

# 30 Paragraphs: A Memoir

SHANE MCCRAE





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#48

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## INTRODUCTION

For a long time, I wrote a memoir, and for a long time I wanted to write a memoir. As it turns out, those two things were the same thing. For a long time, I wrote from a void into a void—my memories weren't clear, and the form in which I wrote them down wasn't satisfying. I don't know whether one can ever be satisfied by one's own memories (if not, why nostalgia, but if so, why the constant hunger for the nostalgic?), but I do know that one's own unclear memories, particularly one's unclear memories of traumatic events, *dissatisfy*. And so I didn't imagine I would be happy with the material I had to work with. But I did hope I might be able to find a form that would work. And after about a year or so of really purposeful writing (as opposed to my previous desultory and fragmented writing), I found that form—I found it a week ago.

I've been working on a new sentence (not a New Sentence, although that would be nice, too) for years—for longer, even, than I've been writing the memoir. The new sentence I've imagined and sometimes employed is both restless and extensive. It is propelled forward by many brief clauses, which work, to my ear, like metrical units, although most are longer than even the longest foot. And, ideally, it never ends. But of course it ends. It ends all the time. What I'm really trying to do is keep the sentence going not only until the thought that started it out is exhausted, but also until the digressions that suggested themselves along the way are exhausted. The idea behind the new sentence isn't new, but in its execution the new sentence is potentially ageless (although in actuality it will always be bound by time, although it *is* the sort of thing one might die in the middle of writing, and then what?), and because of this, every time I start writing one I feel both exhilarated and frightened. Although I'm still working on this sentence, it seemed like the sentence in which to write the memoir.

Someday—and hopefully this will happen as I expand the memoir—I'd like to figure out how to make the sentence successfully span paragraphs. This seems both obvious and impossible, which is also, incidentally, how every new sentence seems when I'm writing it. Although none of these sentences is new.

The new sentence can sometimes and often seem difficult, and so as a medium it is delicate. I want always to work at, and sometimes with, the edge of comprehensibility—I think this is especially important for a memoir, if only to remind the writer and the reader what they're trying to do together and apart, to see each other through a one-way mirror.

The problem with the new sentence is that it suggests maximalism—when writing it, I feel like I should be filling pages and pages from top to bottom. But the memoir didn't feel right when I laid it out that way, and it was bound formally to a linearity that wasn't true to my memories—because there are so many gaps between them, my memories don't behave like they're bound to each other. There is no self between them. And yet I am there. It wasn't until a week ago that a solution to this problem occurred to me—give each paragraph (by which I mean, a unit of words bordered by paragraph breaks) its own page. Memories occupy the white void. But the white void is there, too, surrounding them, and often it's much bigger than they are. These 30 paragraphs constitute an attempt to fix some of what I have left into place.

Although none of the above paragraphs counts.

# 1. PERSON, THINGS

Some things a man loves, he won't fuck. But there's nothing a man won't fuck if he hates it.

## 2-30. BITING THE HOLE

The neighborhood I lived in, when I lived in Round Rock, Texas, was large and unstable. Most of the houses seemed old, although I think now they seemed old only in the way all structures, except for those they see rise before their eyes, seem old to small children, but every few years, and more likely it was every year, or maybe even every few months, or it didn't happen regularly at all, but a few times during the seven years I lived there, sporadically, construction would begin in a corner of the neighborhood I hadn't before known existed, and sometimes I would come across empty fields that had been prepared for streets and houses, but the streets and houses hadn't been built. In one of these fields, which was otherwise just dirt, a few yards past where the street ended and the field began, I discovered—I was about six years old, maybe seven, and it was summer, and I had been biking aimlessly through the neighborhood, and had decided to turn

down a street I hadn't explored before—a dump, I guess that's the word for it, and probably there is a word for it I don't know, and I would call it a quarry if it weren't so small compared to the other quarries I've seen, all of which have struck me as incomprehensibly large precisely because they have pushed against, but never beyond, the limit of what can be fully comprehended in one look—one can see a whole quarry and the details thereof, whereas one can't see a whole mountain and, say, a single flower midway up the mountain, but only the quarry and nothing else, it fills one's field of vision—full of mounds of small, just about the right size to throw at somebody, white rocks. Each mound was maybe three or four feet tall.

It seems unlikely that everything I remember happening on my first trip to the dump actually happened on my first trip to the dump. But that phrasing is misleading. Only one thing happened, one strange thing, but the strange thing was strange enough that it would seem to have required some time away from the dump in order for me to work up the resolve to do it, as well as some time to plan it. Although what planning would it have required? And maybe it was exactly the kind of strange thing that can only happen spontaneously. One way or another, after having determined when I would be least likely to be seen or after having thought about nothing but the thing itself, the thing I had just resolved to do and knew I would in the next few moments do, I rode back to the dump or I was already there, I leaned my bike against a mound at the edge of dump, I made my way to a mound in the middle of the dump, and I took all my clothes off. Then I climbed the mound and lay down.

Although I know I didn't put my shoes back on before I climbed the mound, in my memory I put my shoes back on before I climbed the mound. I know I'm inventing this detail, however, because when I try to picture the shoes, I see brown wingtip Oxfords that look like the shoes my grandfather used to wear. I see myself naked wearing my grandfather's shoes, which are much too big for me, and my skin is almost as pale as the rocks. I don't remember anything about my body, how it felt to be on the mound in those first few moments on the mound, by which I mean I can't recall the memory of my body to my body and feel it there, but I remember that the stones I lay my body upon were sharp and hot, and I remember that biting ants climbed from the stones to cover my body, and that I leapt from the mound, panicked and suddenly ashamed, and danced to shake the ants off, and then struck myself to knock the ants off.



Most mornings, on my way to school, I would stop on the bridge over the branch of the creek that separated the school from my house and peer through the railing down at the minnows twisting in the pale current.

Some afternoons, and sometimes on the weekends, I would climb through the thick bushes behind the school, I would push, violently, sometimes knocking whole trees down, sometimes stomping on them, imagining myself hacking through a faraway jungle, and once I brought one of my grandfather's machetes with me, his only souvenirs from the army, although he never fought in a war, two of them, those and a pair of boots, and hacked so desperately, so gleefully then that I didn't get anywhere, but stood in one spot, hacking, through the bamboo trees beyond the bushes, to the village of abandoned and rotting houses in the placeless clearing.

I don't know anything about the village. I didn't know anything about the village when I was there, picking through the ruins. I know what I saw. But what does a child see? A child can't be abused into becoming a visionary—an abused child will only become more and more like a kicked dog, which can seem visionary to people who don't see the way a kicked dog sees.

I saw two houses, both wooden, both painted brown, although much of the paint had peeled away. These were next to each other in the center of the village if one were facing the village, having just emerged from the bamboo forest. On the right side of the village I saw a building that looked like a cross between a barn and a warehouse. It, too, was brown in places, and brown, also, where the paint had peeled away, exposing the wood underneath. I saw that the houses and the warehouse were separated by about a hundred feet of dirt, and patches of broken concrete, and thorny, low bushes, and grass. I call it a village, but there wasn't more to it than what I've just described. I call it a village because it was abandoned—the words seem to go together—and filled with trash and also things people wouldn't have left behind, things that looked important to me, toys, mostly, some whole and some broken, all filthy, mostly in the warehouse. I remember the ivory-colored stuffed bear I saw near the bottom-left corner of the mouth of the warehouse—the first thing I saw in the warehouse, the thing that drew me to the warehouse—best. But there were toys scattered all over the floor of the warehouse, and at the back of the warehouse—I only visited the warehouse once, after I had visited the houses several times, and didn't return to the village for months afterward—I saw a door, like the front door of a house, but deep and far in darkness.

Back then—I was about seven years old—as now, fear compelled me toward the things I feared, and so I made my way slowly—and I lost my balance a few times, slipping on dolls and doll parts—to the door, and turned the handle, and pushed. On the other side was a small workroom with a desk—a board about the size of a door, but smaller, laid across two sawhorses—a dirty chair with metal legs and brown vinyl padding on the seat and the back, and a few shelves full of paint cans. A dusty toolbox, a small lamp, and a Phillips screwdriver sat on the desk. The room’s single window was intact, and sunlight fell through it and across the desk, striking the lamp, and at first I thought the lamp was on—for a few seconds, I thought the lamp was on. I stared, panicking, but I didn’t run.

But what does a kicked dog see?

When the kicked dog knows a kick is coming, the kick is invisible, and fills the dog's field of vision. The kicked dog is a visionary, because it sees what most dogs don't. But the kicked dog can't be a visionary, because it can't see anything.

When the kicked dog wakes in the grass to the sun and the world, a large, older boy who a moment, a minute, how long before had been crushing the dog's chest, crushing *him*, against the yellow brick pillar at the edge of his porch, standing above him, not between him and the sun but between him and a piece of the sky, that much, not the whole sky, but a piece of it, his skin burning where each blade of grass touches it, feeling the world more particularly than he has ever felt it before, and so hurting in a way he has never hurt before, the first question he asks is, "Am I still alive?"

The large, older boy doesn't answer; the large, older boy doesn't help him up. It's the first time the large, older boy has visited the kicked dog's house during the day, and after he leaves, the large, older boy never comes back—not during the day, and not at night.

The village was the emptiest place I had ever seen. But the warehouse and the houses were full. The houses were full of furniture nobody had used in years, and kitchenware, and shoes—I remember several pairs of shoes—and stiff jeans. The first time I walked through one of the houses—the first house I saw after hacking through the bamboo forest—I was as surprised to find couches as I was to find clothes. The first couch I saw had been tilted on its back. It lay in a small living room, and next to it was a pair of cracked brown wingtip Oxfords, and a few feet in front of it were two empty, beaten-up suitcases; otherwise, it was surrounded by old sheets of plywood and fragments of the walls. The houses stood even though they looked as if more material had been torn from the walls than could have been in the walls in the first place.

I remember the living room of that first house pretty well, and I remember the kitchen. But when I walk, in my memory, toward the door on the left side of the living room—I'm walking parallel to the front door (if one were facing the house, deciding whether to enter the house, the living room would be the room to the right of the front door), crossing from one side of the house to the other, and on my right is the door that leads into the kitchen—all I see in front of me is a fuzzy whiteness. I think if I were to pass through the whiteness I would find bedrooms on the other side. But I can't.

If you choose not to remember the painful things that happened to you as a child—well, if you at one time *chose* not to remember them, and later *can't* remember them—you're left as an adult with a lot of ominous memories that seem to build toward something awful and then stop. Most often, they fade. There's a thick, gray fog at the end of a memory, and you realize the fog was there at the beginning, too, but it was so faint then that you hadn't noticed it. As the memory moves toward whatever pain it's moving toward, the fog becomes thicker, and eventually it swallows the memory. And then there's a stretch of fog by itself. And it fades. And if you continue trying to follow your memories forward through time, if you continue trying to piece your childhood together, another memory emerges—a memory of a different day, in a different place—connected to the memory before it by the fog that will obscure it.

The minnows clustered there, on the left side of the bridge if one were facing the school, if one had stopped on the way to the school. There the creek seemed to slow down a little before it filtered through the three small tunnels underneath the bridge. On the other side of the bridge, the creek emptied into a shallow pond—about a foot to two feet deep, and about 30 feet wide by 80 feet long—but the pond water was too dirty to see anything in it. The minnows might have passed through the tunnels into the dirty, dark pond—every morning, I might have been seeing new minnows swirling in the bright shallows—or they might have known to fight hardest there, at the mouths of the tunnels, where the water was still clear, against the darkness the element they lived in pushed and pulled them toward.

His name was Danny. I remember his name was Danny, but I'm sure his name wasn't Danny. I don't remember his name. I don't remember the name of the large, older boy who, the day we met, told me to leave my bedroom window open for him later.

As the local nigger, I was passed around the neighborhood—never from adult to adult, mostly from child to child, and sometimes from child to teenager to child. I must have met Danny on this circuit, but I don't remember where, or when. Danny was much larger than me—a child, also, but old enough and big enough that I couldn't form a clear idea of his age, and he seemed, as all much older, bigger children seemed, somehow bigger than my father, who was, anyway, my grandfather, the man raising me who was married to the woman raising me. Danny might have been a teenager.

I don't remember much about how Danny and I met, but I do remember I was afraid of him from the beginning, and I remember he threatened me. That was how he got me to leave my window unlocked. But I would have left it unlocked even if he hadn't threatened me. As the local nigger, and the child of my home, I was willing, even eager, to let anybody do anything they wanted to me, as long as they didn't hit me, and as long as what they were doing looked like the things I saw people doing to each other in my grandfather's magazines. What I remember most distinctly is not any single act, but rather the sensation I felt, both empty and vast, as I watched what people did to me, and what I did to them, reluctantly, but I would if they asked me to, checking to make sure it looked right, familiar. I was comfortable in that vastness, and afraid of it, and I hated it, and yearned toward it, but not toward *it*, exactly, but toward people I thought might be familiar with it, as my grandfather seemed to be, and willing to inflict it.



My grandfather—although I don't know whether he would have described himself in this way—was a white supremacist. He wouldn't have been ashamed to admit that he believed white people were superior to black people—especially superior to black people *in particular*—indeed, he happily—or, really, “gleefully” would probably be a better word, since white supremacists don't ever seem happy so much as gleeful—admitted to this belief many times when I was a child. But I suspect he might have thought the phrase “white supremacist” was too fancy for him. He had been, as a child, the younger brother of a much larger boy, and had, along with his older brother Thomas, and his younger brother, Raymond, who grew up to become a landlord, who would eventually be shot through the neck by a tenant he had evicted a few days before, and would die in a soft-top convertible, blood spraying from his neck, his head rolling slightly from side to side on his shoulder as he pointed toward a narrow gap between two dumpsters, wordlessly urging his wife, who was already crawling away from the car, to safety, as a child, lived in poverty, in the wake of the dust bowl, in Shawnee, Oklahoma. Because of and despite this, he hated “white trash” almost as much—although the hate was a different kind of hate, a sad duty—as he hated blacks.

When my grandfather discovered that my mother was pregnant, he grabbed his hunting rifle from his closet, and would have jumped in his pickup right then to drive to my father's mother's house, where my father, a black man who was a few years older than my mother, who was herself 18 at the time, lived, to murder him, had not my great-uncle Thomas wrestled him to the ground. I think it was then, as his brother held him down, as his madness, or, more accurately, one of his madnesses, his most immediate madness, left him, that he decided my father, although he might live, would not raise me.

I was born in 1975, but I grew up feeling like the bicentennial had happened the year *before* I was born—I grew up feeling temporally dislocated. I tracked my father down when I was 16—well, there wasn't much tracking to it: by then, my grandparents had divorced and I was living with my grandmother in Salem, Oregon, where I had lived with my father when I was a baby; I found him in the phone book—and it was then that I learned my grandparents had taken me from him when I was three, and not, as they had so often told me, when I was 18 months old. And of all the lies I was told as a child, this lie has been the hardest lie to shake—it won't, in fact, not yet, anyway, be shaken. When I think about it now, which isn't often, but I do, being taken, I imagine myself as both 18 months and three years old, and the scene in which I am disappeared plays out twice; I see the two versions simultaneously. In one version, I'm naked except for a diaper, splashing in a dirty puddle at the end of my driveway in Round Rock as my grandmother tends to the row of flowers between her new house and her new lawn; in the other version, I'm fully clothed, wearing a T-shirt that's maroon on top and dark gray at the bottom, the two colors separated by a white stripe about a half-inch thick, and bell-bottom jeans, and riding a big wheel my father has just given me, when my grandmother lifts me from the big wheel to put me in the back seat of my grandparents' big, white Dodge four-door, and as she carries me to the car I cry out, and reach back for the big wheel. I'm afraid I will lose it forever. Then I lose it forever.

But what does the kicked dog see? The kicked dog fears it will live through the thing about to happen to it. But the kicked dog doesn't want to die.

The house immediately to the right of my house if one were facing my house, having just walked home, bleeding, from a fight on the playground at the school across the street, was a rental. My grandparents often pointed this out to me as a warning. And I understood they meant that the families who lived in the house, never for longer than a year, had less money than my family did. And I treated the house and its backyard as empty even when they weren't.

Usually, the families who lived in the house immediately to the right of mine didn't have pets. But once, a family with a dog lived there, a small dog, it seemed small to me even when I was small, but it was probably about half my size. I used to play with the dog beneath the fence that separated our yards. I had dug a hole between our yards, or the dog had, and I would stick my hand under the fence and throw things for the dog to fetch. This was the first dog I ever tortured, and it might have been the last—I can't recall torturing another dog after it, but my cats before, and a small bird after—and I stopped harming animals altogether when I was about eight or nine years old, and this, the dog I'm remembering, torturing it, must have happened when I was six or seven. One day, for no reason, I don't think I had a reason, the dog had never hurt me, I grabbed a length of lead pipe, and called the dog to the hole, and when it stuck its nose into the hole, I smashed the end of it with the pipe. This is what I remember most clearly about the dog, this and not the dog and I playing—smashing the dog's nose again and again with the pipe, eventually the end of the pipe, which was about an inch across, jamming it into the dog's nose, and the blood, the dog snarling, its teeth bared, biting the hole.

I didn't tell anybody about the village, not after I first discovered it, and not after I ran from it in fear, thinking a lamp in the back room of the warehouse was on, and when, months later, I returned to it, it seemed to have changed, gotten bigger. Or maybe it was true, as I thought at the time, that I simply hadn't, when I faced the village for the first time, turned my head to the left, but had instead walked straight for the first house, glancing to the right on the way, and spotting the warehouse then. When I returned, I saw on the left side of the village, if one were facing the village, having just nervously passed through the bamboo forest, not hacking a single tree, but slowly bending each aside only as far as one needed to step past it, a dirt road leading away from the village. I saw the road, but didn't go down it, and instead turned back to the bamboo forest, and walked, and then ran, home.

About a year later—on my birthday, actually, the last day of summer—I rode my bike down the gravel road to the left of my school—a road I had often taken to soccer practice—farther than ever before, thinking it might eventually intersect with the dirt road that led away from the village, all the way until it curved sharply into darkness, where the road met a forest that had risen just past the soccer fields and baseball diamonds, all the way, really, until about 70 feet before the curve, and there, by the side of the road, I laid my bike down and stepped toward the forest.

The forest was thick, and dark, and mostly, I think, oak, and some cedar trees. I don't know for sure why I stopped where I stopped, but I think I might have noticed, glancing at the forest as I headed toward the curve I probably wouldn't have ridden past even if I had reached it, the shadowy, almost overgrown path into the forest, and stopped to investigate it. Back then, the forests near my house were littered with abandoned treehouses—well, most were boards wedged between branches and trunks so as to create perches, but a few had walls and even roofs, and all were invisible unless one stood fairly close to them. In one of the better treehouses, in a forest not far from the forest I had just entered, I had discovered, just the previous Saturday, half a pack of cigarettes and a few old copies of *Hustler*. Probably, I entered this forest looking for the same treehouse—or, rather, hoping the treehouse with the walls, and the cigarettes, and the porn would be repeated in this forest, like an outpost station stocked with the standard rations. At first, as I followed the path, I saw nothing but tall trees and thick foliage. But soon I noticed a wrought-iron fence to my right, itself almost disappeared by foliage, and beyond it I saw graves.

The cemetery looked like it hadn't been visited or maintained in years. Most of the 20 or so stones were dark, almost black, almost illegible, and stood only a few feet tall—there were no monuments, and no statutes. But nearest to the gate, to the left of the gate if one were facing the gate, sweaty from pedaling, but chilly, also, already, shivering in the unusually strong wind that day, lay a large, flat stone, which at first I thought had fallen. I had walked in a counterclockwise circle around the perimeter of the cemetery, just inside the fence, and so I saw this stone last, and when I stopped and stared down at it, I realized it hadn't fallen—it seemed, instead, to be covering a grave. I can't remember the inscription exactly, but I do remember I had to bend close to the stone to read it. The stone memorialized 18 children who had died when a nearby orphanage burned to the ground 70 years before. It didn't seem possible to me even then, when I was a small child and such things seemed possible, that the stone marked a mass grave, that the children had all been buried in the same spot, but I couldn't imagine they were anywhere else—what families would have claimed them? I already understood what is usually understood only by those old enough to forget it—that children who don't have families of their own are somehow both greatly pitied and greatly unwanted. And I felt certain that if I moved the stone and

peered into the hole, I would see the orphans in the fire still, motionless, some prone, some on all fours, some kneeling, hunched, and blackened, and the building intact still, burning, and the whole world of wrecked, and burned, and abandoned things, each trapped in the moment of its destruction, each thing preserved, both dead and outside of death, not in hell, but the one fire everywhere, in which there is no suffering, and so from which there is no relief.

## AUTHOR BIO



**Shane McCrae** has published four books of poems, most recently *The Animal Too Big to Kill*. He teaches at Oberlin College and Spalding University, and has received a Whiting Writer's Award and a fellowship from the NEA. He lives in Oberlin, Ohio.





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