



# FORGETTING MISSISSIPPI

**Lewis Hyde**

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*Getting past the past*

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I do not remember how I got to Mississippi. I know I started from my parents' home in Rochester, New York, and that I went first to Memphis. My parents had stalled my departure, insisting I come home from college before going south, so I missed the initial 1964 Freedom Summer

orientation in Oxford, Ohio, and instead attended a second in Tennessee.

I think I took a bus. And I think I had a several-hour layover in Columbus, Ohio, and that I went to a burlesque show at which I was disappointed to find nothing very sexy on display. I was eighteen.

The thousand or so volunteers who traveled to Mississippi that summer did so to register black voters and to help organize the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in hopes of unseating the all-white delegation that the state's Democrats would inevitably be sending to the party's August nominating convention

Inspired by Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail," I had, while still in Rochester, responded to an editorial in the local paper with an idealistic letter to the editor announcing that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." My father, having read the letter, advised me that one trick to good writing was to cut the flamboyant parts (racism was "like a boil," I'd written, and "the pus must continue to drain," etc., etc.), but it was too late—I had posted my manifesto.

Other than the disappointing burlesque show, I remember nothing of the trip. The orientation in Memphis must have been on a college campus; I remember a basement classroom where a man named Stoughton Lynd taught us something. Perhaps I got to Laurel, Mississippi—where I was to work all summer—on another bus, or perhaps we took a bus to Jackson, then drove to Laurel. It's all lost.

Or rather it's lost from memory but not from history, for luckily, Mother and Father kept the letters I wrote that summer so I have documents to supplement recollection's shabby record. I *did* take a bus and the trip was a twenty-nine hour "torture." The Memphis orientation was at

LeMoyne College; a "strange fellow," Richard Beymer, "the guy who played Tony in *West Side Story*" was in the group; Staughton Lynd taught us that the "Removal Statute of 1868," under which "a case can be removed from the state courts to fed courts," might be invoked when we got arrested but that it was "more of a stall than a workable means." When I got to Laurel we tried to rent a car and the local Avis outlet offered us a hearse; I read a book by "Bert. Russell," whom I described to my parents as a "very cool cat." The three-page mimeographed "SECURITY HANDBOOK" we were given warned: "When getting out of a car at night, make sure the car's inside light is out," to which I added in pen: "unscrew it."

Of all my scattered and fragmented memories from that summer, one in particular stands out: when Lyndon Johnson sent four hundred sailors into the state to walk the swamps and drag the rivers searching for the bodies of three volunteers—Mickey Schwerner, James Chaney, Andrew Goodman—murdered by the Klan on June 21, these sailor found other bodies, dead men no one had been looking for, no one had reported missing. "So this is Mississippi," I thought, a place where a walk through any swamp might uncover the invisible dead, unnamed, unsought.

Last year, I decided to see if there was any truth to this memory. I began searching the *New York Times* online and on microfilm. The reading was slow: other events drew my attention (Barry Goldwater was running for president, the Vietnam

War was on the horizon) and the papers were voluminous (Sunday editions ran to hundreds of pages). I worked for several days and found much about the missing volunteers but nothing about other bodies. Perhaps this was a false memory, or a rumor that we circulated that summer, a projection of our fears.

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*Forgetfulness* in Greek is *lêthê*, in turn related to *letho* (“I escape notice; I am hidden”), ultimately from a Proto-Indo-European root meaning “to hide.” The privative or negative form of this word, *a-lethe* or *aletheia*, is usually translated as *truth*, the truth then being a thing uncovered or taken out of hiding. In terms of mental or cultural life, all that is available to mind is *aletheia*; what is not available is for some reason covered, concealed, hidden.

In this tradition, then, to forget is to hide, to conceal, to cover up. And here I imagine a folk etymology and suggest that this covering up is also burial. And that, to begin to sketch the scope of forgetting in regard to personal or cultural trauma, there are two kinds of burial: in one, something is hidden because we can't stand to or refuse to look at it; in the other, it is buried because we are done with it. It has been revealed, examined, and now it

may be covered up or dropped for good. The latter is proper burial, burial after attention has been paid and funeral rites observed.

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Cranking through the old newspaper microfilm, looking for coincidentally discovered murder victims, I finally came upon a UPI report dated July 12 that told how “a fisherman found the lower half of a body, its legs tied together, floating in the Mississippi River.” It seemed that Mickey Schwerner had been found: “It was the body of a white man,” the UPI declared; “the belt buckle carried the initial ‘M’” and there was a gold watch in the blue jeans pocket. “Civil rights workers . . . said Mr. Schwerner had a gold watch.”

So I had misremembered. A body found in the river, not a swamp. Near the Delta, not in Neshoba County. A white, not a black, man.

But no, the news from the following day corrected the story. The body of Charles E. Moore, a black youth from Meadville, Mississippi, had been found, so badly decayed that his race was not apparent. And a second body had been found nearby, that of Henry Dee, also young and black, also from Meadville. The boys had been missing since early May. “Rope and wire found

around their bodies indicated they had been bound and thrown into the river.”

After this, however, the *New York Times* dropped the story. There is hardly another word about Dee and Moore until the following winter, when three short articles appeared: November 7: “2 Whites Seized in Negro Slayings”; November 8: “2 Whites Released on Bond in Killings”; January 12: “Whites Freed in Slayings.”

James Ford Seale and Charles Marcus Edwards, both members of the Ku Klux Klan, had been arrested and charged with willful murder. Their families posted bond; the men were released; at a January hearing the charges were dismissed, the Franklin County DA saying that “additional time” was needed to solve the case.

In Mississippi in those days, the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan believed that they were Christian soldiers opposing the forces of Satan on this earth and that the civil rights workers invading their state were the newly fashioned betrayers of Jesus the Galilean. The Imperial Wizard of the Mississippi Ku Klux Klan, Sam Bowers of Laurel, part owner of a jukebox and vending machine company called Sambo Amusement, had devised a secret code to tell his crusaders when to burn a

cross or to whip a man or to firebomb a church or to eliminate a heretic, eliminate him without malice, in complete silence, and in the manner of a Christian act. In Mississippi in those days, the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan believed that young Negro men had signed agreements promising to rape, weekly, one white woman, that there was an impending Negro insurrection, that the Black Muslims in Chicago had smuggled five thousand automatic weapons,

“and maybe a machine gun,” into the state and had hidden them in churches and graveyards. In Greenville, Mississippi, the Klan persuaded Washington County deputies that by the act of “felony grave

tampering” these guns had been hidden in the cemetery of a black church. “Working in the dark, foggy graveyard, heavily armed police pried the lid from a wooden vault,” finding no guns but disturbing the rest of one James Turner, only recently buried.

Every act of memory is also an act of forgetting. Such, at least, was one ancient understanding. In Hesiod, the mother of the Muses, Mnemosyne, is not simply Memory, for even as she helps humankind to remember the Golden Age she helps it to forget the Age of Iron it now must occupy. Bardic song was meant to induce

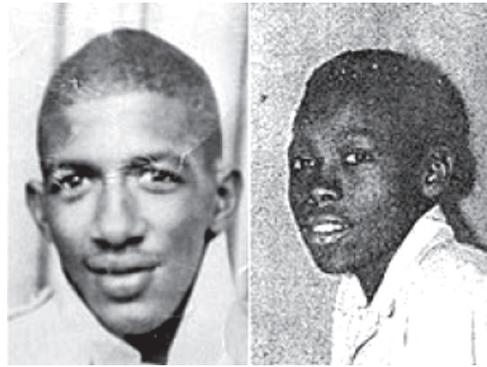
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those twin states: “For though a man have sorrow and grief . . . yet, when a singer, the servant of the Muses, chants the glorious deeds of men of old and the blessed gods who inhabit Olympus, at once he forgets his heaviness and remembers not his sorrows at all.” In this conceit, both memory and forgetting are dedicated to the preservation of ideals. What drops into oblivion under the bardic spell is the fatigue, wretchedness, and anxiety of the present moment, its unrefined particularity, and what rises into consciousness is knowledge of the better world that lies hidden beyond this one.



On Saturday, May 2, 1964, Charles Moore and Henry Dee, both nineteen years old, were hitchhiking across from the Taste-Freez on the outskirts of Meadville, Mississippi. Moore was a student at nearby Alcorn College, at the time suspended for joining a protest about the lack of social life on the campus. Dee worked at a local sawmill. Neither had any involvement in the civil rights movement.

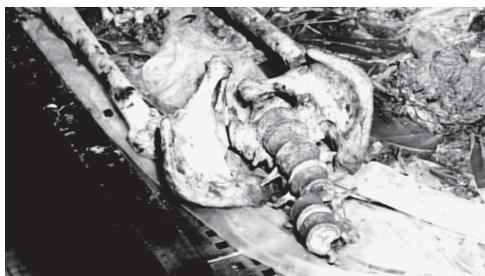
James Ford Seale of the Bunkley Klavern of the Ku Klux Klan picked the boys up and took them into the nearby Homochitto National Forest, where he and four other Klansmen tied them to a tree and beat them savagely with sapling branches. Dee had recently returned from a trip to Chicago; he wore a black bandana: surely he knew where the guns being smuggled into the state were hidden.



One of the Klansmen, Charles Marcus Edwards, asked if the boys were “right with the Lord,” the implication being that they were about to die. In desperation, one of them invented a story: yes, there were guns—they were hidden in Pastor Clyde Briggs’s church over in Roxie.

The Klansmen split up, one group going to the courthouse in Meadville to get Sheriff Wayne Hutto to go with them to Briggs’s church (where they found no guns). The others took the beaten boys to a nearby farm. They were bleeding so profusely that the Klansmen spread a tarp in the trunk of a Ford sedan before stuffing the boys into it and driving them ninety miles north to Parker’s Island, a backwater bend of the Mississippi River.

When they opened the trunk they were surprised to find the boys alive. One of the men asked if they knew what was going to happen. They nodded. James Ford Seale taped their mouths shut and their hands together. He bound their legs with rope and wire. He and another man chained Henry Dee to a Jeep engine block, loaded him into a boat, rowed him out onto the



river, and rolled him into the water, alive. Charles Moore watched from the shore. The men returned, chained Moore to another weight, rowed him out onto the river, and rolled him into the water, alive. Later they were to say that they dumped Dee and Moore alive rather than shoot them because they did not want to get blood all over the boat.

Says Tiresias to Creon, who will not properly bury the body of Polynices, now lying

outside the gates of Thebes, picked at by carrion birds and dogs:

“As I took my place on my ancient seat for observing birds . . . I heard a strange sound among them, since they were screeching with dire, incoherent frenzy; and I knew that they were tearing each other with bloody claws, for there was a whirring of wings that made it clear. At once I was alarmed, and attempted burnt sacrifice at the altar where I kindled fire; but the fire god raised no flame from my offerings. Over the ashes a dank slime oozed from the thigh bones, smoked and sputtered; the gall was sprayed high into the air, and the thighs, streaming with liquid, lay bare of the fat that had concealed them.

“Such was the ruin of the prophetic rites.”

The Klansman who owned the boat used in the murders of Dee and Moore had a brother who knew nothing about their drowning. But this man felt he should tell his brother what had happened because at the point where the brother frequently crossed the river he had the habit of dipping up water to drink and he should be warned that he was “drinking water off a dead Negro.”

In the Dee-Moore murder case, historical memory—the contemporary written record—is almost as shabby as my personal memory. To take but one key example, the

newspapers at the time reported that Franklin County Sheriff Wayne Hutto made some phone calls and located the boys in Louisiana. “I can’t figure it out,” Hutto is quoted as saying. “If these boys had been in any trouble around here I think I would have known about it.”

But Mississippi in 1964 was a police state, meaning simply that the police were complicit with the Klan terrorists, Hutto in this case having helped the Klan search for weapons in the church in Roxie.

We know all these details because the Dee-Moore murder case was in fact solved by the FBI within months of the discovery of the bodies. The FBI had a paid informant in the Klan, a man to whom the killers told the whole story of what happened on May 2, 1964.

This is why in late October of that year the FBI was able to send navy divers into the muddy waters around Parker’s Island and find the skeletal remains of the victims, along with the Jeep engine block. Charles Moore’s skull was found—identified because he had lost some teeth playing football. Henry Dee’s skull has never been found.

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At the Neshoba County Fair in Philadelphia, Mississippi, the town where

Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney were murdered, Ronald Reagan kicked off his 1980 presidential campaign by telling a cheering crowd, “I believe in states’ rights.”

“The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting,” writes Milan Kundera. But as with all large abstractions, the assertion can

be inverted. The Republican Party’s “Southern strategy” made the memory of racial difference its tool and when it comes to racial or ethnic differences, the struggle “of man against power” is the struggle of forgetting against memory.

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They say that one way to lay a traumatic memory to rest is to create a particular kind of symbol: a grave marker. Once a grave has been marked, you can visit it but you do not have to. Once a trauma has been properly buried, you can call it to mind but you do not have to. It’s available but not intrusive, not haunting.

“The first symbol in which we recognize humanity . . . is the burial,” writes Jacques Lacan. “It is man who invented the sepulcher . . . One cannot finish off someone who is a man as if he were a dog . . . [His] register of being . . . has to be preserved by funeral rites.”

This is from Lacan’s seminar on *Anti-gone*, a play in which we find no proper

burial. *Antigone* ends with three suicides, and suicide can be thought of as an attempt to name through action what ought to be named through inscription. Lacan calls naming through inscription “the second death.” “The symbol . . . [is] the killing of the thing,” he writes, drawing on Hegel, whose idea was that conceptual understanding is a kind of erasure of the particular.

Take a living dog that runs and barks and eats and shits. As soon as that dog passes into the word *dog*, its particular embodiment disappears: the word *dog* doesn’t run and bark and so forth.

Let us put this in terms of trauma. A very particular, horrifying thing happens to someone—as happened to the families of Dee and Moore. How to recover from (or at least work with) such horror? The advice is to erase the particular by putting it into symbols. If the story cannot be fully told, then the trauma persists. Time stops. Twenty years later, the dead still appear in dreams.

The grave marker is the symbol that makes it clear that whatever has happened need not live forever. The symbol lives on but the real, once properly inscribed, is temporal and can be buried.

Forgetting is the erasing angel that murders particularity so that concepts can be born, so that time can flow again.

In January 1965 the murder charges against James Ford Seale and Charles Marcus Edwards were dismissed, and law enforcement at every level—county, state, and federal—abandoned the case. Several journalists showed some interest in it during the 1990s, but nothing began to move until the summer of 2005, when Canadian film-

maker David Ridgen got in touch with Charles’s older brother, Thomas Moore.

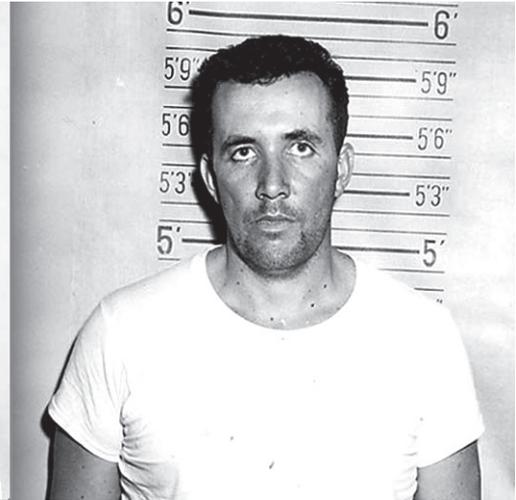
Thomas Moore is the central character in the rest of this tale.

He was in the army when his brother was killed and though he came home for the funeral, his mother told

him that there was nothing he could do, that he had to forget about it and go on with his life. The army sent him to Vietnam, and he later served in the first Gulf War. He retired to Colorado Springs in the 1990s. During all his years in the military, Moore had nightmares about his brother’s death. He would hear Charles calling out for help, asking “Why?” The killing left him feeling trapped, he has said, “chained by pain, guilt, hate, and shame.”

Ridgen persuaded Moore to go back to Mississippi and work on the case. Within weeks they had remarkable success: they found James Ford Seale (who had been

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reported dead) and they found what were supposedly lost FBI files. Soon they confronted Seale's conspirator, Charles Marcus Edwards, directly, approaching him one morning as he and his wife came to open the church where he was a deacon.

In Ridgen's film, *Mississippi Cold Case*, we see Moore hand Edwards a manila envelope of FBI files and we hear him ask Edwards why the files contain his name. Edwards protests, "I'm not on the FBI report" (he had in fact never seen the files). "I did not kill your brother," he says. "The FBI dropped all this case and you know that. They dropped the case because there wasn't any evidence. I've never been on that Mississippi River in my life," he says, shooing Moore and Ridgen away. "You all get off this church ground and quit stirring up trouble here on the church."

Not long after this encounter, Moore and Ridgen persuaded a US Attorney in Jackson to give Edwards immunity in

exchange for his testimony and to indict Seale for conspiracy in the murders. In 2007 Seale was convicted and sent to jail, where he died four years later.

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This past summer I went back to Mississippi. On May 2, 2014—fifty years to the day after the kidnapping, beating, and murders of Charles Moore and Henry Dee—Moore, Ridgen, and I visited the site in the Homochitto National Forest where the boys had been tied to a tree and whipped until one of them invented the story about guns hidden in a nearby church. Two sticks leaning against a tall yellow pine marked the spot of the beating. I dropped a digital recorder into my shirt pocket and Moore and I, standing on the dirt road amid the filtered sunlight and the bugs, began to talk.

What was of most interest to me was not Seale's conviction—that was simple

justice—but something surprising that happened at the trial: Edwards asked the families to forgive him for his part in the crime. In her book *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt addresses “the predicament of irreversibility,” our “being unable to undo what [we have] done” such that the deeds of the past hang over every new generation. “Forgiving,” she writes, offers a “possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility.”

I knew in general what had happened at the Seale trial, but I was glad to hear Moore tell it in his own words:

The first day of court . . . it was about four o'clock . . . and he [Edwards] said, “Can I address the court?” and the judge says, “Well, let me dismiss the jury”—and I was sitting right on the front seat—he was still in the witness box and Thelma [Collins, Henry Dee’s sister] was sitting next to me . . . and he, looking right at me, he asked me, he said, “Mr. Moore and Mrs. Collins,” he said, “I wants to apologize for what I was involved in forty-one years ago, in the killing of your brother.” And he said, “I ask your forgiveness.” Those were the words. And that was it.

Everybody’s mouth was just, *whup!* an’ I said, “Holy shit.”

So then, I had several family members there . . . and I went to each one and I said, “What do you think?” They

said, “That’s up to you. You got to deal with it.” I said, well, I was readin’ the Bible—’cause I was brought up in Sunday school—and I read where it said, “How many times do I forgive my brother? Shall I forgive my brother seven times? No, seventy times seven.” And then I said, “I’m goin’ to forgive him and give him a handshake.” So we did, next morning.

Moore’s decision to forgive Edwards would have been hard to predict. The US Army had trained Moore as a rifleman, then as a machine gunner, then as a sniper. “You were a dangerous man,” I said, and he agreed. In fact, when it became clear that his brother had been killed simply for being black, Moore began to plot revenge against whites in Franklin County. He stockpiled automatic weapons. He imagined climbing the water tower and poisoning the town water supply. Only when his mother found out what he was up to, and told him not to do it, did he forbear.

Standing with Moore on that dirt road in the forest, I kept circling this change of heart, wondering how he had moved from being a trained, revenge-seeking rifleman to being a man willing to forgive. He kept putting off a direct answer, or so it seemed until I realized he was building it up slowly, for it had many parts.

The first had to do with finding out what had actually happened. In 2005, when Ridgen approached him about filming, Moore asked, “What’s in this for me?” and Ridgen replied, “Maybe a little truth.” Until that

time, Moore had not actually known how his brother had been killed or by whom.

In short, in describing his change of heart, Moore began by speaking of truth and justice (or, as he said to me, “some justice”—of the many men involved in the murders, only one went to jail). It was especially the Seale indictment, and the fact that Moore himself was instrumental in securing it, he said, that had “redeemed [him] from being angry.”

“Forgiving,” writes Arendt, “is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly.” That day in the courthouse, Moore and Edwards had quoted back and forth to each other the Christian Gospel about forgiveness, a common language known to both men but belonging to neither, what a psychiatrist friend of mine calls “the third,” that is, a thing that allows two people to step beyond themselves into something other than opposition.

Nor was that the end of it. After Seale’s conviction, Moore “continued to read about forgiveness”:

Moore: Research, research, research. Get an understanding. And I read this thing where it said it was a three-part process. Two of them you have a whole lot to do with—you got to want to do it . . . —it talks about what you holding

in—Who is it really hurting? And then I said, then the third part must be the Holy Spirit, to come in and take the place of all that violent mind. And of course I was in the church then; I was moving, I was moving. Marcus [Edwards] opened the door, gave me the key. Now a lot of people have asked me, “Do you think Marcus was serious?” I don’t know. And I really don’t care. I really don’t care whether he was trying to make himself look good.

I don’t care. I don’t know. He dangled some keys in front of me, and I took ‘em. And I let myself out of my own suffering, my poor prison. And I was able to let it go . . . and let my brother lie, just settle down. I think my brother’s got peace.

Hyde: But do you still dream about your brother?

Moore: No. No, no, no, no. No, I look at the work that I’m doing in church, in the community. I look at it as my brother and my mom, they lookin’ down on me and sayin’, “He doin’ some good stuff.” So, as horrible and as brutal as it was, I have come—through the spiritual life—to accept the fact that this was something that I was destined to do, and go *through* in my life in order to be who I am today.

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In the Erechtheum on the Acropolis in Athens there once stood, says Plutarch, an altar to *Lêthê*, to Forgetfulness, meant to remind Athenians to forget a mythic dispute between Poseidon and Athena. Each god had sought to win the city's favor with a gift, Poseidon offering a spring of salty water and Athena—the winner—an olive tree. Defeated, Poseidon did not begrudge the loss but took it, says Plutarch, with “an easy-going absence of resentment.” The altar to Forgetfulness tells the city that the foundational divine discord is to be left to the past, not brought forward.

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James Ford Seale was convicted in 2007. Three years later Thomas Moore returned to Mississippi, this time to seek out Charles Marcus Edwards to see if it was possible to move beyond truth and justice to something closer to true reconciliation. David Ridgen filmed their encounter. After some preliminary greetings, the two men sit on Edwards's porch swing and Moore initiates the conversation:

Moore: I don't know how you feel about it but when you stood up in

church, I mean stood up in the court and asked for forgiveness, that gave me *an avenue*.

Edwards: Yeah, right.

Moore: Man, I hated you, dude. I'm gonna tell you right off, I said “I'm gonna get him,” you know, and I didn't even know you.

Edwards: You know, when I did that, being in the church, and I'd prayed about that a lot of times, for forgiveness, you know. And it lifted a burden off of me, yes sir, it lifted a burden off of me. That was a black mark in my life, I can't tell you. I'm sorry for it to

this day. I was sincere when I asked you and Miss Dee to forgive me too, you know. I didn't deny being a member of the Klan. I didn't deny that.

Ridgen [voice-over]: Soon the conversation turns to the beating itself.

Edwards: I reckon you could say Curtis [Dunn] and myself we did the little strapping that went on. James Seale says I—he held a gun on these guys . . .

Moore: I try to think that the shock and that they was on the, uh, how bad

they were beaten up I don't know, but just the fact that, I know . . .

Edwards: They got a pretty good whuppin' but I—they was nowhere near dead nor nothing like that, I mean, they were good and alive when they left [*unintelligible*] and took them back down to Mr. Seale's place down there before those other people came out there.

Moore: Did you ever think about: "What if that had happened to *my* son?"

Edwards: Well sure I did. And I wondered, you know, I wondered, I had four boys, and I wondered, and I said, "What if some of them people might retaliate and take one of my sons," you know, and I wondered about that.

Ridgen [*voice-over*]: After two hours, and the conversation becoming ever more personal, the coffee comes out.

*We see Edwards bringing coffee mugs from his kitchen, then he and Moore stand by Moore's car.*

Moore: What does this talking that you and I are doing do for you today?

Edwards: Well, let you know that we can be friends.

Moore [*nods*]: Yeah.

*The scene switches back to the men sitting on the porch swing. Moore recalls the time he approached Edwards at his church.*

Moore: We didn't come to see you until 2006 because I'm gonna tell you why. I'm gonna tell you why: because I didn't have the *nerve* to come talk to you. So I, me and David rode by here a couple of times and I said, "No, I'm not goin' in there." That was in 2005.

Edwards: I tell you what, and I look back at the day that you all came to church up there and [*unintelligible*] I thought about it a thousand times since then: "Why didn't I just ask them people to come on in the church with me?"

Moore: What time is your church service on Sunday? The service.

Edwards: The service is at eleven o'clock. [*pause*] If you want to come, you come.

Moore: I think—you and I, sittin' up in church, is going to be a testimony for our people.

Edwards: [*nods*] Okay.

*The men go into the garden to pick peaches and tomatoes. They shake hands by the car.*

Moore: We'll be seeing you, fellah.



Edwards: [*nodding*] Uh-huh.

Moore: I remember the words you said, “You all get off of here now, go home.” All right, sir, we’ll see you Sunday.

*Moore and Ridgen drive away, Moore shaking his head in disbelief.*

Moore: I’m damn near speechless, myself. Five years ago, we talkin’ this kind of shit, you crazy as hell. [*smiling*] And instead I’m telling the man that “I planned to kill you. I plotted.” And the biggest thing is that he invited us to his church. I didn’t expect that. I didn’t expect him to say, “You all come on to the church.” That’s going to be a *story*. God damn it, black and white *do not* attend church together.

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Years before this encounter, at the time of the Seale trial, when Moore forgave Edwards, the two men quoted to each other Jesus’s answer when asked how many times a man should be forgiven. Seven times? No, says Jesus, not seven but seventy times seven.

By the time I interviewed Moore I had read Matthew 18:2–6, where this counsel

is found. Jesus has a child brought before him and tells the disciples that they should humble themselves “and become like children.” Then he says, “Whoever causes one of these little ones . . . to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung round his neck and he were thrown into the sea.”

How would Moore read that line, I wondered. Isn’t Jesus saying that some sinners should be put to death rather than be forgiven? Didn’t the Klansmen cause one another to sin? Didn’t Edwards single out Henry Dee for kidnapping and thus “cause” the murders?

In her meditation on forgiveness, Arendt allows that there are such things as radical evil and unforgivable crimes. Jesus connects forgiveness and repentance but what exactly is repentance? Arendt points out that the biblical Greek for “repentance” means “change of mind.” It isn’t enough to say, “I’d like to apologize.” What is called for is a conversion and true conversions are rare; one or two in a lifetime would be unusual. What exactly, I wondered, had Charles Marcus Edwards done to show that he had become a different person? In the filmed conversation, he is remarkably passive; Moore does all the work.

And as for reconciliation, isn’t what we’re seeing an American individualist

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form—*one* person guilty, *one* person apologizing, *one* person forgiving? What about a legal system that allowed a century of American apartheid, that allowed county, state, and federal law enforcement to ignore two murders for forty years?

I had been thinking about all of this before I met Thomas Moore, and had papers in my pocket with notes to help me fill out my questions. But as we stood talking in the forest where the boys were tortured, my questions seemed out of place, almost rude, thought experiments for some other day.

Instead of pestering Moore about that great millstone, I thanked him for the work he had done. It wasn't my brother who had been killed. I was not the man whose nightmares had been quieted.

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“To study the Buddha Way is to study the self,” writes Dogen Zenji, thirteenth-century Japanese Zen master. And “to study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be verified by all things.” This last line is a little hard to translate. Some say that forgetting the self is “to be actualized by myriad things”; some say it’s “to be enlightened.”

In Dogen's original text, the Chinese character for “forget” is made of two elements: the lower half indicates “heart/mind” while the upper half means “to become invisible, perish, lose.” The oldest version of this upper part, found on oracle bones dating back three or four thousand

years, is a bit of a pictogram: it inserts a vertical line beside the sign for “person” so as to indicate a person hidden behind something and thus invisible.

When something is forgotten, the heart/mind no longer sees it. You could therefore translate Dogen's “self-forgetting” this way: “When we study the self . . . it disappears.”

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The story of Thomas Moore's journey from vengeance to forgiveness has two kinds of memory and thus two kinds of forgetting. Some things can be called to mind at will, and some intrude upon the mind no matter what we will. It is one thing to get angry when thinking back on an injury; it is quite another to be invaded by nightmares whenever sleep lowers the threshold of consciousness.

In Greek mythology, the Furies are embodiments of unforgettable grief and rage. Their names are Grievance, Ceaseless, and Blood-Lust. Their names are Grudge, Relentless, and Payback. They clog the fatted present with the undigested past. They harry the sleepless mind, demanding ransom in blood for its release.

There are certain parasitic fungi that invade the brains of tropical ants, making them climb to the top of trees and die there so the fungus can grow from their bodies and widely spread its spores. In the same way, the Unforgettables control their hosts and seed themselves anew. The curse of the House of Atreus descends generation to generation. The story has no closure, each of

its bearers being compelled to add another chapter and act it out in the real world.

In the case at hand, the US Army put weapons in Moore's hands and taught him how to kill; add to that his brother's restless, nightmare ghost and before long you have a man plotting to murder white men in Meadville, Mississippi.

Of the many forces that combined to alter and close that plot, three stand out. First there was the truth: in 2005, after forty-one years, Moore got access to the FBI files and knew for the first time what actually happened to his brother. Then there was justice ("some justice"): the government indicted James Ford Seale, a jury in Mississippi convicted him, a federal judge sent him to prison. Only after all of that did forgiveness enter the picture, and forgiveness, as we saw, turned out to be an object of study for Moore: "Research, research, research. Get an understanding."

To enter the work of forgiveness it may not be necessary for the truth to come out and justice to be done, but it helps. It helps because it then becomes easier for the injured man to see the degree to which the wound has become part of his identity, his sense of self. If he is to change he will first of all have to study that self, become intimate with it. That doesn't mean a literal forgetting of the crime but it does mean letting go of the person

the crime brought into being. "Why drag about this corpse of your memory?" asks Emerson in one of his great odes to American self-renewal. Said Moore: "As hard and as brutal as it was . . . this was something that I was destined . . . to go *through* in my life in order to be who I am today." Who he is today is a man who has laid the ghost to rest ("my brother's got peace"), freed himself from servitude to the Unforgettable, and become the agent of his own recollections.

From the point of view of the parasitic fungus, seizing the ant's brain is a wonderful thing. The fungus community endures and spreads. From the point of view of the ant, it's a disaster. In the human community, the spirit of the Unforgettable is useful when it comes to asserting self against other. The desire for revenge can be an expression of basic self-respect and, as legal scholar Martha Minow writes, "vengeance is also the wellspring of a notion of equivalence that animates justice." But revenge without justice too easily descends into unending violence, blacks and whites killing one another year after year as each race claims and defends an identity rooted in *not* being the other.

For those whose goal is an end to conflict, then, better to become intimate with the self that clings to difference. And better to forget about it. 🕯