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**TEXT prose**

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***Screams on the Page (or: Not Your Typical Trauma-Informed Craft Essay)***

1.

Let's start with a flashback. This is that kind of essay. I remember the moment and location if not the exact date or even the year. I'd have been twenty or so, seated in the counsellor's office, quaking with rage at whatever insane thing my parents had just done. I'd have been a junior by then – not a senior yet, but so close. I had ended up at my hometown university, where both of my parents worked, mostly by accident. Officially I withdrew from high school. I got my GED, placed out of about half my first-year courses, and was a sophomore at sixteen. But everyone in town knew what really went down: I got kicked out. A fire was involved. It was clumsiness, not vandalism or arson, not that it mattered. I was accused of a lot of things, things I either hadn't done or couldn't help, plus some other things the school's administration couldn't prove. At one point they threatened to press criminal charges. Things got interesting, even dramatic. We lawyered up. Nothing stuck. Having previously been the kind of student who goes to the Ivy League and the Olympics before discovering the cure for cancer and winning the Nobel or the Pulitzer or both (this is not as hyperbolic as it might sound) I had crash-landed back in my hometown in resplendent disgrace. To say my parents didn't handle the transition well would be ... *kind*, so let's opt for kindness. My parents didn't handle the transition well. Besides, they had issues of their

own: alcohol, PTSD, other forms of mental illness, awful family secrets, the endless acrimonious slog of the divorce.

So, there I was, a trembling erstwhile hyperachiever, droning to my college counsellor about the relentless onslaught of material I kept having to live through. To round out the character development: I think I'd outgrown my peroxide phase by then and taken to wearing my hair short. Had I gotten glasses yet? Maybe so. The loud shirts and dangly earrings would also have gone by the wayside by then. The eighties were either over or about to be. I'd been the centre of too much attention, didn't like it, and didn't want to attract even more. Importantly, I already knew I was a writer, already knew I had the necessary strand of authorial avarice that can spot a good narrative when I'm in the middle of one. Someday I'm going to write a book about all this shit, I told the counsellor. What happened at school, the family stuff, every bit. She nodded. Smiled. I remember she had a speck of fuchsia lipstick on one of her teeth. I didn't mention it, though. She was kind. In our sessions, she'd been consistent in her insistence that after graduation, I needed to move as far away from my family as I could get.

What are you going to call the book? she asked.

I thought it over. I'd settled down a bit, stopped shaking. That's usually how our sessions ended. *Civil War*, I said, and that brings us to the end of our flashback.

## 2.

This is an essay about writing essays about trauma. This is also an essay about writing books about trauma: nonfiction, obviously; fiction too. I've done both. For a change of pace, earlier this year I wrote a novel (titled *Stillpoint* – it'll be published eventually) about a guy who *hadn't* experienced family trauma growing up, or not much. It turned out pretty well, if I do say so myself, and I might try it again sometime. Perhaps I should rethink that multi-part topic sentence then. This is an essay about writing about trauma, or trying to. What we expect from it. What actually happens, what doesn't, what won't. I'm no everyman, but I've had time to think about this – and to research it. I should warn you, it'll get kind of gross.

## 3.

In the classic traditional five-paragraph academic essay, the thesis statement typically appears at the end of the introductory paragraph. That first paragraph sets the stage for the discussion that follows, and the thesis statement is your argument – otherwise known as your actual point. You then have three body paragraphs in which you argue

your case with examples and evidence. In the last paragraph, you wrap things up by restating what you've said. But don't repeat your own words like I've done here (*paragraph paragraph paragraph*). We must never repeat words lest we blunt their effectiveness.

My thesis statement, informed by a great deal of argument and domestic violence and state violence and a pandemic and some academic bullying and the former employer I had to take to court and also some culture shock in several countries and a number of failed relationships and a couple of intervals of financial struggle and some health struggles both mental and physical as well as the aforementioned childhood horror show, is that many of us are thinking about trauma-writing the wrong way. The thinking goes like this: if you've experienced trauma, then, just, you know, write it all down. Lather, rinse, repeat. Get it out of your head and onto the page. Presto change-o! You're all better now, or on your way. Forever and after, you will move through life in a gently syrupy state of grace. You will fall asleep the second your head hits the pillow. You will have regular bowel movements. You will know calmness, or at least you will scream less.

My thesis, to put a finer point on it, is that where recovering from trauma is concerned, we don't really know what *better* looks like. It's not the same as *before*. The milestones are subtle and easy to miss. We lack the vocabulary of psychological healing, and it's hard to chart progress toward an ending that isn't an endpoint. Flesh wounds, infections, and broken bones are tangible. The symptoms can be seen and/or felt. So can the improvement. If you can't see the wound, how can you be sure it's healed? How do you talk about it?

For clarity: there's no going back. Time runs one way.

#### 4.

Time for another flashback. In a classic traditional five-paragraph academic essay, this would be the first body paragraph. The topic sentence would (I'm sure this will come as a surprise) introduce the topic I'm about to discuss. Topic sentences work best when they're the simple declarative kind. Years of teaching ESL and various flavors of academic English in Korea and Hong Kong taught me that. I didn't learn this stuff in elementary school, nor did I pick it up in the prestigious residential STEM school that I oops kind of set on fire and got my ass booted out of. I did write that book, by the way, and perhaps you can see what I did there: I dropped the actual topic of this flashback in at the end of the paragraph. I'm clever like that. The title was not *Civil War*.

So, more context. The unpleasant but necessary kind. My paternal grandfather died in Angola when I was fifteen. Not Angola the country in Africa, but Angola the nickname of the Louisiana State Penitentiary. I never met the man. Didn't know he was even alive until I pieced some things together and confronted my mother with what I'd deduced. He did some very bad things, things that resulted in my grandmother not being alive, things that if I were to discuss in any detail here, I'd need to add trigger warnings and publish this in a different kind of journal altogether. The details are worse than you're imagining. There was press coverage. But this is not that kind of essay. Suffice to say, my home life got complicated at times.

I started writing the memoir in my thirties. Didn't get far. Some of the old Word files made their way up the West Coast with me, then to Asia. When I reread them, the scalding rage pushed me out of the narrative: the violence at home, the constant homophobic bullying, the aforementioned ejection from the prestigious residential STEM school, the weird grey years at university back in my hometown, the humiliation, the sweet relief when I could finally leave. Time does its work; time had its work cut out for it. There was a relentless onslaught of material.

After my PhD, which I finished in my mid-forties, I needed a change of pace. It hit me now might be a good time to try again with the memoir. I cobbled together an outline of key events in my life up until graduation (undergrad). Grouped them into rough chapters. Found a few bits from the earlier attempt I could use after straining the fury out. Started writing. While neither easy nor pleasant, the work progressed. Fifteen years earlier, I'd still been ranting. Now, in early middle age, I had more perspective. Which isn't to say I let anyone off the hook for beatings or broken bones or running me off the road when I was just a gawky kid riding his bike home from school, or from touching me inappropriately or much worse, so much worse, but it all felt like the past now, not the extension of a present I was still trapped in.

5.

Ask the fly how it feels about the amber.

6.

That memoir actually wasn't my first attempt at writing about my life – it was only the first time I'd called it nonfiction. Personal history seeped through the pages of every short story I wrote, every attempt at a novel. The main character of my first published novel *The Concrete Sky* struggled with Generation X underemployment and casual daily homophobia in the same ways that I had. Patronising straight people thought he

needed things explained to him; family members inflicted corrective violence. We shared a certain fatigue from structural awfulness. More to the point, this worldview was all I knew how to write about – broken families, brutality, screaming, booze. These were the only experiences I had to draw upon. Also, my fiction has always landed me in a “WTF is this exactly?” interzone between genres. Is it lit-fic? Is it horror? Some kind of speculative something-or-other? Oh wait, he’s gay, never mind [*editor copies and pastes form rejection text into email*]. The only difference was that I’d been diffracting the story for decades until I could finally just tell it plain and call it what it was.

## 7.

At no point during all this do I think writing helped in the obvious therapeutic way, apart from giving me a space to vent. It was not a psychological laxative. But it gave me purpose, pulled me through a few rough spots. Beyond that, I didn’t think to interrogate it, and I was powerless to make instant changes to my circumstances.

## 8.

The counsellor had a simple office in Seattle’s Capitol Hill neighbourhood. We’ve gotten to the second body paragraph now. I’ve fast-forwarded to the part of the essay where I have the nervous breakdown (for want of a better term) in my early thirties. I’ve gone back and forth over the years on that descriptor. Calling it a nervous breakdown sounds a little dramatic, doesn’t it? It smacks of histrionics and gin. Maybe a fainting couch for when the Valium kicks in. But too much Bad Major Life Stuff had hit me in the space of a year or so: toxic relationship followed by a worse rebound followed by an even worse rebound from the rebound, financial struggles, very close brush with homelessness. My sister had a health scare she almost didn’t survive. Couple of horrific experiences with employers back to back. I spent a lot of time crying uncontrollably and didn’t hospitalize myself solely and only because the first third of my first novel was set in a mental hospital and I didn’t want to be a case of life imitating my own goddamn art.

The counsellor in her simple Capitol Hill office looked politely concerned as I laid all this out. She smiled, chuckled politely. It was the first time she’d ever had a novelist as a client, she admitted politely. And clearly [*polite chuckle*] I had a very vivid imagination. Such a dramatic story. No one lives through that much shit in such a short span of time. It simply wasn’t believable.

I went quiet. Stared at her. In first-person narration, you have to avoid your narrator describing their own appearance when they can't see it in the diegetic moment. It isn't believable.

My face went pale.

I stayed quiet and stared at the woman, unsure what to say.

Then I asked if she wanted to hear the parts I'd left out.

**9.**

You're not a drama queen, a late friend once told me. But drama sure knows how to find you.

**10.**

The polite concerned counsellor in Seattle gave me a stress assessment in that first session. I ticked boxes on the form to answer questions about my mental and physical well-being, handed the sheet of paper back to her, and waited while she reviewed it. She looked up, asked again: I really wasn't making this up, was I? This is not some kind of attention thing, is it? Results like these... they simply aren't *normal*. The only people who score like this are in the highest of high-stress jobs: firefighters, surgeons, stockbrokers. When someone goes through events like these, it wrecks their health. They tend to fall gravely ill within a year or so of individual stress events like these, and sometimes they die. I'd just experienced a whole succession of them.

Now we're getting somewhere, I told her.

**11.**

*You're a writer, so let's take advantage of a strength you already have. I want you to start keeping a journal. Every day. Write. And, are you comfortable with this? I'd like to be able to share these with my own counselling students to track your progress. Here's my email address.*

**12.**

I also saw my doctor and insisted on a prescription for antidepressants. He was a little surprised when I specified [*product name redacted*] because I didn't want to deal with the side effects that came with the other medications, but I was adamant and he agreed.

**13.**

I got lucky. The pills worked. I don't read about other people's experiences with depression because after what I've lived through, why on earth would I want to do that? This means my mixed metaphors are not current. Think of vortices, whirlpools. Crushing heaviness. And the despair and the indignation and the shame and the moral outrage. The utter humiliation at the way things had worked out, kept working out. I'd come *this close* to having to live in my car. After a few days on medication, I felt as if a barrier had formed in the slippery bottomless cavern where my emotions screamed and fell. There was still a black hole down there sucking everything in, only now a sort of net stretched tentatively across the abyss. The elevator could no longer go all the way to the basement. Day by day, there seemed to be more distance between *me* and *that*. If this metaphorical jumble doesn't work for you, I invite you to have a few crises of your own and get back to me with better and more consistent figurative language.

**14.**

Time does its work.

**15.**

So does geography. Not long after all this, I sold all my shit and moved to Korea.

**16.**

Brief segue before we get to the third body paragraph. Being clever yourself, you'll have figured out what I'm up to: I've experienced three periods of intense, prolonged trauma in my life. I was diagnosed with PTSD after the two most recent ones, in fact, twenty years apart. That ~~classic~~ traditional five-paragraph academic essay structure was more apposite than it might first have seemed.

Also: I'm not hardwired to get over things. This transitional interval when I left the States and moved to Asia made it clear that no matter how much brain-dumping I did, getting it all down onto the page wasn't making me feel *better* in any identifiable way, only aware that I'd changed. The writing gave me a certain agency over the material. Organizing it into sentences and paragraphs was a form of taking possession at the end of a long interval of feeling possessed by it and borderline out of control. But clearly, I wasn't the same as I'd been before those things happened. I was even more prickly, still outraged under the surface, prone to ranting, not fun at parties. The days still crashed into me, just more softly. But I wasn't sobbing, or not as much, which was something.

## 17.

Neurodivergent people – particularly those with autism and/or ADHD – are prone to getting stuck in repetitive negative thought loops. In these, catastrophes real and imagined play on an exhausting endless repeat in one's head:

Past important conversations that went badly;  
 Future important conversations that are likely to go badly and must be looked at from every possible angle and rehearsed in advance;  
 Injustices and mistreatment one has been subjected to while powerless;  
 Worries about the future, often arising from keen pattern-recognition skills neurotypical people typically lack (no one loves a Cassandra);  
 Rejection, past or anticipated;  
 Etc.

*Endless, as in it doesn't fucking stop.*

This is known as rumination. It's as much fun as it sounds.

## 18.

So, Hong Kong again. The target readership of this essay will most likely remember what happened there in 2019 and 2020 – the massive pro-democracy marches (they weren't riots) that the government violently put down. My husband and I marched in most of them. We persisted, even as the risk increased. Toward the end of each one, the police would go apeshit, launching tear gas cannisters into the crowds, shooting protestors and journalists with foam bullets (sometimes at point-blank range), kettling groups of marchers in alleys to carry out mass arrests, bludgeoning citizens with truncheons... I could go on. While it might not have been Gaza or Ukraine, conditions on the ground were tantamount to urban warfare by fall 2019. It wasn't safe to go out:

clashes in the streets with armed paramilitaries masquerading as cops, clashes in subway stations, water-cannon blasts containing blue dye and a powerful skin irritant. People were renditioned up to prison camps on the border with China, and what went on there, well, again, if I were to go into detail, I'd need trigger warnings. However bad you thought it was if you remember the headlines: it was much, much worse. Two things brought both the protests and the ensuing violence to a halt: a draconian National Security Law imposed by Beijing, and the beginning of the Covid pandemic.

As the nightmare played out in the city's streets and metro stations and shopping malls, I documented the whole thing – first on social media, later separately. I had no thought whatsoever of writing as therapy. None. It just felt imperative. Friends and relatives needed to know what was happening to us, and I wanted to include details the mainstream media would likely not cover. While you're going through something like that, is it even possible to conceive of what might come after? Survival is its own event horizon.

**19.**

Well before Beijing and Wuhan brought events in Hong Kong to an abrupt halt, my authorial avarice gave way to profound exhaustion: *let it stop, let it stop, let it stop.*

We must not repeat words lest we blunt their effectiveness.

**20.**

The less said about the pandemic, the better.

**21.**

The memoir was published shortly after I moved to England in 2020. In the months prior to that, I'd noticed the first of several key shifts in my head: no desire whatsoever to speak further about childhood. A good friend arranged an online reading and book chat with a group of friends from the aforementioned prestigious residential STEM school I got kicked out of. Some of their names appear in its pages. I'd long known about my alexithymia, the inability to feel emotions in a timely manner. Something can happen, and my non-reaction is like a stone being dropped down a well. There will be a splash sooner or later, just not in the standard few seconds. In my case, it can take longer – days or weeks or months or years after the causative event(s). That book chat was both one of the kindest things anyone had ever done for me and one of the most

uncomfortable experiences of my life. I struggled to expand on what I'd written because I'd said everything there was to say. It was like forcing myself to keep eating after the food has gone cold. Of course I got through it, sort of, I think. But this mixture of depletion and borderline revulsion with the subject matter was new.

Around the same time, I began to dread conversations with my sister. Same reason: the new depletion. I had nothing new to say about my early life and had long since grown tired of relitigating it every time we chatted. No amount of rehashing the past was going to change our baseline. There's no erasing it, no before to rewind to. Time runs one way.

Meanwhile, I was having what we might as well call my second nervous breakdown. I had moved to the UK solo, leaving my husband and our cat back in Covid-ridden post-conflict Hong Kong. I knew no one in Cornwall outside of work. The lockdowns resumed. The sun set at four. Too many nights I would find myself on the bed curled up and sobbing, the sobs sometimes turning into uncontrollable screaming. I would stuff a pillow over my face so the neighbours wouldn't hear. I learned it's possible to scream quietly. During those black black black weeks and months, my throat was frequently sore.

Having taught myself to write creative nonfiction with the memoir, I realized I might be able to crank out an essay or three. There was no lack of material.

## 22.

Another quick but necessary diversion: my diagnoses.

Late 2023: PTSD round 2, autism

Early 2025: ADHD

## 23.

That essay or three became a dozen or three in short order. Some of these have appeared in prestigious lit mags; some are included in my essay collection *Sunset House*, which was published in 2024.

A friend from the aforementioned prestigious residential STEM school who'd been reading my posts about the horrors in Hong Kong insisted I should compile them as a book and went so far as to convince me to let her do it herself, and she did, and that's a thing that now exists. When the manuscript was accepted for publication, I told the publisher I would do one round of edits, full stop. I could not keep going back over it. I

was still too fragile; I dreaded the prospect of reliving those events, of reading the articles and watching the videos I'd need to for fact-checking purposes. That book has still not come out. Turns out publishers are also too fragile sometimes. My motivation remains very low.

**24.**

If this were an academic essay, this would be the discussion section. Only let's not call it that. We've been having so much fun.

I'm in the peculiar but intellectually fascinating position of having experienced three intervals of protracted trauma far enough apart to have sort of recovered before blundering into the next one, to have started writing about them early on, and to have coupled that with academic research. In other words, I have the receipts.

I'm about to shift the tone. This is that kind of essay.

**25.**

Ask the amber how it feels about the fly.

**26.**

Think of the last time you cut yourself, or the last time you had a cold. In each case, there's a process:

The cut bleeds, then scabs over. The skin grows back in a predictable way, perimeter to center. You don't see this, of course. You put antiseptic cream and maybe a bandage on it and kind of forget about it after a couple/few days unless it's in a painful location. In time, the scab comes off.

The cold symptoms appear after a day of strange lethargy: the runny nose, the tightening chest, the scratchy throat, the malaise. You wonder: is it a cold, is it the flu, is it Covid? You just hope it won't be prolonged and terrible, especially if you've already gone a few rounds at the coronavirus rodeo. At some point, the symptoms peak. For me, that usually means I can sleep lying down (it's always worse at night and I struggle to breathe). The brain fog begins to lift. The snot torrents relent.

The same process applies to most ailments: the rash clears up, the cold sore shrinks if you started putting Zovirax on it early enough, the bone knits itself back together. Or the toothache gives way to a filling, and the Novocain wears off. The antibiotics kick in.

You remember, and then you begin to forget.

## 27.

Alternatively: after a disaster, infrastructure gets repaired. You can see the patched asphalt and the scaffolding around buildings after an earthquake. You can see the high-water lines after floods. At the time of this writing, a major winter storm has just pounded the UK with snow and sustained hurricane-force winds. Fallen trees are being cut up and hauled away; the power is gradually coming back on; blocked roads and railway lines are slowly reopening. About half of my next-door neighbours' fence blew out and collided with mine in the night. Whether it's a fire, a flood, a tornado, an earthquake, or a war, people begin to rebuild as soon as they're sure it's safe.

Things don't look the same and won't for a while, but functionality is incrementally restored.

You notice. You remember. It hurts. In time, it hurts less.

## 28.

What does it mean to be *over* a traumatic event? Therapists speak of a phenomenon called post-traumatic growth, which I'm not convinced will be of much interest to anyone freshly reeling after their life has been blown up. When you're still neck-deep in the rubble, vague promises of future insight and maturity are all well and good but not terribly helpful. The agony matters more. Think of a wild horse desperate to buck its rider. So, what does *over* look and feel like? When are we *better*? Some experiences are indelible. It's hard to chart progress toward a state of mind that is more easily observed in retrospect.

We write about the bad shit as a means of taking ownership. By forcing it into sentences, paragraphs, we are making it bend to our will. We command it instead of the other way around.

## 29.

If it sounds like I'm making a case for futility, I both am and am not. I'm fatalistic in my insistence that trauma sometimes changes us permanently. Unless and until time travel becomes a thing, there's no going back to our earlier mental state; there's no reset button. And when the trauma in question is the childhood kind, what would you even be rewinding back to – the womb? But I am also not arguing for permanent abjection. Time does its work; misery relents. If someone not generally hardwired to get over things has managed to do some version of that, however cautiously and tentatively, and if writing has played some part in it, well, that's exactly what we're here to discuss, isn't it?

To the extent I can claim to be over anything from childhood and my teenage angst-stravaganza, I've lost interest in discussing those years. They happened. I've said what I have to say on the subject. The book's a good read, if cringe-inducing in places. My relationships with certain family members are unfortunate but considered and intentional. There's no way to undo events set in motion before I was born. I don't have to *like* any of it, but it doesn't dominate my thoughts. I don't rant about it and don't want to. It's cold food now.

The same is true of the series of events in 2003-04 that led to my first PTSD diagnosis. I have no interest in the original bastard or either rebound. We're not friends in real life or online; we never will be. The bad experiences with employers are long over as well. Both firms have closed (one went bankrupt); one of the owners is dead, and good riddance. But do I think about these people and experiences constantly? I do not. Do I get emotional to the point of losing agency over my words and actions? I also do not. Of course there's a faint but lingering bitterness, an occasional flare of outrage – how I was treated versus what I deserved – but these things pass after a moment or two. Importantly, I don't ruminate on them.

The more recent events ... are a different story, a work in progress. I still can't watch videos of the 2019-20 protests in Hong Kong. By any objective standard, they're hard to watch. But as recently as a month ago (it's now been more than five years since those events) I got choked up in a Zoom call with a colleague I know from those days. I still hesitate when my thoughts turn to finally getting that manuscript together. And there are details I can't and won't write about yet, things too awful and painful to divulge. Even I have my limits.

**30.**

We've reached the conclusion, which means we have a moment to consider a rhetorical question or two. Did I cure myself of a toxic childhood by writing a book? Could journaling have done the same job? Perhaps, although the ADHD somewhat interferes with my ability to be consistent with that. More to the point, that foundation can only be poured once. You're not going to get over a bad breakup by writing a few poems or an essay about your new ex. Even if we set aside the murkiness around what *over* looks like and how to tell when you're there, there's that issue with the stubborn onwardness of time.

There's a line of reasoning among therapists that writing helps not because it's inherently curative but because it gives you a narrative. Organizing your thoughts onto the page can give you greater clarity on what happened. It's not just about the agency. Later, when you read what you've written, you can see how far you've come. But it's not a painkiller, a purgative, or a priest incanting "the power of Christ compels you!" as he spritzes your demons with holy water.

Knowing I'm not generally hardwired to get over things has led me to interrogate recovery and healing in their various forms. The prospect of indefinite angst holds zero appeal. No sane person (or high-masking insane one, natch) wants the burden of a permanent injury. Retreating from pain is a biological imperative. Agency, acceptance, growth: admirable concepts all, albeit subaltern to relief. If I'm completely honest, I think my healing has taken the form of a single thought – *oh, not this shit again* – where traumatic material is concerned. I'm less interested in talking about it, thinking about it, reliving it, and certainly not retraumatizing myself over it. Identity needs to be based on something other than anguish. Nature abhors a vacuum.

Perhaps we *should* repeat our words in order to blunt the effects of reality, telling our stories until they become as unpalatable as the events themselves: *let it stop, let it stop, let it stop*, and now it can. It will. It has.

This has been that kind of essay.

*Marshall Moore is a Course Leader and Senior Lecturer in the School of Communication at Falmouth University. A native of eastern North Carolina, he lived and worked in Hong Kong and South Korea for 15 years before relocating to the UK in 2020. He holds an MA in applied linguistics from the University of New England (Australia) and a PhD in creative writing from Aberystwyth University.*