

COW IDEAS

by Ivars Balkits

WHY WE LIKE IT: We were more than a little intrigued by this 'talk-umentary' that has the feel of both a report in the making and a rumination on our kinship with cows, the situation of cows and how they impact our lives. Although the information conveyed may seem inconsequential to all but the people who make a living in the dairy and farming sectors, it at the same time quietly raises questions of philosophical and moral weight. Is the controlled environment in which the cows live and die a metaphor of our own entrapment within a conformist capitalist economic regime? The impersonal voice is merely a cover for the troubling questions that lie beneath. And as for prose, on a scale of 1 to 5, we think the last paragraph is 6.

Cow ideas can make you think of cow eyes. Then you can see the cow eyes like wallpaper or bugs in grass. You can see the fright more than you can the eyes. Fright or caution or just "Huh?" You see their death. It might be your own fright.

Cow ideas. It's whether it's cruel to keep them confined to barn and milking parlor. They are chained at the cheesemakers part of the time. Those are pastured a good part of the time. Most of the time, in fact. They are maybe not sociable cows like the Jerseys and may need to be chained while in small spaces. Maybe to prevent them from mistreating each other.

Jerseys don't seem to need to be chained. They get to walk around the barn and piss and shit and get water whenever they want. To get water, they just walk in shit and piss. They seem to enjoy that. After that they get to lie in their sand beds. Which are clean and replenished. Just because Jerseys are bred to be inside cows is that justifiable?

Shit-splatter up to their knees, but not up to their udders, thankfully. Do I continue to drink milk or eat cheese or spread butter after seeing that shit and that piss and that confinement? Such is my probe in these cow ideas:

This small farm with Sweet in its name...

does have natural ventilation, one or two lights, sun windows – clear panels on the roof – the structure is good up to -40 without alternate heat, is not a tie-down barn. The farmer milks 30 cows by 7 a.m., has two helpers. The milk parlor allows him to milk 3 at a time, Every 12 hours he pastures them on new grass, having moved electric fences to create a new paddock. Heritage breeds, they are a “closed” herd, no genetics are brought in, and what does that mean? I forget to ask him. He uses traditional milk cans for his 40 directly marketed accounts. Any amount over goes to Boston on a the big cooperative truck. Runs right by here.

The medium farm operation, considered that, defined as that, MFO, of five hundred plus milking cows may lie all the way across the county, I don't know, I wasn't paying attention, with heifers about to begin hefting and oldsters to be done with their lives. The price being good for beefing this year, as it so happens. How can we justify the excess methane in the atmosphere from their rear-end emissions? That's another question I would like settled sometime. Sorry to interrupt...

this probing process.

Why can't all operations be small and serve the immediate area? Why can't all the animals be pastured? I ask but I know it is capitalism.

Coming back to cow ideas and the doe-eyed calves that become milking cows or the three day-old bull calves still glowing with fetal light, off to be beefed... I ate cheese after that and added cream to my coffee.

I guess just seeing so much of dairying I'm a little awed. Awed by the number of cows in those MFO barns. Awed at the amount of shit the animals generate. I am under the smell's spell really. I am awed by the mounds of manure under black plastic held down by truck tires, car tires, tractor tires. I am awed by the mountain of shredded corn silage.

I was impressed by the small farmer, how he managed, how he managed with integrity. I was glad for the cows in his pastures and glad he wanted to keep these heritage breeds breeding. I was impressed with the individual conviction of the farmer. The individual exertion of the small farmer. I was impressed by his arrangement. I was glad for the grass and open barn and the cleanliness of the sand bedding. I was awed by the fermented hay, 50 percent moisture content, which can caramelize and then for winter it's "cow candy!"

I also wanted to see into the psyche of the cows that live in the large farm barns and never see pasture.

It seemed like a city to me, a cow town. I wondered about the reality of the Jersey's sociability and the freedom of the small farmer's cattle. I wondered about cattle, in general. The beasts of the prairie, of the veldt, of the plain, of the range. Their ancestors, their sires, their offspring, their service to humanity. Their nourishing milk and cheese and ice cream. Their lives, just-so tedious? Or, were they having fun?

While it lasted?

I was impressed how they liked to crowd, the Jerseys, the Elsie Borden cows. How they liked to rub hide to hide, bulk to bulk, the comfortable pushing and shoving, movement toward and then suddenly away from the barking little farm dog. Their tastings of my shirt. Their slobber on my shirt and jeans. Their interest and what it might be they were interested in. I saw what looked like fear in the calf pens, already, taken from their mothers at birth. The rolled eye. The shy head.

How unnatural.

Yet, we are bred to be urban too. No, that's not true. We are forced into being urban through the need by capital for labor. Herding the billions into their corrals, into their units, in chains, not a new idea, I think of a lost play, Aristophanes' *Babylonians*. I think of a play called *Cows* (nonexistent), written from the perspective of the cows in the medium farm operation.

Is that too trite? So much, so much shit on the brain today.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *'Cow Ideas' was practically written on site. I was taking notes while serving as a publicist for a study tour of a number of Ag or food studies programs in Vermont a few years ago. We visited the dairies described in the piece. I composed it based on the notes and my 'gut reaction'. I don't really have a strong opinion either way about ingesting cow milk products. It is good to recall the environment, however, in which they were generated.*

BIO: Ivars Balkits has most recently had work published on the websites for LitroNY, cahoodaloodaling, Angry Old Man, Plural Prose Journal, Uut Poetry, Helios MSS, Unbroken Journal and Otoliths. He is a recipient of two Individual Excellence Awards from the Ohio Arts Council, for poetry in 1999 and Creative Nonfiction in 2014. Ivars works as a writing tutor and course facilitator at Ohio University.