes into it. There are things you need in there. There are things you will never need in there. But as the shame closet grows, the task of excavation or organization becomes too daunting to contemplate.

The shame closet era of the internet had a beginning. It was 20 years ago that Google unveiled Gmail.

Like: concise prose style

3. 9/22, Anne Powers, “How Joni Mitchell Pioneered Her Own Form of Artistic Genius”

As a woman [Joni Mitchell] wasn’t granted the power to define anything beyond her own experience and its resonances; listeners may have heard themselves in her disclosures, but they remained specific and private. One early interviewer talked to Mitchell about her music as “like peeping in a window on someone and then discussing with her what you have seen.” That’s very different from sitting down with Dylan and expounding on politics, mythology and the state of the world. A woman genius in those years was not perceived as engaging with the bigger picture. She simply made exquisite pictures of herself and her private life.

This is what often happens to women artists: for them, “genius” isolates and, at times, silences. The ones who figured out how to inhabit it had to take drastic measures. Think of Joni’s role models: Georgia O’Keeffe in her desert, Emily Dickinson shut away upstairs. Only such singular figures embodied the highest apex of artistic expression. And often, they got stuck there, pitied as much as they were revered for their need to stand apart.

Like: mix of complex and simple sentence structures

4. 9/23, Leslie Jamison, *The Empathy Exams*

“Empathy isn’t just remembering to say *that must really be hard*—it’s figuring out how to bring difficulty into the light so it can be seen at all. Empathy isn’t just listening, it’s asking the questions whose answers need to be listened to. Empathy requires inquiry as much as imagination. Empathy requires knowing you know nothing. Empathy means acknowledging a horizon of context that extends perpetually beyond what you can see: an old woman’s gonorrhea is connected to her guilt is connected to her marriage is connected to her children is connected to the days when she was a child. All this is connected to her domestically stifled mother, in turn, and to her parents’ un-broken marriage; maybe everything traces its roots to her very first period, how it shamed and thrilled her.

Empathy means realizing no trauma has discrete edges. Trauma bleeds. Out of wounds and across boundaries. Sadness becomes a seizure. Empathy demands another kind of porousness in response…

Empathy comes from the Greek empatheia—em (into) and pathos (feeling)—a penetration, a kind of travel. It suggests you enter another person’s pain as you’d enter another country, through immigration and customs, border crossing by way of query: What grows where you are? What are the laws? What animals graze there?

Like: parallel structure of opening paragraph for emphasis

5. 9/24, Whizy Kim, “America’s love of hot dogs, explained”

“I don’t think we have enough hot dogs,” Julianne Moore’s character whispers gloomily in Todd Haynes’s 2023 film *May December*. The scene that quickly became iconic online for how amusingly melodramatic it is also captures, perhaps inadvertently, America’s strange relationship with the oblong food. *Is* there such a thing as having enough hot dogs? As a culture, the answer seems to be no. The National Hot Dog and Sausage Council estimates that we eat somewhere in the region of 20 billion hot dogs every year, or about 70 per person. (Hot dog eating contest champion Joey Chestnut once downed a record 76 in 10 minutes.)

The hot dog’s popularity isn’t exactly surprising. It’s an undemanding food, coming to you precooked and ready to eat. It’s so easy to make that a child could do it, and indeed many of us did as kids. During the Covid lockdown, when other people had their hot girl walks, I entered my hot dog era, eating nothing else for a week straight in the stifling kitchen of my apartment. It turned out that I wasn’t alone: In March 2020, hot dog sales were already up by 127 percent for the year.

Like: opening hook that makes me wonder where the essay is going

6. 9/25, Constance Grady, “Why are we so obsessed with morning routines?”

Of all the pillars of internet content, surely one of the strongest is the genre where people outline their morning routine in grave and sanctimonious detail. They exist in every medium, in every platform, among every internet subculture.

TikTok has its Get Ready With Mes, where influencers chat over their plethora of skin-nourishing unguents and artful makeup products. Beauty YouTube has the more glamorous cousin, Vogue Beauty Secrets, in which dewy-skinned celebrities walk us through the many things they do to their faces every morning.

Artist blogs swap tips about the best way to keep Morning Pages. Powerful women, titans of their respective industries, tell the Cut “How I Get It Done.” And on LinkedIn and YouTube, lifehackers share their morning tricks for maximizing productivity.

The productive morning is the one really taking off these days, beloved by the wellness world and the rise-and-grinders alike. The reigning king of the productivity ritual is Andrew Huberman, the controversial Stanford neuroscientist and podcaster whose routine is always being described in vlogs as “scientifically perfect.”

Like: short paragraphs build momentum, make it easy to keep reading on

7. 9/26, Guy Lodge, “Deadpool’s obnoxious gay panic humour is a tiresome schoolyard taunt”

Even by the standards of opportunistic franchise cross-pollination that has fed the superhero film genre in recent years, Deadpool & Wolverine is a business merger disguised as a movie: two Marvel Comics characters previously under the jurisdiction of 20th Century Studios, now folded into the Marvel Cinematic Universe by Disney in the wake of the company’s 2019 acquisition of Fox. What fun! For the stern, steel-fingered Wolverine, this union entails more of an identity compromise than glib jokester Deadpool – a character already well-versed in the kind of wink-wink irony the MCU trades in. Co-written by Ryan Reynolds himself, Shawn Levy’s film certainly feels a more obvious extension of the first two Deadpool films than any of Wolverine’s previous vehicles. Played with an air of grizzled get-the-job-done exhaustion by Hugh Jackman, the latter often feels like an accessory to a louder, lewder protagonist.

For an MCU that has, in its post-Avengers era, increased its focus on minority representation and inclusivity, Deadpool brings more to the table than the hetero-masculine Wolverine. Introduced into the Marvel comics stable in 1992, the character was conceived as openly pansexual. “[Deadpool’s] brain cells are in constant flux,” explained Fabien Nicieza, Deadpool’s co-creator, on Twitter back in 2015. “He can be gay one minute, hetero the next, etc. All are valid.” Citing neurodivergence to explain a character’s sexuality may not be radically progressive, but in the world of mainstream superheroism, queer fans will take what scraps they can get.

Like: tone punctuates the subject matter well

8. 9/27, Laura Snapes, Katy Perry: Woman's World review – what regressive, warmed-over hell is this?

Hey ladies! I don't know about you but waking up this morning, I felt *different*. Changed. Possessed of some kind of ineffable life force. A long-suppressed inclination towards total world domination suddenly blossomed. It was kind of scary, but I knew that I could do anything I wanted with this feeling, like buy stuff or reveal the hitherto untapped complexities that I've always kept stashed under a bushel (you're telling me I could be sexy … *and* satirical?) or succeed in business or even become some kind of seltzer/shoe/apple cider vinegar mogul. I felt like the strong complex female main character in the strong complex female main character movie of my own life. What was this intoxicating sensation? As I watched Katy Perry's new video while cleaning my teeth – hey, I prize dental wellness and looking good just 4 me, I thought, sassily waggling my index finger in the slightly smeared mirror—I realised what had happened. I'd just been *empowered*, baby!

Perry's clubby missile of a new single, Woman's World, had affirmed to me that yes, it is a woman's world—and you're lucky to be livin' in it. In her woman's world, women are nuanced, winners, smart, soft, pretty, prickly, fiery *and* shiny. As the video demonstrated, you could be a Rosie the Riveter type (but, like, hot) or a businesswoman or a big sexy bionic horse. Women can have it all! Thank god someone finally said it.

Like: Irony of opening paragraph makes it felt by reader how cheesy the subject material's ideas of empowerment are

9. 9/28, Thomas Fuller, How Football Builds Community and Camaraderie Among Deaf Students

On the first day of practice of the 2021 season, Galvin Drake pulled into the parking lot of the California School for the Deaf in Riverside, music blaring. The thumping beats of Daft Punk and Damian Lazarus were so loud it seemed as if they could loosen the bolts holding together his green 2005 Toyota Camry. Galvin couldn't hear the melodies or the lyrics, but it didn't matter. Music had a different meaning for him than it did for hearing people. The beats pulsed through his seat. He didn't listen to music; he *felt* it. Late at night when he would drive near his home in Riverside, Galvin would turn it down, as a courtesy for his hearing neighbors. But on campus, he let it rip, often with the windows open.

Galvin was the assistant varsity football coach at the school, or CSDR, as everyone calls it. He was the team's enforcer, lecturing the players on the importance of weight lifting and eating well. No junk food and soda during football season, he told the student athletes. He looked the part. He could deadlift 405 pounds—not 400, but 405, he noted—and had the bulging muscles to prove it. He ended his text messages with a flexing biceps emoji. But on this first day of practice he was worried. The pandemic had forced the cancellation of football the year before, and everyone had languished in front of computer screens, attending their classes remotely on Zoom and playing video games when class was over. Many of the players were overweight. All were out of shape.

Like: opening essay with a focus on a singular individual to garner investment in narrative

10. 9/29, Todd May, Should Humanity Pay the Ultimate Price for its Crimes Against Nature?

"Depend upon it, sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully."
–Samuel Johnson

Hangings will do that sort of thing: concentrate the mind. But how about a moral hanging? Does it concentrate the mind? And what is a moral hanging anyway?

First things first. A moral hanging, which is a technical term that I just made up, is when you know you've done something really bad that you can't undo, and the more you live, the more you'll keep doing it. It's a hanging because getting rid of your future is the morally right thing to do. (Whether you *deserve* it is another question.) It's also a hanging because you're just hanging there. You can't get out of it.

In a book that is about to be published, *Should We Go Extinct: A Philosophical Dilemma for Our Unbearable Times*, I raise the possibility that humanity itself might be subject to a moral hanging. The rough idea is that the factory farming, deforestation, climate destruction, scientific testing of animals, and so forth that we engage in creates so much misery for our fellow creatures that it might be better if we no longer procreated—if we just let our species die out.

Like: epithet and rhetorical questions catch my interest and lead me towards the essay's topic

11. 9/30, Miguel Macias, The Emotion I Didn't Expect as a New Parent: Regret

When friends ask me how I'm feeling 18 months after having a baby, I usually tell them that it has been wonderful. Sometimes, though, if I'm feeling particularly confessional, I will smile coyly and say: "Well, this is not the life I wanted. But the life I had before was not the life I wanted, either." I say it in a cheeky, half-joking way, hoping the gravity of the comment will go unnoticed. But it's not a joke.

Since my daughter, Olivia, was born, I have cycled through a huge range of emotions. I expect many of them would be familiar to any parent: joy, exhaustion, deep love, confusion, wonder, exasperation, happiness, sadness. But there is another, quieter, emotion that comes up every now and then. It's a feeling that's so difficult to talk about, so universally taboo, that I feel nervous expressing it even to the people closest to me: regret.

Like: the repetition of "but" to keep changing direction, giving the piece a feeling that mirrors the feelings described by the author

12. 10/1, Audre Lorde, “Poetry is Not a Luxury”

At this point in time, I believe that women carry within ourselves the possibility for fusion of these two approaches so necessary for survival, and we come closest to this combination in our poetry. I speak here of poetry as a revelatory distillation of experience, not the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word poetry to mean—in order to cover a desperate wish for imagination without insight.

For women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives.

As they become known to and accepted by us, our feelings and the honest exploration of them become sanctuaries and spawning grounds for the most radical and daring of ideas. They become a safe-house for that difference so necessary to change and the conceptualization of any meaningful action. Right now, I could name at least ten ideas I would have found intolerable or incomprehensible and frightening, except as they came after dreams and poems. This is not idle fantasy, but a disciplined attention to the true meaning of “it feels right to me.” We can train ourselves to respect our feelings and to transpose them into a language so they can be shared. And where that language does not yet exist, it is our poetry which helps to fashion it. Poetry is not only dream and vision; it is the skeleton architecture of our lives. It lays the foundations for a future of change, a bridge across our fears of what has never been before.

Like: mix of the declarative and the artistic, the poetic and the activist in both sentence structure and vocabulary

13. 10/2, Joan Didion, *The Year of Magical Thinking*

I never saw a wild thing / sorry for itself, D. H. Lawrence wrote, in a much-quoted four-line homily that turns out on examination to be free of any but tendentious meaning. A small bird will drop frozen dead from a bough / without ever having felt sorry for itself.

This may be what Lawrence (or we) would prefer to believe about wild things, but consider those dolphins who refuse to eat after the death of a mate. Consider those geese who search for the lost mate until they themselves become disoriented and die. In fact the grieving have urgent reasons, even an urgent need, to feel sorry for themselves. Husbands walk out, wives walk out, divorces happen, but these husbands and wives leave behind them webs of intact associations, however acrimonious. Only the survivors of a death are truly left alone. The connections that made up their life—both the deep connections and the apparently (until they are broken) insignificant connections—have all vanished. John and I were married for forty years. During all but the first “five months of our marriage, when John was still working at Time, we both worked at home. We were together twenty-four hours a day, a fact that remained a source of both merriment and foreboding to my mother and aunts. “For richer for poorer but never for lunch,” one or another of them frequently said in the early years of our marriage. I could not count the times during the average day when something would come up that I needed to tell him. This impulse did not end with his death. What ended was the possibility of response.

Like: response to/build upon other thinker/common conception to introduce new POV; the resonance between loss and stark prose structure

14. 10/3, David Foster Wallace, “E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction”

Most of the fiction writers I know are Americans under forty. I don't know whether fiction writers under forty watch more television than other American species. Statisticians report that television is watched over six hours a day in the average American household. I don't know any fiction writers who live in average American households. I suspect Louise Erdrich might. Actually I have never seen an average American household. Except on TV.

So right away you can see a couple of things that look potentially great, for U.S. fiction writers, about U.S. television. First, television does a lot of our predatory human research for us. American human beings are a slippery and protean bunch, in real life, as hard to get any kind of univocal handle on as a literary territory that's gone from Darwinianly naturalistic to cybernetically post-postmodern in eighty years. But television comes equipped with just such a syncretic handle. If we want to know what American normality is—what Americans want to regard as normal—we can trust television. For television's whole raison is reflecting what people want to see. It's a mirror. Not the Stendhalian mirror reflecting the blue sky and mud puddle. More like the overlit bathroom mirror before which the teenager monitors his biceps and determines his better profile. This kind of window on nervous American self-perception is just invaluable, fictionwise. And writers can have faith in television. There is a lot of money at stake, after all; and television retains the best demographers applied social science has to offer, and these researchers can determine precisely what Americans in 1990 are, want, see: what we as Audience want to see ourselves as. Television, from the surface on down, is about desire. Fictionally speaking, desire is the sugar in human food.

Like: varied sentence structure, especially the brief interjection after more complex ideas

15. 10/4, Michael Lewis, “Faking It”

When Internet stocks began their free fall in March 2000, the Internet was finally put in its proper place. It was nothing more than a fast delivery service for information—that was what serious people who had either lost a lot of money in the late stages of the Internet boom or, more likely, failed to make money began to say now. The profit-making potential of the Internet had been overrated, and so the social effects of the Internet were presumed to be overrated. But they weren't. Speeding up information was not the only thing the Internet had done. The Internet had made it possible for people to thwart all sorts of rules and conventions. It wasn't just the commercial order that was in flux. Many forms of authority were secured by locks waiting to be picked. The technology and money-making potential of the Internet were far less interesting than the effects people were allowing it to have on their lives and what these, in turn, said about those lives.

What was happening on the Internet buttressed a school of thought in sociology known as role theory. The role theorists argue that we have no "self" as such. Our selves are merely the masks we wear in response to the social situations in which we find ourselves. The Internet had offered up a new set of social situations, to which people had responded by grabbing for a new set of masks. People take on the new tools they are ready for and make use of only what they need, how they need it. If they were using the Internet to experiment with their identities, it was probably because they found their old identities inadequate. If the Internet was giving the world a shove in a certain direction, it was probably because the world already felt inclined to move in that direction. The Internet was telling us what we wanted to become.

Like: concluding sentence of the second paragraph acts as a good summary of the ideas of the paragraph before moving on in the essay

16. 10/5, Tyler Cowen, “Maybe Legalizing Weed Wasn’t Such a Great Idea”

Measures of GDP and GDP per capita are usually good metrics for human well-being—but not always. Cigarette sales, for instance, are not as beneficial for citizens as much as the initial GDP boost might indicate, because nicotine is bad for most people.

Marijuana sales involve some of the same problems. Many people want to smoke it, but it is not good for everyone.

Marijuana advocates argue that it is less addictive than alcohol and healthier than cigarettes. They point out that it can also be great fun and a source of social bonding. Even if this is all true—and I have no reason to believe that it isn’t—the aggregate numbers suggest some very real concerns.

In states with legal marijuana, self-reported usage rose by 28%. Meanwhile, substance use disorders increased by 17%. Chronic homelessness went up by 35%, a possible sign that marijuana use leads to a downward financial spiral, and perhaps job loss, for many users. Arrests increased by 13%, although reported crime did not itself go up.

This combination of results is difficult to interpret. Perhaps some of the increase is due to governments investing more resources in law enforcement. It’s also true that numbers do not quantify the pleasure enjoyed by responsible marijuana smokers.

That said, these results are hardly a great advertisement for the legalization experiments. They stand in jarring contrast to what advocates promised: an end to black markets, safer marijuana and a better-protected user population. And if I may be allowed to think less like an economist for a moment, I confess I don’t feel good about a social practice that lowers effective IQ. No one smokes pot to perform better on their SATs.

I remain of two minds on the entire question. My libertarian leanings lead me to strongly oppose throwing people in jail for what is essentially self-regarding behavior, in this case marijuana usage. Yet the empiricist in me can see that marijuana legalization has so far proved a disappointment.

Like: the willingness to occupy the “two minds” position

17. 10/6, Octavia Butler, “Positive Obsession”

Shyness is shit.

It isn’t cute or feminine or appealing. It’s torment, and it’s shit.

I spent a lot of my childhood and adolescence staring at the ground. It’s a wonder I didn’t become a geologist. I whispered. People were always saying, “Speak up! We can’t hear you. I memorized required reports and poems for school, then cried my way out of having to recite. Some teachers condemned me for not studying. Some forgave me for not being very bright. Only a few saw my shyness.

“She’s so backward,” some of my relatives said.

“She’s so nice and quiet,” tactful friends of my mother said.

I believed I was ugly and stupid, clumsy, and socially hopeless. I also thought that everyone would notice these faults if I drew attention to myself. I wanted to disappear. Instead, I grew to be six feet tall. Boys in particular seemed to assume that I had done this growing deliberately and that I should be ridiculed for it as often as possible.

I hid out in a big pink notebook—one that would hold a whole ream of paper. I made myself a universe in it. There I could be a magic horse, a Martian, a telepath. . . . There I could be anywhere but here, any time but now, with any people but these.

Like: punctuating longer more meditative paragraphs with blunt phrases/single-line paragraphs

18. 10/7, James Baldwin, “Notes of a Native Son”

On the 29th of July, in 1943, my father died. On the same day, a few hours later, his last child was born. I had not known my father very well. We had got on badly, partly because we shared, in our different fashions, the vice of stubborn pride. When he was dead I realized that I had hardly ever spoken to him. When he had been dead a long time I began to wish I had. It seems to be typical of life in America, where opportunities, real and fancied, are thicker than anywhere else on the globe, that the second generation has no time to talk to the first. No one, including my father, seems to have known exactly how old he was, but his mother had been born during slavery. He was of the first generation of free men. He, along with thousands of other Negroes, came North after 1919 and I was part of that generation which had never seen the landscape of what Negroes sometimes call the Old Country.

Like: surprising juxtaposition of first two sentences, followed by the intimate realization of the third, sets up emotional tone and content of the essay

19. 10/8, Hunter S. Thompson, “Song of the Sausage Creature”

There are some things nobody needs in this world, and a bright-red, hunch-back, warp-speed 900cc cafe racer is one of them—but I want one anyway, and on some days I actually believe I need one. That is why they are dangerous.

Everybody has fast motorcycles these days. Some people go 150 miles an hour on two-lane blacktop roads, but not often. There are too many oncoming trucks and too many radar cops and too many stupid animals in the way. You have to be a little crazy to ride these super-torque high-speed crotch rockets anywhere except a racetrack - and even there, they will scare the whimpering shit out of you... There is, after all, not a pig's eye worth of difference between going head-on into a Peterbilt or sideways into the bleachers. On some days you get what you want, and on others, you get what you need.

When Cycle World called me to ask if I would road-test the new Harley Road King, I got uppity and said I'd rather have a Ducati superbike. It seemed like a chic decision at the time, and my friends on the superbike circuit got very excited. "Hot damn," they said. "We will take it to the track and blow the bastards away."

"Balls," I said. "Never mind the track. The track is for punks. We are Road People. We are Cafe Racers."

The Cafe Racer is a different breed, and we have our own situations. Pure speed in sixth gear on a 5000-foot straightaway is one thing, but pure speed in third gear on a gravel-strewn downhill ess-turn is quite another.

But we like it. A thoroughbred Cafe Racer will ride all night through a fog storm in freeway traffic to put himself into what somebody told him was the ugliest and tightest decreasing-radius turn since Genghis Khan invented the corkscrew.

Like: rambling quality of style feels genuine, personable

20. 10/9, David Sedaris, “You Can’t Kill the Rooster”

It often seems that my brother and I were raised in two completely different households. He's eleven years younger than I am, and by the time he reached high school, the rest of us had all left home. When I was young, we weren't allowed to say "shut up," but once the Rooster hit puberty it had become acceptable to shout, "Shut your motherfucking hole." The drug laws had changed as well. "No smoking pot" became "no smoking pot in the house," before it finally petered out to "please don't smoke any more pot in the living room."

My mother was, for the most part, delighted with my brother and regarded him with the bemused curiosity of a brood hen discovering she has hatched a completely different species. "I think it was very nice of Paul to give me this vase," she once said, arranging a bouquet of wildflowers into the skull-shaped bong my brother had left on the dining-room table. "It's nontraditional, but that's the Rooster's way. He's a free spirit, and we're lucky to have him."

Like most everyone else in our suburban neighborhood, we were raised to meet a certain standard. My father expected me to attend an Ivy League university, where I'd make straight A's, play football, and spend my off-hours strumming guitar with the student jazz combo. My inability to throw a football was exceeded only by my inability to master the guitar. My grades were average at best, and eventually I learned to live with my father's disappointment. Fortunately there were six of us children, and it was easy to get lost in the crowd. My sisters and I managed to sneak beneath the wire of his expectations, but we worried about my brother, who was seen as the family's last hope.

Like: the contrast of the “every family” narrative with the peculiarities of author’s brother

21. 10/10, Jia Tolentino, “Athleisure, barre and kale: the tyranny of the ideal woman”

The ideal woman has always been generic. I bet you can picture the version of her that runs the show today. She’s of indeterminate age but resolutely youthful presentation. She’s got glossy hair and the clean, shameless expression of a person who believes she was made to be looked at. She is often luxuriating when you see her—on remote beaches, under stars in the desert, across a carefully styled table, surrounded by beautiful possessions or photogenic friends. Showcasing herself at leisure is either the bulk of her work or an essential part of it; in this, she is not so unusual—for many people today, especially for women, packaging and broadcasting your image is a readily monetizable skill. She has a personal brand, and probably a boyfriend or husband: he is the physical realization of her constant, unseen audience, reaffirming her status as an interesting subject, a worthy object, a self-generating spectacle with a viewership attached.

Can you see this woman yet? She looks like an Instagram—which is to say, an ordinary woman reproducing the lessons of the marketplace, which is how an ordinary woman evolves into an ideal. The process requires maximal obedience on the part of the woman in question, and—ideally—her genuine enthusiasm, too. This woman is sincerely interested in whatever the market demands of her (good looks, the impression of indefinitely extended youth, advanced skills in self-presentation and self-surveillance). She is equally interested in whatever the market offers her—in the tools that will allow her to look more appealing, to be even more endlessly presentable, to wring as much value out of her particular position as she can.

The ideal woman, in other words, is always optimizing. She takes advantage of technology, both in the way she broadcasts her image and in the meticulous improvement of that image itself. Her hair looks expensive. She spends lots of money taking care of her skin, a process that has taken on the holy aspect of a spiritual ritual and the mundane regularity of setting a morning alarm

Like: use of the second person and prompting of the reader feels personable

EXTRA PRACTICE:

22. 10/11, Mindy Kaling, “Flick Chicks”

What I’d really like to write is a romantic comedy. This is my favorite kind of movie. I feel almost embarrassed revealing this, because the genre has been so degraded in the past twenty years that saying you like romantic comedies is essentially an admission of mild stupidity. But that has not stopped me from enjoying them.

I like watching people fall in love onscreen so much that I can suspend my disbelief in the contrived situations that occur only in the heightened world of romantic comedies. I have come to enjoy the moment when the male lead, say, slips and falls right on top of the expensive wedding cake. I actually feel robbed when the female lead’s dress doesn’t get torn open at a baseball game while the JumboTron camera is on her. I regard romantic comedies as a subgenre of sci-fi, in which the world operates according to different rules than my regular human world. For me, there is no difference between Ripley from “Alien” and any Katherine Heigl character. They are equally implausible. They’re all participating in a similar level of fakey razzle-dazzle, and I enjoy every second of it.

Like: honesty of emotion being described

23. 10/12, Chuck Klosterman, “The Great American Stasis”

Like a cop in an unmarked car across the street from a meth lab, I watch America. I am not in America, but I stare at it. I stare at it all day and much of the night, compulsively, over the Internet and on TV stations I only intermittently understand and through newspapers I cannot read at all. I moved 3,960 miles east of New York, unconsciously hoping I would forget that America is there. It was a horrible plan. America became pretty much the only thing I have thought about for fourteen consecutive weeks. Which would be totally fine, I suppose, except that nothing ever happens.

In the United States, it always feels like everything is changing, all the time. We are constantly reminded how the world is advancing at an accelerated pace and that the state of today has no relationship to yesterday or tomorrow. But this is not true. I am starting to suspect the world is changing much less dramatically than we like to imagine. This is a confusing time to be alive, and we assume this collective confusion must be a product of how everything is eternally evolving. But separated by time and language and water, I see little evidence of this. What I see is a relatively static society that consciously confuses itself through media and interprets that confusion as progress. I did not authentically believe this was true for most of my life, but I do now. We have mediated our culture into concrete.

Like: imagery of the first clause (mundane, ordinary, familiar) mixed with the oddness of the second clause (what does it mean to “watch America”?)

24. 10/13, Jackson Arn, “In “The Texas Chain Saw Massacre,” Feeding Your Family Comes First”

Famous horror directors tend to get pestered for origin stories. Being polite people, for the most part, they usually oblige, which is how I know that an elementary-school bully named Fred Kruger beat up Wes Craven, the six-year-old Alfred Hitchcock was sent to an actual jail cell, and little Brian De Palma used to visit the hospital where his father worked to giggle at the gore. When Tobe Hooper died, in 2017, having directed several worthy films but only one “Texas Chain Saw Massacre,” various juicy-sounding bits made the rounds. Growing up in Austin, he met a doctor who mentioned a Halloween mask made from human flesh. An aunt in Wisconsin told him about Ed Gein, the killer who converted corpses into lampshades. Years later, he was on the U.T. Austin campus the day an ex-marine named Charles Whitman climbed to the top of the clock tower and murdered passersby with a hunting rifle. He was rattled by the image of his mother having a lung removed.

The implication of these kinds of stories, or, at least, of the media’s demand for them, is that horror requires some deep psychological wound, that you’d choose to spend your life scaring people only because something scary happened to you first. There may be a dribble of truth in this, though nobody seems to demand similar explanations from, say, action directors. It’s especially ironic in Hooper’s case; few modern horror films are less interested in psychological backstory than “The Texas Chain Saw Massacre.” We’re told next to nothing about the victims’ relationships with one another, or their lives back home. No childhood trauma lurks behind the killers the way it does for Norman Bates or Michael Myers. If any -ology helps us understand these people, it’s sociology: assembly-line slaughter makes the underclasses deranged; technology makes them irrelevant; unemployment makes them hungry. Scarcity underlies almost everything the characters do, whether they’re killers or not—like that other stagflation classic, “Mad Max,” this is a story about precious fuel and the lengths some people will go to get it. The youths discover a household of cannibals because their van is low on gas and they hear a generator somewhere. Later, one of the cannibals takes care to switch off all the lights in his store—power bills being enough to “drive a man outta business”—before going off to feast on the alternative energy source he and his family have discovered.

Like: offering a new interpretation/perspective on a genre, setting up the implication/expectation and then defying it

25. 10/14, Virginia Heffernan, “I Saw the Face of God in a TSMC Semiconductor Factory”

SEMICONDUCTOR FABRICATION PLANTS, known as fabs, are among civilization’s great marvels. The silicon microchips fashioned inside them are the sine qua non of the built world, so essential to human life that they’re often treated as basic goods, commodities. They’re certainly commodities in the medieval sense: amenities, conveniences, comforts. In the late ’80s, some investors even experimented in trading them on futures markets.

But unlike copper and alfalfa, chips aren’t raw materials. Perhaps they’re currency, the coin of the global realm, denominated in units of processing power. Indeed, just as esoteric symbols transform banal cotton-linen patches into dollar bills, cryptic latticework layered onto morsels of common silicon—using printmaking techniques remarkably similar to the ones that mint paper money—turns nearly valueless material into the building blocks of value itself. This is what happens at TSMC.

Like money, silicon chips are both densely material and the engine of nearly all modern abstraction, from laws to concepts to cognition itself. And the power relations and global economy of semiconductor chips can turn as mind-boggling as cryptocurrency markets and derivative securities. Or as certain theologies, ones that feature nano-angels dancing on nano-pins.

Like: condensing of abstract philosophizing onto a (literally) small object as the subject

26. 10/15, Arthur Asseraf, “My Time Machine”

I am not convinced that we live at the same time as the people we love. I cannot be the only child who felt like their grandparents came from a different planet. Growing up, the entirety of the human past appeared to fit in one person: my grandmother. A combination of family estrangements and premature deaths meant that she was the only person of that generation around to raise me. My father’s mother was evidence of a world before me and my parents, a world contained to her apartment.

This space, in the western suburbs of Paris, had its own rules. The walls were covered with a 70s velvet wallpaper, and its colour was exactly the same as the clay courts of the tennis matches she would fervently watch on TV. My parents would drop me off, she would fix me lunch, and at the end of the afternoon, she would bribe me with money to come back more often.

On holidays, my whole family would congregate within those same orange walls, where we would eat couscous with silver cutlery around her large table. She was a terrible cook – having worked her whole life (on top of doing all the housework), she had never had time for the kitchen. But given the ones I was raised on, their taste is always the one I judge other dishes against.

While I sat there sipping flat, caffeine-free Coke, which she insisted was the only correct form of Coke, she would tell me many stories about her life.

Like: how author engages senses (taste and touch especially)

27. 10/16, Kamran Javadizadeh, “Ahead of Time: On Poetry and Mourning”

NINETY-THREE DAYS before she died, my sister sent me a message. Five and a half years earlier, Bita had been diagnosed with stage four intrahepatic cholangiocarcinoma, a rare and deadly form of cancer. She was forty-three. There was a thirteen-centimeter mass—roughly the size of a grapefruit—in her liver. When the radiologist friend who’d helped get Bita into Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center saw me in the hospital corridor after her diagnosis, he burst into tears.

Bita had been in treatment ever since; I had been beside her for nearly every appointment. They tended to be on Mondays: I’d take the train from Philadelphia to New York City and meet her in the waiting area of her oncologist’s clinic. Inside, I’d watch and listen and take notes. I discovered I had a talent for explaining to the doctor what my sister wanted to know but was reluctant to ask directly, and for explaining to Bita the implications of what he’d actually said rather than what she was afraid she’d heard. I’m a poetry critic and a teacher. What I did in the oncologist’s clinic was not so different from what I do in the classroom or on the page. I listened and redescribed what I’d heard; I connected threads, or tried to.

Now it was the sixth summer after her diagnosis, and I had brought my six-year-old daughter from our home in Pennsylvania to California to visit my parents and stay for a few weeks in the house where Bita and I had grown up. Bita had herself been six when we’d moved to California from Iran; I had been one. For the first few years we shared a bedroom. I don’t remember much of it. The shag carpet in our room was red, faded from the sunlight that poured through the sliding glass doors each afternoon. At night, our mother would tuck us in. In my earliest memories, we’re each in our own bed, lying in the dark. I am refusing to speak Farsi. Each night, before she lets her leave the room, Bita makes our mother promise that everything is going to be okay.

Like: multiple different temporal registers operating rather than linear narrative of life/illness

28. 10/17, Hanif Abudrraquib, “We’re More Ghosts Than People”

I don’t find myself investing much in the kingdom of heaven. It has always been this way for me, even as a child. I prayed often, sometimes the requisite five times a day in my Muslim household. But I did it out of a sense of duty to my living, not what might exist after my living.

I can’t control my own arrival to whatever the promised land may or may not be, because I don’t have the rubric in front of me. I have sometimes been a good person who does bad things, and sometimes I’ve been a bad person who does good things. The way the afterlife is most often discussed is by way of a scale that sorts into binary categories. I grew up with Muslims who insisted that every bit of food left on their plate after a meal would be weighed against them on the day of judgment. I considered this: arriving in front of the robed choir, a few grains of rice tipping the scale toward an irreconcilable level of bad, banishing me to some fiery underworld.

In early 2019, spinning through *Red Dead Redemption* for the first time, I became obsessed with the idea of a heaven for someone who wasn’t real. Someone I had come to love, but who only existed in a fictional realm. It was a private thought. Discussing love and sanctification like this seems foolish, probably a byproduct of my many newfound chambers of loneliness. I wanted not only a kinship with this not-real someone, I wanted to save them, and save myself in doing so.

Like: juxtaposition of an existential concept with a video game

29. 10/18, John Green, *The Anthropocene Reviewed*

Now, many people find the artificiality of Diet Dr Pepper revolting. You often hear people say, “There are so many chemicals in it.” Of course, there are also lots of chemicals in wine, or coffee, or air. The underlying concern, though, is a sensible one: Diet Dr Pepper is just *so* profoundly artificial. But that’s why I love it. Diet Dr Pepper allows me to enjoy a relatively safe taste that was engineered for me. When I drink it, I think of the kids at that soda fountain in Waco, Texas, most of whom rarely knew the pleasures of an ice-cold drink of any kind, and how totally enjoyable those first Dr Peppers must’ve been.

Each time I drink Diet Dr Pepper, I am newly astonished. Look at what humans can do! They can make ice-cold, sugary-sweet, zero-calorie soda that tastes like everything and also like nothing. I don’t labor under the delusion that Diet Dr Pepper is good for me, but, in moderation, it also probably isn’t bad for me. Drinking too much Diet Dr Pepper can be bad for your teeth and may increase other health risks. But as Dr. Aaron Carroll puts it in his book *The Bad Food Bibl*e, “There’s a potential—and, likely, very real—harm from consuming added sugar. There is likely none from artificial sweeteners.”

So Diet Dr Pepper probably isn’t a health risk for me. And yet I feel as if I’m committing a sin whenever I drink Diet Dr Pepper. Nothing that sweet can be truly virtuous. But it’s an exceptionally minor vice, and for whatever reason, I’ve always felt like I *need* a vice. I don’t know whether this feeling is universal, but I have some way-down vibrating part of my subconscious that needs to self-destruct, at least a little bit.

Like: a willingness to be surprised by the seemingly ordinary/everyday

30. 10/19, Ta-Nehisi Coates, “Letter to My Son”

I write you in your 15th year. I am writing you because this was the year you saw Eric Garner choked to death for selling cigarettes; because you know now that Renisha McBride was shot for seeking help, that John Crawford was shot down for browsing in a department store. And you have seen men in uniform drive by and murder Tamir Rice, a 12-year-old child whom they were oath-bound to protect. And you know now, if you did not before, that the police departments of your country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body. It does not matter if the destruction is the result of an unfortunate overreaction. It does not matter if it originates in a misunderstanding. It does not matter if the destruction springs from a foolish policy. Sell cigarettes without the proper authority and your body can be destroyed. Turn into a dark stairwell and your body can be destroyed. The destroyers will rarely be held accountable. Mostly they will receive pensions.

There is nothing uniquely evil in these destroyers or even in this moment. The destroyers are merely men enforcing the whims of our country, correctly interpreting its heritage and legacy. This legacy aspires to the shackling of black bodies. It is hard to face this. But all our phrasing—*race relations*, *racial chasm*, *racial justice*, *racial profiling*, *white privilege*, even *white supremacy*—serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscle, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth. You must never look away from this. You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regressions all land, with great violence, upon the body. And should one live in such a body? What should be our aim beyond meager survival of constant, generational, ongoing battery and assault? I have asked this question all my life. I have sought the answer through my reading and writings, through the music of my youth, through arguments with your grandfather, with your mother. I have searched for answers in nationalist myth, in classrooms, out on the streets, and on other continents. The question is unanswerable, which is not to say futile. The greatest reward of this constant interrogation, of confrontation with the brutality of my country, is that it has freed me from ghosts and myths.

Like: the use of the second person as readers literally bear witness to Coates’s dialogue with his son