

## Lambing Season

Just before dawn I pulled three wet and gasping lambs from the warmth into the cold. They were the first arrivals of the new day, beating the sun by a few minutes. I sat back and rested, wiping my hands on my pants.

These births had not been easy and my forearms burned from the constant tugging on heads and legs. The first lamb's neck twisted the wrong way, and the second one started as a breech birth. All three survived, however, and now shivered and steamed on the wet straw. The pre-dawn chill cooled the lambs rapidly, even though lambing season occurs during the warming months of the spring.

The exhausted ewe lay on the ground, my knee pressing against her neck to keep her down. I lifted her lambs, still warm and slick, and laid them next to her head. The ewe strained to lick the birth residue from their bodies, her eyes wide and liquid. The lambs' eyes remained closed as they rolled and kicked in their newfound freedom.

When I learned my university in Scotland would close a month for Easter break, I sought a job to occupy the vacant time. The walls of the student employment office were thick with postings for caterers, traffic counters, and office workers. The solitary notice seeking a lambing assistant on a sheep farm stood out. It was the only phone number I copied down.

Although I was not a veterinary student, which the posting requested, my father's relatives had farmed in western Pennsylvania since colonial times. I grew up visiting my great aunt's farm north of Pittsburgh for many family gatherings. There I fed cows and plinked coffee cans with an old .22 rifle, excited to escape the confines of suburbia. I realized these vacations did not constitute a realistic farm experience, but I considered them lessons in a rural vocabulary without the tougher grammar of actual responsibility. When I called up the sheep farmer listed on the posting, I overcame his reservations with persistence and a little bluffing and convinced him to hire me as a lambing assistant for two weeks in April.

The colorless cold morning marked my final day on the farm. Crouching over the ewe and her newborn lambs, I realized I would board a bus in a few hours and return to my life as a graduate student in Edinburgh, a place which now seemed as foreign as a sheep farm once did. Before I could think of leaving, however, I had to finish the morning chores. Using a trick the farmer taught me I lured the new mother into an empty pen by dragging her three bleating lambs along the straw. She followed anxiously, her nose tracking their scent. With the new family re-united in a cramped pen, I began to bundle hay to feed the two hundred sheep entrusted to my care.

My world for most of each day and night was a single-story barn the size of two basketball courts. Tin sheeting stretched over the roof and walls, allowing only thin cracks of sunlight to reach inside. Slat-board fences of rotting wood divided the barn's interior into the enclosures and pens that held the ewes and their offspring. I learned to step over these fences while carrying water buckets, feed bags, and even ewes because the few metal gates were solid rust. Straw covered the ground three inches deep, forming a springy carpet over the dirt. Outside the barn, green and brown fields rolled in all directions, dotted by white clumps of grazing sheep. Despite my desire to be a shepherd wandering amid the green pastures, I spent almost all my time working alone inside the barn's translucent shell.

The isolation bothered me at first; I missed the reassurance of a large and bustling community around me. In two weeks I had seen only six other people, four of them being the farmer and his family. My life suddenly shrank from my globe-spanning circles in Edinburgh to the farmer's house, the barn, and the journey in between.

But now, on my last day, I realized how much I had come to value the solitude and routine that safeguarded this existence. Silence forced me to rely on imagination to a degree dormant since childhood. I constantly dredged-up old memories and subjected them to microscopic study, weighing perspectives that busier surroundings would have drowned out. During lazier moments, I jotted journal entries for a future time when I would lack the patience of reflection.

The constancy of morning chores, however, restricted my idle time to later in the day. To feed the sheep I walked around the barn dropping a handful of hay into each pen. The ewes rushed to eat, raising dust clouds of pulverized straw to fill the barn. The air reeked of universal decomposition, a smell dominated by wet and rotting hay and the steely odor of matted wool. Yet somehow the barn's odor felt comfortable to me, like the dankness of a familiar basement. I had spent so much time inside the barn that its environment had become a part of me. To an outside observer, however, I am sure both the barn and my own clothes produced an unbearable smell.

With the feeding completed, I refilled the dozens of water buckets emptied or spilled during the night. The freezing spray from the spigot numbed my fingers still warm from handling the newborn lambs. By now all my senses were accustomed to the sudden shocks of farm work. I shifted a dozen times each day between the mental and physical extremes of boredom, panic, comfort and pain.

Some days I waited lazily for a single birth, watching the shadows stretch themselves across the ground. The warm afternoon breeze cast a quiet spell over the barn and for long hours I would lean back against a fence watching the drowsy sheep and letting my mind wander over distant memories.

But other times the births came so frequently that my cracked and infected fingers swelled with purple bruises. The crisis of a suffocating lamb or burst uterus broke the calm like a nightmare shattering sound sleep. My hands throbbed as I slipped and clawed against the pressure of bone and muscle. Some times the lambs did not make it out. Other times only parts of them did. Sitting alone amid the blood, straw and mud, I struggled and pleaded between the two outcomes of birth and death. Often I gave up, drained and depressed, and waited for the calm to return again.

The dawn of my last day, however, began peacefully. No other lambs were born and the barn fell still except for the quiet crunch of chewing sheep. I completed my chores by placing fresh straw in each pen and checking again on the newborn lambs now struggling to stand up by themselves.

Secretly, however, I knew the morning's calm to be a lie. All of my efforts, from delivering the pre-dawn triplets, to cleaning the pens, were a deception. Everything I helped to create during these two weeks would be erased completely. Watching the first sunlight slip through the gaps in the wall, I reminded myself that all these sheep would be killed today.

In fact, they had only a short while to live. Within the hour, dark green jeeps and flatbed trucks hauling bulldozers would roll up to the farm gate. The muddy lane would fill with army soldiers, veterinarians, and the loud-talking men known simply as "shooters." I would help them round up the sheep, separate the ewes from their terrified lambs, and clear space for the bulldozers and trucks to work. Then the killing would begin.

From conversations with the farmer I already knew how it would occur. Retractable bolt guns would punch a small, neat hole through the ewes' skulls, pumping their blood high in the air. The lambs would go easier, collapsing with a sharp cry after the injection of a sedative into their hearts. When it was all over, the barn would be perfectly quiet for the first time.

Just one week earlier the epidemic of Foot and Mouth disease ravaging Great Britain jumped a range of hills to infect the livestock of a neighboring farm. We had considered ourselves safe from the disease due to our isolation in a little-trafficked valley north of the Cheviot Hills. But the news arrived late on a Friday evening while the farmer's family and I watched *Who Wants To Be a Millionaire* and cradled cups of lukewarm tea. The farmer picked up the ringing phone, and after a moment, cursed loudly. The children were sent to bed and I flipped aimlessly through a magazine while watching the farmer and his wife debate in hushed voices. The TV droned on without an audience.

A few days later I learned that a thousand sheep were to die on my last morning of work. Our farm lay within the government's mandatory cull zone to contain the disease. Until that day, the farmer told me, I was to continue to deliver lambs and care for the sheep as if nothing was different. I felt like a death row warden guarding inmates who were both innocent and ignorant of their punishment.

From outward appearances, my routine changed little during that week of waiting. I delivered dozens of lambs a day and completed all the necessary chores. When a sick ewe died after giving birth, I nursed her two orphaned lambs using a plastic syringe and tube. I nicknamed one of the orphans Blackfoot and let him ride atop my shoulder as I went about my tasks.

Yet I could not ignore sense of impending violence. The farmer told me the main roads were blocked by checkpoints and patrolled by soldiers. Cars, tractors, boots, and clothes had to be disinfected every time we came and went from the farm. A few times I thought I heard gunshots from over the hills, and finally, one afternoon I saw the pillars of smoke from burning carcasses. The most wrenching image, however, was to watch my sheep and to know it would happen here.

At first I told myself that I would not participate in the cull. These were my sheep, especially the hundreds of lambs I had pulled into the world, and I wanted no part in their slaughter. But I also knew that farm work frequently demands unpleasant tasks. I could not sit on the sidelines when difficult work needed to be done, even if that work was killing.

An hour after sunrise on that last morning I waited patiently for my imagination to resolve itself into reality. I was standing over the pen containing the newborn triplets when I heard the first growl of the army trucks from the road. The lambs, only a few thousand heartbeats into the world, wobbled on timid legs to suck their mother's milk. When I heard the truck engines quit and the doors slam shut, I turned my eyes away from the lambs to focus on the soldiers dressed all in white walking up the lane.

## **Part II: Cull**

Although I was not a farmer by any means, I knew there was nothing sacred about loss on a farm. New life arrived every day under the watchful presence of death. The bodies of stillborn lambs and those that died soon after birth grew to a large pile outside the barn. When it rained I covered them with a shroud made from empty feedbags. With this mortality, however, there was always the continuation of life. Something always survived. The weakest triplet could die during the night, but I would find its two siblings bouncing with bright eyes and full bellies in the morning. I learned to accept nature's rule that the death of a few allowed for the many to survive.

I also killed many times before that final morning. But it was different kind of killing. Lambs weakened by sickness or starvation curl into tiny balls of hollow stomachs and twitching muscles. They gasp for air through the cold saliva that collects in their mouths and chokes them. Other lambs are born with twisted backs and disabilities that make them unable to stand. These lambs I killed to end their lives.

"Look away if you don't want to see this," the farmer warned me on my second day when he carried in a lamb paralyzed by a joint disease. Don't look away, I told myself. You need to see how this is done.

Holding the lamb on its back, he lifted its tiny body high into the air and brought its head down hard on the top of a fence post. Once. Twice. It made the sound of wood striking wood. He held up the still-twitching body and felt for a heartbeat. The next day I killed a stricken lamb the same way. I wanted to close my eyes when its head hit the post, but I was afraid that I would miss. After a few more times it was just another part of my job I learned how to do.

Although I had killed before as an act of mercy, I had never killed the way we did on that last morning. The perfect efficiency of mass slaughter overwhelms any single act of compassionate killing in both action and theory. No lamb or ewe would survive the work of the shooters and the army to eradicate the threat of Foot and Mouth disease from the farm. Nature was not allowed to play its course.

As I describe these events, I realize I have not completely accepted my complicity in the death of the animals I struggled to keep alive. At some point I convinced myself I was just doing another job required by a lambing assistant. Although my efforts had switched from life to death, I blocked out the impact of my work and focused only on the process. I remember telling myself the faster I worked the sooner it would be over and I could go home and forget what had happened.

It only took an hour to kill the hundreds of sheep in the barn. After separating the ewes from the lambs, I went outside, wanting to maintain different memories of the place I spent so many hours. When it was done, soldiers worked in pairs to heave the carcasses into the bloodied buckets of the bulldozers. An open-backed gravel truck waited on the road to receive the bodies that fell like a shower of heavy stones.

As I watched them clean up, the farmer came over and told me to guide a convoy of shooters to get the sheep in the fields. Climbing into the back of a truck, I felt exhausted from a full day although it was only nine o'clock in the morning. I sat with my back against the wheel hub, across from some of the farmer's friends from the village. As we drove away, I looked back at the wheeling bulldozers and falling bodies and was captivated by the easy mechanics of death.

In the fields we did exactly the same thing. With help from several border collies we drove the sheep into a fenced corner of the field, and then blocked their escape with portable metal barriers. Stray sheep were chased down and captured. Then we pulled the lambs away from their mothers and placed them in a separate enclosure. When everything was ready the shooters and the vets stepped forward. Again I tried to escape by turning to face the now empty fields. But behind me I heard the conversations of the shooters mixed with the regular snap of their bolt guns.

I stood near a makeshift pen, a small space surging with hundreds of terrified lambs. From here soldiers carried the lambs to the veterinarians standing nearby to administer the lethal injections. A pile of completely still bodies grew in the grass just behind them.

As more lambs were caught and crammed into the tiny pen, I saw the smaller lambs at the bottom being trampled, almost drowning. One of the shooters, his clothes splattered in blood, paused from his work and waved me over.

"Don't put any more lambs in there," he said pointing to the overcrowded pen. "We don't want them to suffocate."

I nodded, a small part of my brain registering the irony of his words. He frowned, his eyes flashing contempt, so I scooped up a large lamb from the pen walked over to the vets.

I watched how the lambs were killed while I waited behind a line of soldiers for my turn. A soldier held out a struggling lamb and the vet probed the animal's torso with his fingers. After choosing a spot just behind the lamb's shoulder, the vet inserted a needle. A quick burst of blood shot into the syringe as the needle must have pricked the lamb's heart. The vet thumbed the plunger to force the poison into the lamb's body. In two seconds it was over. The lamb cried out as it slumped down, its final protest fading like a tape player running on dead batteries.

I reached the front of the line and stood before a vet dressed in blue coveralls and a poncho. Several glass medicine bottles swirling with red liquid bulged from her pockets.

"You're the lad in charge of the lambing, right?" She asked as I held the lamb's legs tight to keep it still.

I nodded yes, too nervous to speak and wondering how she could tell. The vet bit her lip as she searched the lamb's body and inserted the needle. In a few seconds it was done and the lamb was dead. I walked over to the pile of bodies and set it down as one would stack firewood. The pile was starting to collapse and a soldier worked patiently to re-arrange the bodies.

"Are you a vet student?" the same woman asked when I carried over another lamb, this one with a brilliant white head.

"No, I'm a history student at Edinburgh," I replied.

She nodded, but her eyebrows went up. She noticed my American accent.

"Where are you from?" She asked, her attention focused on the lamb. Her first attempt to pierce its heart failed. The lamb kicked and I pressed it against my body to keep it still.

"I'm from Ohio in the United States" I responded.

"Really," she looked at me, her mouth making a questioning frown. "What are you doing out here?" Very dark blood rushed into the syringe with the lamb's final heartbeat. She pushed down the plunger.

"A bit of adventure during my Easter Break from university." I replied, watching everything, blood and poison, disappear from the clear plastic tube.

The lamb raised its head and cried out once and then was still against my chest.

"My God" was all she said.