

She applied to my class on first-person writing a few weeks later. Her application began:

About three years ago, I started a list. It began in a marbled notebook but has since evolved inside the walls of my word processor: *Interesting stuff*. That's what I call it. I'll admit it's become a bit of an addiction. I add to it in class, in the library, before bed, and on trains. It has everything from descriptions of a waiter's hand gestures, to my cab driver's eyes, to strange things that happen to me or a way to phrase something. I have 32 single-spaced pages of interesting stuff in my life.

In my class, which she took in the spring of her junior year, she drew on those thirty-two pages of interesting stuff to write a series of essays that her classmates, in their written critiques, festooned with awestruck adjectives: *beautiful, vivid, vibrant, visual, fresh, direct, lyrical, compelling, evocative, precise, confident, honest, startling*. (Three of the pieces in this book are from that class. Others are from Yale writing classes taught by John Crowley and Cathy Shufro; some are from student periodicals; and three—"Baggage Claim," "Sclerotherapy," and "I Kill for Money"—were written during Marina's junior and senior years at the Buckingham Browne & Nichols School, in classes taught by Harry Thomas and Brian Staveley.)

Many of my students sound forty years old. They are articulate but derivative, their own voices muffled by their desire to skip over their current age and experience, which they fear trivial, and land on some version of polished adulthood without passing Go. Marina was twenty-one and sounded twenty-one: a brainy twenty-one, a twenty-one who knew her way around the English language, a twenty-one who understood that there were few better subjects than being young

and uncertain and starry-eyed and frustrated and hopeful. When she read her work aloud around our seminar table, it would make us snort with laughter, and then it would turn on a dime and break our hearts.

I always ask my students to append to their final essay a list of "Personal Pitfalls"—the aspects of their writing they wish to work on in the future. These were some of Marina's:

- Too much polysyndeton.* Watch it!
- Don't overdo the anaphora.**
- Be careful of weird strange phrases and their prepositions.
- Be careful of parallels.
- Make your titles good! Don't just choose them at the last minute! Avoid alliteration!
- Make sure modifiers make sense.
- Add more real stories when talking about general ideas.
- Make sure to spell-check homophones like "it's" and "its" by searching the document before finishing.
- Don't use too many adverbs in one sentence.
- Similes must actually be capable of doing their thing. You can't "curl up like a spoon."
- Unusual phrases work better at the end of paragraphs.
- I lay an egg, I laid an egg, I have laid an egg. I lie, I lay, I have lain.
- Topic indecision—just get over it!
- Make sure tenses are consistent.
- Don't use two prepositions in a row.
- Don't get too attached to things. It only took you a minute to write that sentence!
- THERE CAN ALWAYS BE A BETTER THING!

* Polysyndeton is the use of multiple conjunctions: "A and B and C" instead of "A, B, and C."

** Anaphora is the repetition of initial words or phrases.