

Lentille. Scenes from the Life of a Cow

Urs Mannhart
Literary Non-Fiction
German



Urs Mannhart's book Lentille is a blend of reportage and essay that delves into the life of a cow. Those who gently inch closer to them will discover that these animals have a fascinating character – and much more besides.

"I don't think anyone needs to understand Kierkegaard to develop a sense of what a cow is, nor is the latest knowledge from cognitive biology necessarily required. All you have to do is simply sit down next to a cow in a pasture, next to a beautiful, resting cow that has just laid down and started to chew its cud."

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Translation rights
Loan Nguyen
l.nguyen@matthes-seitz-berlin.de

Author
Urs Mannhart, born in 1975, is a writer, reporter and organic farmer who lives in La Chaux-de-Fonds. His most recent publication was *Gschwind* oder *Das mutmaßlich zweckfreie Zirpen der Grillen* [*Gschwind* or the presumably purposeless chirping of crickets].

Photo: Beat Schweizer

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Excerpt translated by Imogen Taylor

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I have only just left the tiny station behind me, only just passed the little shop and the church and arrived at the gently sloping hill where the last houses of the village are clustered and the view opens out onto the spreading woods and pastures and the farm where I've been helping out for the last few weeks—I have only just arrived at the gently sloping hill when I hear the loud mooing of a cow.

For some moments, all is quiet. A breeze nudges a docile flock of clouds over a conifer wood; only the drone of a lorry can be heard in the distance. Then I hear it again, that violently bleak, alarmingly pervasive cry.

I am still three hundred metres away. Hastening my step, I leave the neatly fenced-in detached houses behind me and turn off onto the avenue of sycamores leading to the farm.

Did I say *mooing*? An embarrassingly makeshift word; I can't hear a hint of the charm contained in that melodious dissyllable.

When I arrive at the farm, open the two-part wooden door and walk into the cowshed, Lentille is lying on the straw, breathing heavily, sweating, her neck wrenched round, her head tilted over the trough. With her, also breathing heavily, are Michaël and a vet. They stand close beside the cow, crushed under a ton weight of helplessness. Right now they are doing nothing, but it can't be more than a lull; the vet's right arm is encased from fingertips to shoulder in a shiny, see-through glove thick with slime, and Michaël's clothes are stained with blood and gunk, his knees and elbows covered in straw. I greet them curtly, with little more than a nod. They nod back. This is no time for words.

Lentille stretches her neck long and launches into the next bellow. Now that I'm standing right in front of her, the full-bodied cry that pushes its way up from deep down in the cow and out into the open is an event that grabs me with rough hands and thrusts me against the wall, making it difficult for me to breathe. Every time she bellows, my mind goes blank for a moment.

When I said goodbye to Michaël four days ago before going away for the weekend, he said he was going to put Lentille in the loosebox that evening so that she could give birth to her first calf in peace.

There's no sign of a calf. No peace either. Thick strands of slime mixed with blood hang from Lentille's swollen vulva. The other cows, only a few metres away, are quiet and the sheep opposite are busy eating, but the atmosphere is tense; the vet has a frown on her face.

Michaël confers with her; then the two of them kneel down on the straw behind Lentille. The slender, wiry vet pushes her gloved hand into the cow. Lentille rolls her eyes and bellows. The vet keeps going, pushing her arm into the creature until she's in up to her elbow, working her way into the cow's body with all her strength and yet with the utmost care.

Michaël confirms my suspicions: the unborn calf is in an awkward position. He had a look himself an hour ago and could feel only the head, not the legs. Unless they can move the calf, it won't fit through the cervix.

The vet pulls out her arm, stares mutely into space, feebly shakes her head. It could all turn out all right, she says, but they need Lentille to stand up. Michaël nods and looks into Lentille's face, as if seeking for signs of assurance. Then he stares anxiously at the body spread out before him; it's hard to imagine Lentille ever managing to get to her feet again.

Lentille—pronounced [lätij], French for *lentil*—is not a huge cow. On the contrary, she is narrow-hipped, not yet three years old; it is her first calf. But she must weigh getting on for five hundred kilos even so.

As always, Michaël works with remarkable patience. He massages Lentille's tense neck; he talks to her. Then he signals to her to stand up.

A heavy sigh and a heavy inertness are her response.

This may take time. It will take time.

Since my presence is no help, I begin to think about other work I could be getting on with. After all, I came to the farm to make myself useful, not to hang around drinking coffee. I could chop wood, grease cheese, bring hay to the sheep, repair fencing, muck out the hen-house, prepare straw, rinse the whey cans, put the young cheeses in brine—there's always work to be done on a farm. But I'm not in the right state of mind; Lentille's situation has shaken me.

I am sure Lentille will get up eventually. Michaël has a good rapport with his cows; he'll get through to her somehow. And eventually, I hope, the vet will manage to feed a rope into the cow and tie a knot around the calf's forelegs. It may take time, it will take time—perhaps too much time. The longer it goes on, the worse the chances are for the calf's survival.

I don't know what work to do. I can't do any work. More important, I can't help Lentille, although she's bellowing so pitifully. As long as she's bellowing, I can't work. Having to listen to her bellow without being able to help is work enough. More than I can cope with. Lentille bellows; my ears are full, my hands empty. I tear my eyes away and leave the cowshed, taking with me all the work of having-to-listen and not-being-able-to-help; I close the door behind me and go into the kitchen where it's empty and more or less quiet.