

**Personal Essay Prompt:** Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience there, and why is it meaningful to you?

## Essay

The most life-changing lessons waiting to be discovered lie beyond the snug bounds of monotony and routine – beyond the classroom. This truth is something I recognized only recently, after electing to immerse myself in the world of dairy farming. Initially I was anything but content. I will confess, I was apprehensive. Encountering a strange new environment is always unsettling to a certain degree. However, beyond my immediate tentativeness, this experience challenged me to take a fresh, creative approach to learning, and develop a personal resilience and drive which I would never have attained otherwise. For these reasons my time at the dairy farm holds a distinct, fond place in my memory.

The first thing that struck me was the smell – an overwhelming stench of cow manure – earthy tones of putrid grass which assaulted my nostrils. Then the symphony began – the rhythmic hissing from overhead pipes marked the beat, with the staccato clipping of hooves, rain-song of pellets hitting metal and incessant mooing of disgruntled cattle all merging in an intense crescendo. White tiles stained with unidentified brown splashes surrounded the beasts, whose bodies radiated wisps of steam with their every exhalation. Cold cups sucked at pink flesh, as the small transparent spheres flooded with white fluid, emptied, and flooded once more with the metrical throb of the dairy parlour.

Attached as I became to the familiar hum of the dairy, my most treasured time was, undoubtedly, calving. I vividly remember my first one – the expectant cow stood panting in agony as her every sinew struggled to contract and squeeze the calf from her body. ‘Grab the legs and pull,’ the overall-clad farmer insisted. Locking my freezing hands around the slippery hooves protruding from the cervix, I slowly coaxed the hefty calf free with a few tugs. The moist, thick membrane-enclosed body finally slumped to the hay covered ground in a flurry of white. Having been lured to maternal attentiveness by her calf’s distinctive scent, as well as the oxytocin overflow of the birth, the dazed cow outstretched her tongue to clean her young. Little pointy ears, dark eyes and a russet coat were all unveiled. A peculiar, blissful wave of satisfaction overcame me. I had delivered new life into the world! Here, the blur of detached, unanimated words, diagrams and numbers of the classroom suddenly became thrilling. The stationary anatomical depictions were brought to life – networks of muscles, bones, arteries and organs all delicately interacted to create the life before me. My mind traced the movement of the scaffolding Hydrogen, Nitrogen and Oxygen atoms, which I had penciled so many times, from the hypothalamus, to the bloodstream, and to their final destination – the target cells.

This learning journey transformed the whine of the suction cups, the rattling of the pipes, and chaotic clinking of hooves on the milking parlour floor into my idyllic soundtrack. Even the pungent but somehow sweet smell of silage is nostalgic. Indeed, this time cemented my dream

of becoming a veterinarian – the intellectual tests, the physicality and the sheer variety of outlandish situations which arise all endeared the profession to me.

There were many immediate physical reminders of my time at the dairy farm: the stench that gripped onto my clothes, and offended the noses of my family members on the journey home, as well as the yellow dribbles of iodine which stained my callused and burnt hands for days. Nonetheless, after these fleeting souvenirs faded into obscurity, I was left with one prevailing and utterly indelible lesson – to animate stationary words and diagrams memorized from pages, and inspire an academic creativity, you have to learn from thought-provoking people, and, above all, place yourself in situations which break free from the norm. The most unconventional of environments can bring lessons far superior to those we learn in our classrooms.