

BRENDAN RYAN

The Killers

One of the essential jobs that we had to do on the farm was to kill a sheep so that our family could have some meat to eat. We ate most parts of the sheep; lamb chops, ribs, Mum boiled the sheep's bones for sheep's broth and the sheep's liver. The liver was a prized delicacy carried into the kitchen, still warm and slippery from the freshly slaughtered sheep. Killing the sheep was a job that involved a certain amount of drama; rousing up my brothers and sisters to help catch the sheep or killers as we called them, the heightened moments of trying to grab one and then the slaughter itself. Once our cattle dogs sensed that a sheep was going to be caught they danced around in circles, wagging their tails, looking to Dad for directions before he shooed them towards the sheep paddock a short distance from our house.

The five or six sheep that we kept sensed that something was about to happen as each of us climbed through the cyclone wire fence and into their paddock. Immediately they ran to the far corner of the paddock to escape our shouts. Joe and Rover, our cross-bred Border Collies, nipped at their hooves while Dad shouted directions to them to drive the sheep into a holding corner next to the pigsty. My brothers and sisters and I formed a line closing in on the sheep. Each of us had a space to guard. We stepped forward slowly with arms outstretched watching their eyes for any sudden movement or change of direction. My heart was racing and it was always a competition amongst my brothers and sisters to see who could grab the killer. Once Dad gave the direction to pounce, each of us lunged forward, our fingers clawing at the fleece as the sheep dived, leapt and squirmed out of our reach. The sheep knew no boundaries and they ran over the backs of their own or one of us to escape what they feared. Once I saw a ram head-butt Dad and give him a blood nose; an act that set him roaring. When the killer was finally caught, it was dragged between Dad's knees up to the paddock gate, all the while the dogs biting its hind legs. The other sheep ran back to the far paddock corner, bunched up and scared of what might happen to them. While the chosen sheep was dragged through the open gateway, the fear in its eyes seemed to darken them. We all stood back, catching our breaths and watching while Dad dragged the sheep towards the killing spot near our clothesline, a patch of dirt stained with the blood of other sheep, flung the killer down on its side and then asked for the knife.

The job of killing the sheep was over in less than a minute but the experience has remained with me. Some things are hard to forget. At first, Dad killed the sheep while my elder brother Mick and I watched and learnt about taking responsibility for what we were eating. But killing a sheep was also an act of demonstrating that I was up to the job, a job I became better at, and thought less about, the more that I did it. It was simply something that needed to be done if we were going to have something to eat. I knelt on the sheep's stomach and neck, my weight keeping the sheep still, while Dad looked on. I took the knife and ran it back and forward along a sharpening stone. The sound of a knife being sharpened on the stone quietened us all. The metallic scraping of the blade, the wriggling of the sheep under my weight, the dogs circling for something to nip at. It was a moment of focus. Once the knife was sharpened and warmed in hot water, the next job was to prise apart the lice-riddled folds of wool, cut the neck and lean my weight onto the sheep to steady the death tremors. To make sure it was properly dead, the sheep's neck had to be broken by pulling its head back against my knee until the neck bones cracked, the eyeballs rolled back and the gagging ceased. Sometimes nerves kicked in and the sheep thrashed its legs after its throat had been cut. It was an odd sight, similar to the chooks running around in circles after their heads had been chopped off with an axe. I stood up, looking down at the bloody gash in the sheep's neck and knew that something had set me apart from my younger brothers and sisters. They would have to look up to me.

After the sheep's neck had been cut, the next part of the job was to skin the sheep; a job that Dad was more skilled in. The first part of skinning the sheep was to cut the fleece free below the neck and pull the wool back so that Dad could push his fist down over the sheep's stomach and separate the wool from the skin. Little nicks were made with the knife along the skin folds as he went so that ultimately he could push his fist down along the sheep's stomach and then pull the wool from the body. The skin was still warm and a certain amount of strength was needed to push and gouge the fleece from the skin. With the fleece removed and the head and hooves severed, the sheep's carcass could be carried over to a cypress tree where a chain and pulley was rigged up to lift the body off the ground.

While the killing and skinning were being carried out, smaller jobs were given to Mick and me, sometimes my brothers Jack and David if they were around. Our sisters had disappeared inside by this stage, and while it was unpleasant work, it was necessary. One job that we had to do was to carry the sheep's head by the ear down to a nearby

drain where the cattle dogs could feed on it while the sheep was being disemboweled. It was a weird sensation to carry the head of the sheep away from the body that only moments before had been a sheep feeding in a paddock. Once the head was thrown into the drain, the cattle dogs would pad forward, sniffing at this new treat. Dad and Mick carried the carcass over to the killing tree—a cypress tree with its lower branches cut back to allow a carcass to hang and sway. A curving butcher's bar was inserted between the two hind legs of the sheep and a metal chain was hooked around the bar. Dad or Mick and I pulled on the chain which lifted the sheep into the air. After we had lifted the sheep to a height that made it easy for Dad to cut its stomach open, the chain was anchored to a tree limb and Dad set about his business.

The intestines, organs and stomach flopped out after the sheep had been sliced down the middle. The sky blue intestines swirled around the liver in the dirt and the first thing Dad did was to cut away the liver and pass it to myself or Mick to then carry it inside on the red-dotted chopping board for mum. The brown liver was still warm and it swirled and slid on the chopping board as we ran inside shouting, "Mum. Mum. I got the liver!" Mum rushed to the back screen door, shooing away flies and ushered us inside to drop the liver into the sink where she washed it, laid it on a plate covered by a tea towel and placed it in the fridge. The next morning we could have fried liver for breakfast.

My next job was to drag the stomach and intestines down toward the drain where the dogs could continue their feast. This was a heavy job and even with two of us dragging the sheep's guts away, Mick and I had to stop for breaks to try to get a better grip on the slippery stomach and gizzards of the sheep. Looking down at the sheep's stomach and intestines made me wonder how a sheep could carry such weight around inside their bodies. Often there would be pieces of organ or intestines left behind on our journey to the drain; scraps that the dogs and cats could later clean up. Together, we hurled the stomach into the drain and stood back to watch the dogs paw at the intestines. The water from the drain flowed into Mt Emu Creek, a distance of two paddocks away. In summer, the drain was mainly dry and the dogs could chew on the stomach and intestines undisturbed and leave what was left to the circling crows. There was always a bucket of warm water nearby to wash our hands when we returned and to clean the knives. Inevitably, blood would be spilled on our clothes and boots. But that was sheep's blood; blood that could be covered with cowshit from milking later in the day. I wiped the blood from my hands on my trousers and watched Dad, waiting for him to parcel out the next job.

After the sheep had been gutted and cleaned, a pointed stick was wedged in the stomach to keep the sides apart and to allow air to circulate. The last thing that we wanted was off meat. A white sheep bag was then fitted over the carcass to protect it from flies. The sheep bag was blood-stained and kept in the machinery shed away from the house. Depending upon the weather, the carcass would often be left for a day or two before Dad would pull it down and cut it up. The sight of the sheep swaying in the sheep bag under the cypress tree used to give me the chills, especially at dusk when the body hung there like a human body. The following morning revealed what we had done the day before. A sheep had been transformed into a hunk of meat swaying in a white bag under a cypress tree. Such were the equations of farming. When the sheep was ready to be cut up, Dad cut it down the middle of its spine with a hack saw. Half of the sheep was carried over his shoulder to the chopping block—a round slice of a tree trunk just outside our back screen door. The surface of the chopping block was scored with knife cuts and stained with sheep's blood. It was also the place where chooks' heads were severed, rabbits skinned and gutted and where my brothers and sisters played King of the Castle. Dad hacked the sheep into smaller pieces that could be slid into freezer bags to be kept in our Deep Freeze. Some of the sheep's bones would be brought into the kitchen for Mum to make bone soup.

Once the sheep had been cut up and put away, the next job was to deal with the sheep skin. Immediately after the kill, the skin was slung over the two metre high chicken wire fence of our chook run and left to dry out before it was sold to the "sheep man" for \$1.00 a skin in Warrnambool. When the skins were fresh, scraps of fat and blood trails were left on them and the wet skins always attracted crows and magpies to circle and pick over them. Usually the birds flew off when we walked out and shouted or clapped our hands at them. The "sheep man" was a company in Warrnambool who tanned and dyed the skins. Occasionally a man from the company drove around farms to pick up skins, but we usually bundled two or three sheep skins into a bag and drove them into Warrnambool on shopping days. The smell of the skins from the back section of our station wagon was over-powering, but it was a farm smell we only had to put up with for twenty minutes. Once a month we killed a sheep, sometimes more often during school holidays when there were more regular mouths to feed. Like many of the jobs that we did on the farm, it was a job that seemed necessary at the time.

Being introduced to violence through farm work at an early age possibly helped me to see the world in a clear-eyed way. The division between life and death could be

brief or arbitrary. I saw calves come into the world and with an axe I took feeble calves out of this world. Sometimes cows had calves in the paddocks that were too small to rear or were born with twisted or broken legs. Often the solution was to bring these sickly calves to the cow yard, fetch the axe and knock the calf on the head with the blunt end of the axe. It was a job that I didn't enjoy doing as I swung the axe between my legs at the head of the calf. The thud of the axe on the calf's head brought death quickly to it and the next job was to drag the dead calf down to the bull paddock drain for the crows and dogs to eat. Not that violence is necessary on a dairy farm. It is more that sometimes it became a quick-fix solution to problems that we were too isolated to fix. I was always sympathetic to the suffering of animals and winced whenever Dad whacked the cows in the dairy with a length of poly pipe. In time, I also whacked the cows on their backs with poly pipe when things were not going my way. The things we did on the farm were not defined by violence or the rough treatment of animals. They were the jobs that we had to do. Dirt, dust, cowshit and blood were daily parts of our lives, as were the starlit skies, the knowledge we acquired and the place I created for myself amongst ten children on a dairy farm in the Western District.

Brendan Ryan grew up on a dairy farm at Panmure in Western Victoria. His poetry, reviews and essays have been published in literary journals and newspapers, including *Island*, *Westerly*, *Antipodes*, *The Age*, *The Weekend Australian*, *Best Australian Poems* series (Black Inc) and *Contemporary Australian Poetry* (Puncher and Wattman). The author of six collections of poetry, *Travelling Through the Family* (Hunter Publishers) was shortlisted for the 2014 Victorian Premier's Awards. A new collection of poetry, *The Lowlands of Moyne*, will be published with Walleah Press in 2019.