

Easter is the beginning of winter

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The wool on a sheep's throat is surprisingly soft. The sheep's throat is warm and pink, shining through the wool. Soft, warm and pink against the butcher's knife.

The killing shed was behind the stables, away from the farmyard. Pine trees rimmed the cliff edge above the river, casting it in autumn shadows.

The killing shed was two rooms – of sorts at least. The first, about three metres by three metres, had three walls of fly netting, a corrugated iron roof, and a concave concrete floor drained like a shower. The fourth wall was made of wooden boards.

There was a brass water tap with a length of hose attached. The board door in that wall was ajar. A glimpse of the dark cold windowless inner room. Silver meat hooks and white cloths glinted there.

My father and I stood in the killing shed this April Thursday. In the centre of the outer room, the cross bar was suspended from a pulley. The bar would hook into the shanks of the carcass between tendon and bone, and be raised to hang the carcass. The snick-snick-snick of the butcher's knife on the sharpening steel.

My father and I had selected a sheep. We had walked along the road and up the hill, the sheep trotting ahead of us, guided by the dog and so into a holding pen by the stables.

Making ready in the killing shed. The stiff rubber apron was too big for me. The snick-snick-snick of knife on steel.

I remember I had a pet lamb once, motherless and bottle fed. When he got older, he was returned to the flock. Even after a couple of years, if he caught sight of me, he would always break from the flock and trot towards me bleating, and butt at my hand so that I would rub his head. Sheep love to have their heads rubbed.

"It's time, son."

I swallowed hard. I walked toward the holding pen. The sheep barged hard against the other side. I knew what I had to do.

The Paschal Lamb. Easter Sunday dinner. I had to think of it that way.

I struggled with it. All the way across the grass. It was as large as I was. It scented my panic and then, the singular smell of the killing shed.

My father passed me the knife.

I dropped it.

Couldn't let go of the sheep.

He picked it up and passed it to me. Again.

"I don't ... think I can do this, Dad."

Quavering, on the edge of tears.

"You have to learn, boy."

"My father made me do it when I was your age. I didn't like it either, but it has to be done."

He'd told me what to do. Shown me what to do. Made me do it ... in practice with a sack of old hay-baling twine.

It wasn't the same. Not nearly the same. I struggled with the sheep, trying to hold it still. I was trembling.

"Come on - hurry up can't you", irritably

The rest of his words came down a long dark tunnel into my ears. The shadows were pressing around. The world was turning around this axis - this moment.

My stroke was far too weak. I dropped the knife. I dropped the sheep. It lay kicking in the blood, faeces, urine. Its and mine.

My father pushed me aside, swearing, calling for God's help with making a man of an inadequate son. I retched and retched in the corner as he finished the job.

I crept out of the house later, along the road up the hill. The carcass had been washed and wrapped in white butchers' cloth. A white ghost hung in the shadows.

Death rather than life.

Easter is the beginning of winter in this country.