

# meatpaper

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### MEATPAPER THREE

## The Urban Farmer

### Do farm animals survive by dying?

interview by Amy Standen

photos by Julio Duffoo

MARCH, 2008



**IT'S ONE THING** to rhapsodize about forging a connection to your food at the local farmers' market. It's another thing entirely to harvest that food from a rabbit hutch on the back porch.

Novella Carpenter is the only person I know who renders lard on her kitchen stove from pigs she raised out back. She's also the only person I know whose spring plans involve brain-tanning rabbit pelts that have dried stiff as boards in her overstuffed refrigerator. But while straw piles up in the crooks of the stairway, and sacks of soon-to-be-cured olives hang from the pantry ceiling, the home Novella and her partner Bill share is far from rural: It's a one-bedroom apartment in a rough-and-tumble neighborhood of Oakland, California. Between the back porch, a small yard in the back, and an adjacent vacant

lot where Novella grows vegetables, it's a complete, working farm in a very unlikely place.

On the winter solstice Novella slaughtered one of the turkeys she raised in her backyard and let *Meatpaper* photographer Julio Duffoo document the process. She and I met a few weeks after the slaughter, in a park in San Francisco's Mission District.

#### Tell us about this turkey.

I think there were six turkeys who came to us, and he was one of four who survived. They had a nice little flocking relationship. The garden was one of their favorite places to go. They'd march down the sidewalk, and they'd hang out and play in the garden until it was time to go back to their little area behind the house. When they were really little, one of the turkeys almost died. I came out one day and I found him flattened and freezing. I picked him up and brought him back to life, so maybe it was this one, I don't know.

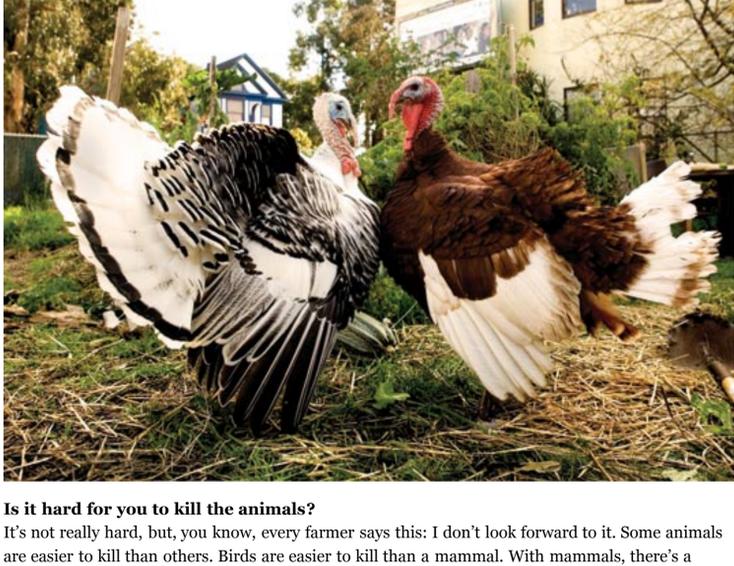
#### You can't tell them apart?

No, there were three bourbon reds, and they all look the same.

#### Did you name them?

The one we killed didn't have a name. A lot of farmers say you shouldn't name animals you're going to kill. Other people will say, "Boy, Oscar in the freezer is really delicious!" I have a friend who is adamant about naming the animal he's going to kill. He really pampers those animals and gives them the best possible life, because it's going to be a really short life. And I like that philosophy. But naming is for you; it's not for the animal. The animal doesn't give a shit if he has a name or not.

*Every single day I saw this turkey. I fed him. I cleaned up after him. I picked him up and held him. I gave him water. You watch them grow and then it's time.*



#### Is it hard for you to kill the animals?

It's not really hard, but, you know, every farmer says this: I don't look forward to it. Some animals are easier to kill than others. Birds are easier to kill than a mammal. With mammals, there's a closer connection to being human.

#### You were a vegetarian at some point, like a real "Meat is Murder" person.

I must have been about 16 when I started. I can't remember what it was I read, but my mom put a steak in front of me and I was like, "I just can't do it. This is an animal!" Then I was a vegetarian for about two years in college. So all told, maybe four years. Not that long.

#### And you were converted back by a plate of bacon in Las Vegas, right? What do you make of that vegetarian period now, looking back?

I think [my] philosophy was really juvenile. It's hoping something doesn't have to die. It's very "Babe" or Charlotte's Web. But the final, logical conclusion to being a vegetarian or vegan is that farm animals will cease to exist.



**Sure, but some people — like Jeffrey Masson, for example (p. 10) — have argued that a life lived for the purpose of dying is not a real life.**

I guess you could say that, but you're ignoring human culture. Animals and domesticated farm animals are tied together. They're interlocked; they've coevolved. We've made them exist, and they've helped us survive. And so for me, it's like, why don't we keep up that

beautiful tradition? Part of that tradition is dying, but part of that is surviving. Those animals continue to exist because of us.

#### It's funny to see you positioned as this champion of carnivorousism when you're such a conscientious meat eater — you pretty much only eat meat you kill yourself.

Pretty much. A lot of my vegan and vegetarian friends have told me, "This is the only acceptable way for you to eat meat." And I think that's true. You see the conditions that [factory-farmed animals live] in. If it's this mindless thing where you don't know where the meat came from, you don't know how it died or anything about it, to me that's kind of gross.

#### But there's a reason most people don't know anything about how their food animals die — it's an upsetting thing to see. And you're someone who has always felt a strong connection to animals.

That's part of the reason I sort of build a ritual around [the slaughter], burn tobacco, etc. Obviously, the ritual is for us, not the animal, but there needs to be a boundary between regular life and killing something. That's one reason that factory farming is so horrible: The animals are part of a machine, and you're just a cog in that machine, you're part of it, too. The turkey doesn't care if we thank him, obviously. But the ritual is to keep human, it's to admit to ourselves what we're doing is something that needs to be forgiven. It's also reminding yourself this isn't a normal part of your life.



**But at the same time, I know you feel that slaughter is a very normal part of life.**

It's the logical conclusion of six months of life, or so, for an animal. The problem that people have is that they aren't there every day. They don't see the turkey every day. Every single day I saw this turkey. I fed him; I cleaned up after him; I picked him up and held him; I gave him water. You watch them grow and then it's time. They

aren't children. They aren't babies that you're going to, like, educate or whatever. They're farm animals, and that's why they're here for that. And so you're harvesting them like an apple or anything else you've been cultivating. That's what humans do, and that's how we are able to eat.

They aren't pets. It's always been like this from the very beginning; for every animal we had I was always really clear that this was its purpose. That's why this animal was here. They reach a plateau where they aren't going to get any bigger, they're not going to taste good anymore, and it's just like wasting food if you keep feeding them. So there's a moment when you just have to say: I've got to do this.

#### It's true that generations and generations of that animal have, unless they're breeders, only lived to a certain age. So in a way, that is the end of the lifecycle. But it's hard to call it a "natural" life-cycle.

Right. Well, animals in the wild die really early. I think humans are still trying to figure out if we're part of nature or not.

#### Your parents were back-to-the-landers in Idaho. Do you see what you're doing now as part of that tradition, transplanted to West Oakland?

The problem with the back-to-the-land blueprint is that it requires you to live in the country with a bunch of hillbillies you don't want to live with. And basically, it was total isolation for my parents, even though their ideals — to grow their own food — were laudable. To me, urban farming is that perfect combination of doing what my parents wanted to do: having a relationship with my food, while simultaneously staying in the city, keeping a job, and having interactions with people from different cultures. It's the good things about the city and the good things about the country together.

The Internet has changed it. You can order poultry online. I'm buying goats to a woman I found on Craigslist. It's not like the modern Whole Earth Catalogue, except it allows you to customize urban farming. The *Whole Earth Catalog* was like a blueprint; it would say: "You will raise rabbits." People are more free-thinking now.



**When I visit you I'm always struck by how much work it is to run a farm out of one's apartment.**

I guess so, but it's not work, like, "go to your job." You can do it whenever you want. So I'll go pick stuff for the rabbits at midnight, for example. Some animals, like the pigs, are a huge amount of work, but then you never have to go to the grocery store. For me, hell is the grocery store. You drive to the store, stand in line, wander around in that soul-sucking place, and buy a bunch of crap you don't need just because you happen to be there.

Last July I spent a month living entirely off the garden, and I felt like I had tons of free time. If I wanted food I just walked downstairs and ate a bunch of food.

**That sounds wonderful, but I can't imagine people doing what you do on a mass scale.**

In Third World countries, urban farming is huge, but they don't call it "urban farming." They just live with the goats in the house because it's practical. So many people are moving from the country to the city, the density is staggering, but they're keeping their culture, too. So they're going to raise goats even if those goats live on the roof, or there are ducks in the bathtub.

It's not part of our culture, although I would argue that, more and more, it's going to be part of our culture. That's the future. It's not going to be "Blade Runner" where everything's dead. It's going to be crammed with animals. Because there's not enough farmland for everyone to live like this.

#### And not enough oil to transport the food from the farms to the cities.

Yep. It's all going to be super localized, I think. People will [see pictures of cities] and be like, "What? There used to not be goats in these alleys?" What a waste of space! I look out at this park we're sitting in, and I can imagine a couple sheep out here. 🐑

Novella Carpenter's book, *Farm City: The Education of an Urban Farmer*, to be published by Penguin Press, comes out in spring 2009

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