

# Lamb

by Tali Lum Wan

Blood steamed on the frozen dirt. The lamb bucked in the man's hands, then stilled and slackened. He took the lamb to the ground, turned it onto its back and tore its hide from its body, then placed the folded hide to the side like a tiny red and white coat. The lamb, pink and unbearably naked, lay discarded.

From where he kneeled before the window in the deep kitchen sink, Junior watched the man ascend the steep incline to the barn, leaving the small pink mass in the clearing behind him. Junior's chest tightened. Across the room, Mam flipped through radio stations until an old Springsteen track played, cool and calm and strong. She shuffled back over to Junior, her house shoes noisy on the linoleum floor, and fished the sopping washcloth from the sink. She raked Junior's wet hair back and began scrubbing behind his ears.

'What do you spy with your little eye, my boy?'

Junior watched the pink mass jolt, just once, in the foggy distance.

'Barn,' he said, before keeling forward to dunk his face in the water.

The barn stood solemnly on the hill. Amber light was visible through the cracked door. It wavered as the man moved inside.

'Something starting with B then,' Mam said, pulling Junior upright.

She brought a wide-knuckled hand around to Junior's front and wrung the washcloth out in her fist. Junior clasped her wrinkled wrist, bracing himself as she took the cloth to his face.

'What else do you see, boy?'

He blinked hard.

'Benny.'

The man had emerged from the barn. In dark denim coveralls, with a neck warmer worn up over his nose and his hair carbon black and cropped close to his head, Benny cut a slim silhouette against the grey afternoon. His long legs made short the distance to the lamb, which he snatched up by the back hooves before doubling back towards the barn.

'Aye, Junior, our Benny. Another B word.'

That evening, the plastic bowl was lightweight and hot on Junior's knees. He sat on the carpet, taking individual pasta shells to his mouth with his fingers. On the far end of the couch was Benny watching the boxing on the television, his dinner going cold on the seat beside him. He was intermittently spirited up out of his seat, hands curling sympathetically into loose fists. On the screen, one boxer's glove was like a shiny blue balloon floating sideways in slow motion. It collided with the other man's face, which rippled like half-set custard and sent sweat spraying out in all directions. Everything was shiny, Junior observed. Their boxing boots and billowy satin shorts, their Vaseline-slicked faces and sweat-spiked hair. He liked the way they bounced and flitted about like hummingbirds. The boxer, pale as bone, rocked back on his heels before folding at the knee and landing heavily with his face against the referee's trousered hip. A swarm of less shiny men stormed the ring and pulled the boxer out by the armpits.

'Christ's sake.' Benny sighed, massaging the top of his thigh with the heel of his hand.

Junior eyed Benny, slumped on the couch in his worn-out flannelette pyjama pants and pilled knit jumper, dark eyes fixed on the screen. Benny never said much to Junior. He hardly looked at him most of the time, but Junior adored him all the same. The boy put his bowl to the side and sat up straighter on the carpet. He balled his hands into fists and imagined they belonged to an opponent, snarling and dripping sweat in front of him. Slowly, the fists turned against Junior. The phantom boxer took control and swung wildly. Junior ducked and weaved before a blow landed square on his freckled cheek and sent him crashing down onto his side.

'Ahh!' he yelped. 'He got me!'

Benny looked over at the panting, grinning Junior for a moment, then turned his gaze back to the screen.

Mam carried the washing basket like a baby on her hip. She dropped it down, pulled out a shirt, cracked it like a whip, and pegged it to the line. Junior squatted nearby, twisting his boots into the earth as the truck in his hand tumbled end on end. It was a biting cold morning. Each inhale stung the inside of Junior's nose. Even Mam tugged down

the sleeve of her jacket – a stiff padded coat that Benny used to wear at his fishmonger job before taking over the lambs. And there was Benny, standing stationary out on the hill, examining something or doing maths in his head. From where Junior crouched, Benny was just a black tally on the white morning. Then an arm shot out. Waved? Benny began walking, then jogging, to the nearest road. Up ahead, a bus rolled to a stop, tossing up great plumes of smoke. Junior couldn't tell who was there, couldn't see over the curve of the hill, could only move his eyes over the white roof of the bus. He stood up and dropped the plastic truck loudly.

‘What is it, boy-o?’ Mam asked, pivoting and squinting into the distance.

Mam gasped suddenly and clamped a hand over her mouth.

‘Christ on a cracker,’ she whispered and Junior reeled around. ‘Nothing to worry yourself about, boy. You pick up that there truck.’

But Mam left the washing where she'd dumped it and, pulling a pair of fleece gloves from her pocket, went to stand away from Junior, facing the hill. Benny's head appeared first, poking up from the grey grass like a mushroom. Then moments later, another head – smaller, fairer. It wasn't anyone Junior had seen before. It was a woman. The pair stomped down to the house, their breath making clouds, and stopped just short of Mam whose arms were crossed tightly. The woman shuffled her legs together and tucked her hands beneath her armpits.

‘Mammy,’ Junior heard Benny plead. ‘Let her in for a cup of tea, won't ya?’

Mam looked over her shoulder to Junior before turning back to say something low and stern. The two women set towards the house while Benny lingered behind, the faintest smile on his lips.

Junior watched the woman from around corners, the top of the stairs, and behind the couch. She wasn't someone he recognised from his brief forays into town. Her hair wasn't dark like Benny's and Mam's. Her skin was browner, her face fatter, eyes brighter. Her whole being shimmered gold under the kitchen overheads. Most unusual was the way she moved around the kitchen. In Junior's experience, visitors to the house were almost always local men who'd come after the lambs and they only ever sat idly at the table with their hats in their laps, thawing their frozen noses, watching Mam make a fuss. But here was this woman – putting the kettle on to boil, scooting Mam's step stool over to fetch mugs from the high cupboard, and bringing the sugar jar to the table while

Mam went about her own business. They talked quietly together, with big empty gaps in the conversation that made Junior's ears ring.

'To the table with you, boy,' Mam ordered.

She scowled and finished preparing Junior's lunch roughly, like she was angry with him. He scurried over, pulled out a chair, and climbed atop. The woman was across from him now. Her eyes were green and slanted like a cat's, her face densely freckled. With her jacket off, Junior saw that she wore a cross on a fine gold chain. The woman studied Junior closely too. She bit the skin around her fingernails, which were painted blue and chipping, before dropping her hands and sitting on them. She inhaled deeply and smiled.

'Mammy here has been telling me how clever ya are, Junior. What've you been learning in school?'

'He's not yet started school,' Mam growled, leaning back against the kitchen bench with her arms crossed and her chest puffed up. 'Go on,' she said to Junior, softer now. 'Tell her what you like to do.'

Junior looked shyly up at Mam, who nodded, then turned his gaze out the window.

'I spy,' he said softly.

'Ah,' the woman leant back in her chair and smiled wide. Her teeth were white and square, lined up in her mouth like a row of porcelain tiles. 'I spy with my little eye, something beginning with T.'

Junior pondered this for a moment. He oscillated his head back and forth, scanning his surroundings, then bent forward and leant sideways across the table, gaining a new perspective of the living room.

'Telly,' he said, shooting back upright.

'Well done, boy!' she cheered. 'So, you're as clever as they say.'

The nights were strange. Mam led Junior by the hand upstairs to bed and he watched through the balustrade as Benny took the woman's hand in his. Or else, Benny came out from the shower with his hair ink-black, falling damp on his forehead, and the woman would shift on the couch and throw him this look that Junior had never seen before – like electric sadness.

One foggy morning, while Mam was distracted tending to the chickens, the woman patted Junior between the shoulder blades and herded him towards the road. A bus chugged up beside them and stopped with a shudder and a sigh. They boarded and the woman pulled Junior onto her lap, brushed his fine hair away from his eyes, and touched the freckled tip of her nose to his. This was unusual, Junior suspected, but he wasn't unfamiliar with being touched. He mostly gazed out the window at the landscape blurring past in swathes of blue, green, and grey. They disembarked opposite a market, where pedestrians skipped between cars that were backed up along the busy road. They weaved their way over and came upon a wide, bustling alley, lined on either side with chanting stallholders gesturing towards tables stacked high with fresh produce. The woman bought Junior a cup of juice which he held with two hands, sucking the straw, looking wide-eyed at all the elbows knocking about his field of vision.

'Just a few more things and then we'll go home and surprise everyone with our special recipe, hey, Junior?' She smiled down at him.

He nodded enthusiastically. The juice was the freshest, sweetest thing he'd ever tasted. The market was the busiest, most colourful place he'd ever seen. He liked this woman who smiled and talked. She was fun. He would have followed her anywhere. When they boarded the bus for home, Junior was happy to sit beside her and happy to let her hold his face and kiss his forehead.

'Nearly home, we are.' The woman sighed, poking out her bottom lip. 'Will we play a bit of I spy?'

Junior bounced in his seat and leaned across her lap, putting his face to the vibrating bus window.

'All right, my little lamb,' she said, bending down to whisper in his ear. 'I spy with my little eye something beginning with D.'

They were coming to the crest of the road, almost at their stop. The woman organised the produce inside her bag and sat up straight.

'Look, there he is, Junior! Something starting with D.'

There was the stone retaining wall, the old barn, and a lone ram trotting slowly out in the open. The woman pulled Junior to his feet and smoothed down his jacket, ready to disembark.

'I don't see it,' Junior said, eager to hear the answer.

The woman extended a chipped blue fingertip towards Benny, who threw down a bale of straw, stopped cold, turned, and ran towards the house.

‘Daddy, Junior,’ she said. ‘Over there’s your daddy.’

Junior looked at her incredulously. This wasn’t the name he had for the man.

‘That there’s our Benny,’ he corrected her, grinning.

‘That’s what you call him?’ she asked sternly. ‘Benny?’

Junior, jumping down onto the roadside, disregarded the question.

Their footfalls thudded heavily on the descent to the house. Junior watched his step closely, stealing only a glance or two at the woman who faced forward, stoic. Faded linens flapped and tangled on the clothesline. Mam came tearing out of the house, headed straight to the woman.

‘Would you enlighten me as to who the fuck you think you are?’ Mam demanded.

The woman dropped her bag, green eyes on fire.

‘I’m well within my rights,’ she volleyed back.

‘Have you any idea how worried we were? Why should you be trusted to piss off with the boy as you see fit?’

‘Do you expect me to ask your permission?’ the woman scoffed. ‘Someone might like to spend time with him, or better yet, parent him – you know, in the way a father might like to do?’

She turned her gaze to Benny who stood poised near the door, his whole body one long arc curved away from the conflict.

‘How rich,’ Mam spat, red-faced. She looked to be on the brink of tears. ‘You’d have him be told stories of nice mummies and daddies, would ya? I caution you, girl. Without sounding vain, if it weren’t for me...’

Mam raised her arms and dropped them again, looking at Junior who was frozen watching, then at Benny who’d started towards the woman.

‘How dare you,’ was all he said, softly, searching her face as he spoke.

He took off in the direction of the barn.

‘Would you like to look at the boy, I wonder?’ she yelled after him.

Her mouth was red and shiny, eyes wet, hands in fists at her sides.

‘I believe this visit’s over. You’d best take your leave,’ Mam finished.

In Junior’s mind appeared the slack face of the boxing referee he’d seen on the television so many times before – jowls swinging in slow motion as he flipped his head

from side to side, arm locked stiffly at the elbow and moving up and down like a boom gate. The fight was almost won. *Defend yourself*, the referee bellowed. *Punch back*.

Tension built on the woman's face. She shook her fists.

'I had the best intentions, you should know,' she finally said, conceding.

She looked to the barn where Benny was clanging around inside, and to Junior, who kept his gaze on her until Mam led him to the house.

Junior faced away from the window for his bath that afternoon. Kneeling in the sink, eye-level to Mam's wrinkled chest, he listened to the woman zip her duffle and lumber out the door, letting it slam. The bag of produce lay on its side on the kitchen bench, full of foreign objects: long tufts of spring onion roots, a little knot of ginger that had rolled out, stark against the dark blue laminate. Mam brought the steaming cloth over his eyes and there Junior was again – in his own company.