

Lambing Musings

Ruthy Gourevitch, Semester 46

Editor's note: Ruthy wrote this piece as her college application essay. She hails from Hastings-on-Hudson, New York and is currently a student at Brown University.

The ewe, clearly in pain, was stretched out with her back hooves in the air, making every desperate attempt to find comfort while giving birth. I, along with my cabin mate Nadine and the farmer Megan, watched with excitement, disgust, and nervousness as the lamb plopped out onto the barn's cold floor. The ewe got up, still breathing deeply, and began her role as a mother, licking the blood from the newborn's nose and mouth so it could breathe. We stood in silence, the mid-April Maine wind whipping through the barn, stinging my eyes. At 12:53 AM, lamb-birthing season had entered its most intense phase. What was supposed to be a ten-minute routine check-up had turned into something far more special.

The three of us stood side by side, unable to speak. The biting cold was no longer an issue, nor was the time of night or the math test the next morning. All my concentration was on the baby lamb, finding its way in the darkness. My eyes began to blur with tears. Immersed in the moment, my only thoughts were of the here and now. But Nadine was looking into the future. She broke the silence to ask: "How long will this lamb live?" Megan, who had perfectly arranged the lamb's conception for its arrival in the spring, flatly replied: it would be slaughtered in September.

The words snapped me out of the moment as I diverted my eyes from the newborn and shot Megan a puzzled look. The leg of lamb wrapped in cellophane in the Stop & Shop and the animal just born in front of me were suddenly connected. Was there even any reason to celebrate this birth if it had simply been planned as food all along? Seconds before, I had been exhilarated at being able to witness such an extraordinary event; now I felt stupid for the tears of joy I had just shed for this beautiful creature that had been born only to die. I questioned: did this cycle of life and death represent human indulgence, or just human necessity in an explicit form? Are we to blame for the death of this lamb or are we to be thanked for its birth? Without our need for meat, it would not have been brought into this world at all. My rational mind argued that food chains exist in all ecosystems, and that the only difference in this situation is human control.

As Farmer Megan wrapped the newborn in a blanket and carried it to the scale, my attention was drawn back to the excitement of the moment. I did the honors of cutting the umbilical cord and dipping its end in iodine. We lingered for an hour, watching the lamb's first steps and first lunge for her mother's milk, as laughter and smiles returned to our faces.

I think a lot about geologic time – and our place in it. How are we going to extend the time before we become index fossils ourselves? Curiosity about how to get our relationship with the world around us onto a more sustainable footing was a strong part of what drew me to Chewonki Semester School in the first place. But why did I find the planned death of this animal so jarring? Are such deaths and sustainability really at odds?

The moon was full as Nadine and I walked elatedly back to our cabin, stepping on each of the iced-over puddles to hear the satisfying crackle under our snow boots. I crawled into bed, my watch now reading 2:38 AM, reenacting the past two hours in my heavy head as I began to doze off. Come September, as I bite into a rack of lamb at my dinner table back at home, I cannot predict how I am going to feel when the delicious taste of fresh meat and the reality of human dominance converge in my mouth.