

I

report us fairly,
how we slaughter
for the common good

—*Seamus Heaney, "Kinslip"*

ABEL 1986–1999

My town sat on top of a small hill by the side of a river whose banks held only sand. At noon you had to walk quickly so as not to burn your feet, but when it rained the river would overflow and turn our central street to mud. All us children would go out, slipping and pushing each other, playing in the mud before the sun baked it hard and the wind carried it away as dust.

To talk about this part of my life is to talk about another person, like a person in a story, a boy with a father and mother and three sisters, one pretty, one smart, and one mean. A grandfather who drank too much and beat everyone at dominos. A teacher who thought that boy had talent. A priest who thought he was wicked. Friends and classmates and enemies and girls he watched with increasing wonder, like Jimena, who had thick curly hair and fair skin and who got pregnant with the baby of one of the local guerrilleros. Most people think that a person is whatever you see before you, walking around in bone and meat and blood, but that is an idiocy. Bone and meat and blood just exists, but to exist is not to live, and bone and meat and blood alone is not a person. A person is what happens when there is a family, and a town, a place where you are known. Where every person who knows you holds a small, invisible mirror, and in each mirror, held by family and friends

and enemies, is a different reflection. In one mirror, the sweet fat boy I was to my mother. In another, the little imp I was to my father. In another, the irritating brat I was to Gustavo. A person is what happens when you gather all these reflections around a body. So what happens when one by one the people holding those mirrors are taken from you? It's simple. The person dies. And the bone and meat and blood goes on, walking the earth as if the person still existed, when God and the angels know he doesn't.

So let's not talk about this boy as if he and I are the same person and not two strangers, one who walked in this body before the burning, and one who did after. Let's talk about this boy, whose memories and face I share, as the dead child he is. We can call him Abelito.

Abelito was a fat, well-loved child. Every day he would walk to school in another town, a school run by men from America who taught math and reading but also about the personal Jesus and how a group of priests called Jesuits had stolen the Bible and changed the words to make men follow the devil. The Lord would overcome and save us if we had faith, they said, and faith was a moment when the Heavens shined down and we knew we were saved. The mean sister, Mona, said that she had been saved and that it felt very, very good, but that Abelito hadn't had the feeling because he was going to hell. Two weeks later Mother took him two towns down to the church in Cunaviche to get confessed, and when Abelito told Father Eustacio about Mona's salvation, the old priest had scowled and said it was stupidity, that only a cruel God would condemn and save in such a foolish way, and that God was not cruel, but was, in fact, a terrible and frightening love. And he took that little boy out of the confessional to see the skin-and-bones Holy Christ above the altar, a wooden Holy Christ in agony, with muscles straining and a bloody wound in the side like a mouth come to devour. The statue gave Abelito nightmares, but Father Eustacio said to look on the suffering and know the love of God, to do such a thing to His child. God is love, Father Eustacio said, and He does not hand

out salvation to be worn like a crown. And Abelito said, My sister, then, she is not saved? And Father Eustacio said, No, which pleased Abelito very much. And after that day Abelito nodded his head when the missionaries talked about the personal Jesus who would come to them and make them born again, but in his secret heart he remained faithful to the terrifying Holy Christ of Cunaviche.

Some days Abelito's grandfather would take him and his smart sister, Maria, and teach them how to carve boats from chachajo, a good hard wood that also makes the best spinning tops, and they would put them in the river and watch them float downstream. Abelito's grandfather said all water flows to the ocean, and that one day he would go there to die, the place where everything goes in the end.

Maria would carve her boats from balsa, which is easier to work, but Abelito carved from harder wood because he wanted his boats to reach the ocean. Abelito's grandfather had been a lot of places, and told Abelito marvelous things about the lands far, far downriver, out of the mountains and into the coastal regions, where the people were lazy and stupid and spoke Spanish that sounded like they had pebbles in their mouths, where there were snakes that could kill a steer with one bite, and men with skin black as coal, and many other marvelous things.

The first time Abelito met death was with Marta, his beautiful sister, who got sick and neither the priest nor the missionaries could save her, because she'd been hexed with the evil eye. After her death, Abelito's father gave the children bracelets with a tiny wooden cross hidden in the weaving. This will protect you, he said. At the time, Abelito didn't understand why anyone would put the evil eye on anyone else, let alone on someone like Marta, who was so beautiful that everybody was always talking about it, what a beautiful child. Abelito would walk through the town looking carefully into the eyes of the old women to see if they were good or evil, but he never could tell the difference, and could never understand what pleasure anyone would get from killing children.

Abelito's father liked to play games with his children. "Bear" was

when he would stand by the river and growl and they would run up and try to tickle him and he would grab them and throw them into the water. "Horse" was when they would climb on his back and he would run down the street shouting "Jijiji!" Abelito would also play cinco huecos with some of the other children from Sona. They would use a stick to draw a big square in the street, and then other, smaller squares inside it. Each child would draw a little letter in each square. An *A* for Abelito. *M* for Maria, who was terrible at the game. *F* for Franklin, who was strong and skillful and who liked to boast and taunt the other players before throwing the ball. Then they'd turn, hold a ball in one hand and a little stick in the other, and throw the little stick over their head. If it landed in their square, they'd try to get the others out by hitting them with the ball. I don't remember who came up with that game, but it was Abelito's favorite. Sometimes men would drive through on motorcycles and ruin the squares with their tires, and none of the children were supposed to say anything or even look mad, because all their parents had told them these men were from the paracos.

More than the games, though, Abelito liked working with his father on their house. Ever since Abelito could remember, they had worked on the house. As a toddler, he'd watched his father hack out a small patch in the jungle. This is where your mother will cook, he'd say, pointing to a square of dirt. This is where you and your sisters will sleep.

Then, brick by brick, he built a wall. Whenever he had money, he would buy a cheap block of cement and the children helped him mix it with water to form bricks, and he would lay them around the perimeter. Boys become men by working with their fathers, and girls become women by tending the fire, but in Abelito's family everyone worked with his father on the house, brother and sisters alike. The work went slow at first, but as soon as Abelito's father finished the big room they moved in, all of them, so they could stop paying rent. And as soon as

they stopped paying rent, Abelito's father had more money for cement, and the work went faster.

The missionary school opened up around the time they finished the kitchen, and Abelito's parents sent him and his sisters to get an education. Abelito's first year there was the year many dead bodies floated down the river, and the school closed for a month, and Abelito's father stopped playing Bear with his children. Then the bodies stopped, and the children saw fewer and fewer paracos, and the school reopened.

When Abelito was eight, he saw his first guerrilleros. These were the men that the paracos supposedly fought. He was with his father in the boat and saw a group of ten men and four women on the far side. They wore uniforms and carried long guns Abelito had not seen before. They waved Abelito over and asked him to ferry them across and he did. When they left, Abelito's father told him, "When men with guns ask for something, there are no favors. You only obey."

The leader of the guerrilla was called the Carpenter, after Saint Joseph, and people said the name came from the pity he showed to the children he turned into orphans. He never killed children, they said, even though he ran the risk of them seeking revenge. And sometimes he would make a big show of giving children some of the money he had stolen from their parents. There were worse guerrilleros than the Carpenter, people said, and it could be counted as a blessing that he was the curse God had sent to the jungles around the town.

On the Feast of Saint Joseph he came to town with bottles of aguardiente and guerrilleros holding guitars and drums. Abelito's father brought Abelito to see, and though Abelito's father listened carefully to the Carpenter, he didn't let any aguardiente touch his lips.

The Carpenter was a big man with a rough face, pitted like pumice stone, weathered from a life lived moving from place to place, sleeping in guerrilla camps, lacking a true home. It was a serious face, a face Abelito found impressive, admirable. He wondered what it would be like to live a life that would earn such a face.

The Carpenter said he defended the truth. He said the people deserved respect. Every district should have a clinic, every large town a hospital. The people should own their own land, and the children should have an education. Everything should be free and the government should give us work. Then a guerrillera stood up. She was tall and very fair skinned, with black hair tied tight into a bun and an angry look on her face. She said after her father died her mother had taken up with a man who abused her every night. She had taken the abuse until her younger sister had her first bleeding, and then she had no option. She'd stabbed that man in the neck and gone off to join the guerrilla, and the revolution became her mother and father. The revolution, she said, was a true mother and true father. It had given her thousands of brothers and sisters. Then she sang a song in a voice many years sweeter than the look on her face. The people drank and the guerrilleros sang more songs, and Abelito decided he liked the guerrilla much more than the paracos who used to ruin his games of cinco huecos. Later, with his friend Franklin, they would play guerrilla. And Franklin, always brash, would pretend to be the Carpenter, and deliver judgments that were cruel and just.

A month later the guerrilla came back to the village and took Alfredo, who was four years older than Abelito, and Matías, who was three years older, to join in the revolution. This is a paraco town, they said, and it must pay a new "vaccine," which is what they called the tax they were imposing on the people. They were much angrier than they'd been before, and no one was sure why. Some people blamed Marcos Ardila, the butcher, who they said still had ties to the paramilitaries. Others blamed Chepe, owner of a bar. Whoever caused it, the price was paid in the children they took. The guerrilla would have taken Abelito, too, but they didn't, they said, because he was too much of a faggot. Here is what happened.

Abelito was playing with his smart sister, Maria, when the guerrilla came down the road. Tall, thin Alfredo, who was always sick, and short,

ugly Matías, who was kind, were following behind them with big, scared eyes. Maria ran and hid, but Abelito was curious and stayed. The men with guns surrounded him. Do you want to join the revolution? Abelito looked at Alfredo and Matías, who were looking down at their feet, trying not to cry.

One of the guerrilla pulled a grenade from his vest and asked Abelito if he knew what it was. Abelito said yes. The guerrillero handed it to Abelito and told him, "Pull the pin and throw it. Prove you are a man."

Abelito started crying, and the man said, "Look, a little faggot." And they laughed, all the guerrilla laughed except for Alfredo and Matías. All the guerrilla had eyes like flat stones, except for the leader, whose eyes were like sharp little knives. "Throw it, throw it," the guerrillero shouted. But Abelito just stood and held the grenade and cried, and the leader took the grenade back and said, "Go to your mother, little faggot."

Abelito, weak as he was, ran to his mother. He should have pulled the pin and thrown it like in a game of cinco huecos, carelessly, so it landed close enough to kill him and the guerrilla and all the worthless games of the future.

Of course, he did no such thing, and once the guerrilla had complete control of the towns around Abelito, once the paras became a memory, the guerrilla brought in the paisas, and the next game started.

When the paisas arrived in town, they brought briefcases and seeds and promises of a new business, the coca business, in which the townspeople could not lose. Many people became excited—planting, picking crops, working the land, and making money. The paisas paid what they said, and on time. And both the townspeople and the paisas paid the vaccine to the guerrilla.

Mother and Father would argue during this time. Father wanted to make money, Mother thought this was dangerous. An ugly business. Grandfather had told her terrible stories about it. In the end, the family

did not join in the business that was helping so many of the people around him buy radios, new clothes, and other things. But still, they were happy.

This went on for two years, and during that time the villages along the river changed. Grandfather complained that all the little towns had become no more than bars with streets running through them, and that all the little girls had grown up to become no more than prostitutes. Mother said that Grandfather should be happy that all the towns were bars—he could get drunk anywhere he chose now, and not just in front of Abelito and his sisters.

There were elections, and then after the elections, gunfire, and half the people of a neighboring town left in fear. The paisas showed up with men with guns, and they were very angry. They said they would only pay so much for coca and no more. They said these towns were all paramilitary towns, and the guerrilla had raised taxes on coca to pay for all the trouble they had caused.

Franklin's brother Santiago, who was four years older than Abelito and was good at numbers, said he had traveled downriver with his father and they paid more for coca in other places. He worked out that, if they paid this much here and this much at Camaguan, they must pay a lot in Cúcuta, and the paisas should be paying everyone much more, more even than they had originally paid. He went into the jungle to complain to the Carpenter, and the Carpenter slapped him and told him that they knew this was a paraco town, and he was from a paraco family, and he should not complain. Then the guerrilla beat him so badly he could not even walk back home, but his father and his brother had to be called out to the guerrilla camp to carry him home. Two days later, the paisas returned and went to his house, took him to the square, and told everyone he was an enemy of the people. The next week his body, all swollen, floated down the river and the town mourned and Father Eustacio came from Cunaviche for the funeral. Franklin told

everyone he'd avenge his brother, but no one believed him. His boasting turned sad and purposeless.

A period of great fear began. Without warning, the evangelical school shut down. Maria told Abelito the guerrilla had taken the teachers and made them pay, or were holding them in the jungle until they paid. She said everyone in Colombia must pay a monthly vaccine to the guerrilla, especially the wealthy, and when people don't pay it they must be put in prison until it is paid. But the guerrilla do not have prisons, she said, so they took Abelito's teachers to the thickest parts of the jungle, where there were twenty-foot anacondas that ate men alive, and chained them by the neck to trees. She said they would stay like that, a chain around their necks, until money from America set them free, or they died. But after a time, even this became normal, and the people worked for less money without complaint, and the fear became something in the background, like the heat of summer, something you acknowledge and sometimes even complain about but which you do not expect to change.

When he turned thirteen, Abelito started working coca, which was good, hard work. That same year one of the paisas got Abelito's mean sister, Mona, pregnant. When Abelito's father heard of it, he tried to beat her but found he could not even raise his arms to strike his child, so his mother did it for him with a switch. The family became deeply sad. When they asked the paisa if he would marry Mona, the paisa just laughed, and everyone was too afraid to say anything. Mona said it was better this way. She never said the paisa's name, she just called him "that son of a bitch," and that she'd rather cut his baby out of her own stomach than be married to him.

Abelito prepared for life to change, for his sister to give birth and for him to help his father and mother and sister with the baby, but everything changed, for everyone in the town, much faster than that, when Franklin finally found the courage he'd spent years searching for.

The Carpenter had been sleeping with many of the girls of the town, but especially Jimena. She was fifteen, and had already birthed one of his children. Franklin waited for the Carpenter to come see her. He followed the Carpenter and caught him alone with Jimena, who was very beautiful, and very timid, and had always spoken kindly to Abelito, and who he loved. Franklin stabbed them all over, in the neck, arms, hands, and head. Franklin told me he had wanted to cut out the Carpenter's tongue, the tongue that had told the paisas about his brother's plan, but when he turned the body over and saw his face it had terrified him and he'd run.

Only one man in a hundred will stand up to a true killer, the way Franklin had done. But Franklin only had enough courage in him to do it once. He fled, and his whole family fled with him, while the rest of the town waited like a pig facing the knife.