

GINA WARREN

# THE CHICKEN PROJECT

*One woman's quest to kill her own food*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY TAMARA STAPLES

**I'M SWEARING AND SWEATING**, trying to set up the kennel in my bathtub, emphatically repeating to the dog that the live chicken on top of the toilet is “*Not yours.*” Tashi noses the chicken, the chicken cocks her head. “*Not yours.*” Tashi backs away, then noses the chicken again. “*Not yours.*” I shove straw into the kennel with one hand and push Tashi away with the other.

Once the chicken is inside the kennel and the door is closed, Tashi watches me dejectedly. She's a brindle pit-bull boxer mix, built like a brick, and although it seems like she should be tough as one too, this dog can mope to no end. I fetch water for the hen, and when I return to the bathroom the question hits me: to whom, exactly, does this chicken belong?

I can hardly say this is my chicken, even though I paid five dollars for her. The chicken is only a temporary houseguest, intended for the table tomorrow evening, so I'm not sure I can say exactly what her status is.

Let me back up.

I want to confess: I used to be a vegetarian.

I was happily vegetarian for six years until suddenly I wasn't. The day I became an omnivore again was about two weeks after I started a new job on a farm. No matter how much I repeated the fact that *I DO NOT EAT MEAT*, the guys who worked there would always bring me something containing cow, fish, pig, or chicken for lunch. For several days I refused, until I didn't. I was pretty broke, so I'd been eating a lot of ramen, mixing things like peanut butter and eggs into the brothy noodles for variety. This day it was BBQ-sauce ramen.

But then Luis showed up with steak fajitas. And for all the moral ranting I did about the meat industry—the water it wastes, the land it dominates, the workers it exploits, the contamination it causes—it took me half a second to decide to eat those fajitas. The next week I had a turkey sandwich with extra mayonnaise. The week after I had beef jerky and ribs, then ceviche, chicken legs, pork tamales. And as soon as my finances improved, I began buying meat to cook at home.

I'd become a vegetarian for environmental reasons, “Not,” as I often said, “because I care about animals.” As someone who believes in taking responsibility for what she consumes, I'd always assumed that if I started eating meat again, I'd need to be able to kill it myself. Which is how I ended up converting my dog's kennel into a chicken bed and welcoming the bird into my home.

I'd bought the chicken from a farmer named Cody, one of my co-worker's cousins, and I'm pretty certain that he wouldn't have sold me a chicken otherwise. Cody is only sixteen years old, but he runs an impressive chicken operation: two hundred birds, sixty dozen eggs a week. Every now and then he'll slaughter a batch for meat, but it's not a major source of income. His mother, when I spoke with her over the phone, was nice enough to offer me some prekilled hen. “If you chicken out,” she told me, “we've got some in our freezer.”

“Thank you, Joyce,” I replied, “but that's not the point. I want to do this myself.”

“Well,” the woman sighed, “a lot of people get grossed out. You can hit 'em over the head first, you know. So they don't flap



around. Oh, and don't break the gall bladder, that little green sac, because it'll spoil the meat."

While Joyce was worried I wouldn't "have the constitution for it," my mother seemed to be hoping I wouldn't.

"I just don't understand why you want to do this," my mother said one night when I came over for dinner. Mom was, coincidentally, serving roast chicken. "It seems immoral," she said. "I just don't want to imagine you killing a little chick-a-dee."

"Someone has to do it."

"But *you* don't *have* to. You can go out and buy a chicken from a store." Mom paused and skewered something with her fork. "You'll be making a chicken suffer."

"This chicken suffered!" I said, raising my voice and pointing to the partial carcass in the middle of the table. "How is it immoral to kill a chicken, but it's not immoral to eat it?"

"I buy free-range, organic chicken."

"Gina," my father said in the space of my breath, "Don't yell at your mother." I'm twenty-three, but all of a sudden I feel seven years old again.

If Dad hadn't stopped me, I would almost certainly have mentioned that there's not much to be said for "free-range" chicken. Yes, chickens like Cody's have pretty good lives. They waddle around a patch of grass in a beautiful Northern California town overlooking the ocean, smelling cows and fresh salt, soaking in the sunshine. But that's not how it is for most chickens. "Free-range" is a murky classification, meaning only that the chickens have some sort of outdoor access—yet there are no laws that specify if this area needs to be a twenty-by-twenty-foot run where they can scratch and peck at bugs, or if a small, wire-mesh gravel box outside the hen house will do.

"Organic" is regulated with a little more common sense. Certification is overseen by the USDA, and for a chicken, being organic means that you eat nothing but organic feed, and you can't be pumped full of antibiotics. Without antibiotics, most chickens would die of disease if they experienced the same overcrowded conditions that nonorganic chickens suffer, so this often means organic birds get more space.

The most reliable thing to do, if you want to know how your chicken meat is treated while it's still a chicken, is to buy direct from the farm, and bring a list of questions with you. I hate to say it, but who has the time for that? Does anybody care that much?

The fact that I'm showing up at Cody's after work, bearing a cat carrier lined with straw, seems to support the idea that some people, clearly, do care that much.

I missed the driveway once, then twice, and finally hit it on the third pass. The rolling hills were lush green, peppered with mostly black cows and their young as I bumbled along in my Honda Civic, scaring clumsy calves and jolting into and out of potholes.

My dirty jeans, I think, earned me some street cred with Cody. On the short walk to the henhouse, he kept saying things like, "But a day off's not really a day off, you know," and "You get a break to catch up on all your projects, right?" Cody's line of work is farming: his projects are probably things like branding cattle and fixing fences. My "day off" projects all focus on my own small world, mostly simple tasks I purposefully make hard.

It's laughable, and somewhat selfish, to be honest. I grow a meager amount of food in my garden (the onions, at present, are begging for a mercy killing), use a washboard for my laundry (which I then hang sock by sock and sheet by sheet in my front yard), dissolve my compost in a worm bin I keep on the kitchen counter, try to use most of my paper recycling to start fires in my woodstove (which is how I heat my house), and have a collection of glass bottles, which I sterilize and use to store the kombucha I make from scratch. These are things I do not confess right away when I meet someone. They are, for the most part, fourth- or fifth-date topics. Doing things like washing and rewashing plastic bags and trying to scrub organic ketchup off your shirt with a washboard sounds honorable and romantic, but only in theory. In reality it makes your back hurt, makes your fingertips pruned, and takes away time from other activities—what some might call leisure activities.

**WHEN CODY OPENED THE DOOR** to the henhouse, the first thing that hit me was the smell. The ammonia stench clogged my throat and nose, and while my eyes didn't literally water, I wished they would've because of how badly they burned. I cannot imagine what a factory farm might smell like, with chickens piled one on top of the other, surrounded by feces, and suffering blindness and ammonia burns from the poorly ventilated air. Which is nothing like Cody's farm, but good God it *reeked*.

The chicken house wasn't very large, maybe only eight feet by ten feet. The outdoor run, a swatch of bright grass bordered by a ten-foot-tall wire fence, was slightly more spacious. Chickens flocked toward the door, hustled in and out of the house, and crowded around our feet. I stood there stupidly, wondering how to pick out which chicken was due to die tomorrow, then wondering what Cody, his mother Joyce, and my co-worker who put me in touch with them would think if I ran out of the henhouse, straight to my car, and sped away, sans chicken.

"What about this one?" Cody asked, picking up a light-colored chicken with a large red comb on the top of her quivering head.

"Um, sure?" Cody held the chicken softly to his stomach, looked thoughtful, then released it.

"Maybe a Rhode Island Red. They're older, so they'll have more meat on them," Cody said, changing his mind.

I bent down, and the chicken before me squatted. She let me pet her.

Cody selected another bird.

“That one looks good,” I told him.

Outside, we tried to finagle the chicken into the cat carrier, but I was too hesitant. She pushed with her feet against the edge, went *brrrrrrp brrrrrrp* in a low, throaty voice, and I lost all resolve. “I don’t think she wants to go in,” I told Cody. Although I’m seven years older than he is, I felt much younger than him in that moment. “I’ll just carry her for now,” I decided.

On the walk back to my car Cody held the cat carrier in one swinging hand, and I held the chicken in my arms like a baby. I asked Cody if he had any tips for eviscerating the bird.

“Not really,” he said, “It’s pretty self-explanatory.”

That wasn’t the first time I’d gotten that answer, and I was happy to believe it. “You just twist off their necks,” a friend told me. As a kid, she helped her parents pluck and clean chickens. “And then just slice around their ass and pull all the guts and stuff out after. It’s easy.” On YouTube, the videos are similar. People cut around the neck, around the bottom, and *voilà*—it’s a chicken, just like you’d buy in the store.

**MORNING ARRIVES**, and the house is quiet. The chicken, I presume, is still asleep. Lying in bed, the ludicrous thought of releasing her into the woods crosses my mind. But I’m too invested in the situation to back out now, so I slide out of bed, take the chicken out of the bathroom, and let her roam through my yard. She follows me around, watches me, scratches at the dirt, poops in my Shasta daisies.

But watching the chicken scratch and defecate will not accomplish anything. I set up four stations: the killing station, the plucking station, the evisceration station, and the soup station.

The killing station is in the garden in front of my house, beside the raspberry and sugar pea, and consists of an upright log for sitting on, two placemats, a bowl to catch the blood, and a knife I’ve sharpened hair-follicle thin, so much so I accidentally shaved a layer of skin off my finger (not enough to draw blood) the night before.

The plucking station is almost in back of the house, and involves a large pot of nearly boiling water, a blowtorch, and one of the lengths of parachute chord that I use for hanging laundry. I tied a slipknot in the end, to dangle the bird from, and placed a cardboard box below it to catch the feathers.

The evisceration station is a large, flat cylinder of wood, about eighteen inches high, which I’ve placed in the garden behind my two rows of lettuce. I’ve got a cutting board on top, my only cutting board, which eerily has a picture of a chicken on it. Beside it is a teakettle of hot water for sanitizing as I go, a clean hand towel, a

bucket for waste scraps, a small pot for organs and tissue I’ll boil into soup for Tashi, and a plate for the meat that I will eat.

The soup station is inside: a pot of cold water on the stove, piles of chopped carrots, celery, onion, and garlic. I’m going to boil the chicken and the vegetables to make broth, then remove the meat from the bones, remove the vegetables from the stock, and make soup.

The day before, while out buying carrots at the local market, I discussed the plan with my favorite butcher. Usually he helps me pick out what meat would work best for my recipe, fetches choice bacon for me from the back, and gives me a double-shot of moral support when I’m trying to cook meat in new ways.

“What’s up, girl! What do you need?” he hollered, smacking both latex-gloved hands flat on top of the display case.

“Nothing today. I’m going to butcher a chicken tomorrow. She’s in the car.”

“Aw, man!” He leaned over the counter and gave me a high-five. “You’re going to do it all yourself?”

“Yep, I’m making soup.” I held up a carrot, trying to seem enthusiastic.

“Who’s going to help you?”

I used the carrot to point to my chest and said, “Just me.”

Although I wanted to seem confident, deep down I was scared. If I popped the gall bladder, the meat would be rendered inedible. If I messed up, the chicken would go to waste. What if I didn’t cut her throat deep enough? What if she flapped around my yard, massacred and bloody? I wanted a helper, someone to do this with me, but no one else signed up. One of my best friends, who studied anatomy, offered me pregame advice, but said he couldn’t make the playoff. Another friend said he’d help, but left for a month-long trip to Africa right before my chicken connection came through. I was thinking of asking my co-worker, Cody’s cousin, but on my days off, he works.

“Right on!” Another high-five. “You’re gonna do great! Tell me how it goes.”

**I’M SEATED AT THE KILLING STATION**, trying to calm my hammering pulse. The chicken is wrapped in placemats and resting, belly up, between my knees. It’s only nine a.m., but it’s already seventy degrees. I’m sweating.

To make her fall asleep, I tap a few fingers gently on the space between her eye and the base of her beak. I know this works, like I know you can also massage the breastbone for the same effect, because I had chickens as pets when I was little. My friends and I made them harnesses out of flannel and walked them on leashes to the park. We painted their toes, and pretended they were our children. We kept them for eggs, a flock of four, then a flock of six, then four again, then three when I left for college, and now

my mother has none. She told me she hopes I won't end up killing this chicken so she can adopt it.

Sitting in the sunlight with the chicken on my lap, I think about the life it would have at my parents' house. It would lay eggs, peck in the garden, bathe in dirt, sit in the sun. My mother would probably decide that the chicken needed friends, so she'd find more chickens to keep her company.

Massaging the chicken, watching her warm eyes close, I also think about what my neighbor said—*just don't name her*—although I find myself wishing I had something to croon to this chicken now.

Without a name, is this supposed to feel more impersonal? I'm holding the chicken between my legs, stroking her, trying to help her relax. Maybe there's the no-naming rule because to give the chicken a name would make it seem like she belonged to me more. We name our pets, our children, even sometimes objects that belong to us, like cars or skateboards or stuffed animals.

When her body goes limp with comfort, I stretch out her neck. I tap the knife against it, *tap, tap, tap*, and accidentally slice a single feather. It slides loose and floats to the ground. I've been holding her for about twenty minutes. She's not straining, not afraid of me. I lean forward, jutting my knees toward the blood bowl. Quick, I slice her throat.

Blood gushes into the bowl, warm on my hands. I drop the knife and hold her body. She kicks one leg slowly. A wing shuffles. But not so much. She moves less than I expected. This is nothing like a chicken running with its head cut off. This is nothing like death throes or dry heaves. I can see the blood pumping out of the arteries in her neck. She moves for another five seconds then stops. This is also not like buying chicken, cleaned and plastic wrapped, from a store. And it is also nothing like I thought it would be. I'm not shaking. I'm surprisingly unafraid of what I've just done.

I slice off the chicken's head, place it in the bowl with the blood, and unwrap the place mats.

At the plucking station, I hold the chicken by her feet and dunk the body into the hot water. I try to remember what Cody said—it was either three dunks for twenty seconds with five-second intervals or five dunks for twenty seconds with three-second intervals. I dunk her four times then try to pull the feathers; they come off easy. I hang the chicken, steaming and dripping, and remove the rest of the feathers. She smells grassy and warm. Even the large wing feathers come out without any trouble. The skin does not tear.

Once the feathers are gone, I turn on the propane blowtorch and singe the small hairs from the bird. I wipe her clean with a rag from my back pocket.

The evisceration is the part I've been most worried about. I do not want to pop the gall bladder. I do not want to puncture

the stomach. I'm not sure if the meat will be spoiled if I rip open an intestine, but I do not want to find out. And the colon. I feel I should avoid the colon.

I start with the feet, cutting them off at the knee joint, then drop them into the waste bucket. I do not slice bone and am proud, but when I make incisions around the neck, trying to dip into the throat so I can remove the crop, which held the chicken's food before it was digested, I cut it with my first slice. Corn and seed squeeze out onto the cutting board, like yellow textured toothpaste. I rinse it off with hot water from the kettle. After that, I cut a little lower toward the breast meat and eventually remove the organ, then slice off the neck. The crop goes into the waste bucket, the neck into the dog-soup pot.

It takes me forty-five minutes to clean the bird. I find that I cannot just scoop out the organs from the back, that I cannot just pull and everything comes out, and that this is not in any way self-explanatory.

"Fuck YouTube," I say.

I cut through the rib cage on one side of the breastbone, then the other, and lift out the sternum. From this vantage I can pry the abdominal cavity apart with both hands. The intestines come loose, rosy and pale. I drop the liver into the pot for Tashi. I press the gall bladder between my fingers then toss it into the waste bucket. I try to scrape out the lungs with a spoon, then with my fingers. All the while I'm thinking about how disgusting this must be on an industrial scale—the blood and flies and intestines and chicken shit and probably the pile of punctured gall bladders. I carefully dissect the chicken and, aside from the crop, do not puncture any organs that I don't mean to.

I remove the gizzard, bisect it, and use my fingers to wipe out all the rocks and stones the chicken used to digest her food. I peel off the lining, a strange, yellow layer that feels exactly like it's made of plastic, and save the muscle for Tashi's soup, along with the heart. The meat, the skin, and the bones I set aside for my soup.

Tashi looks at me with a cloyingly sweet face, begging for the plate of raw flesh.

"I have something for you, but this chicken is mine."

I say the words realizing, as they fall smooth and easy from my mouth, that they are true. This flesh belongs to me now.

I boil the carcass with the vegetables for two hours straight then stand above the steaming stock, peeling hot chicken meat from the bones and eating bits of it with my greasy and grateful fingers.

**PEOPLE HAVE NEEDS:** we need to eat, to be respected, to be free from harm. Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs organizes these, determining that each consecutive need cannot be fulfilled until the need that precedes it, the more base need, has been satisfied. After physiological needs, like air and food,



humans require safety, then love and belonging, then esteem (respect for and by others, self-respect, confidence, achievement), and, lastly, self-actualization (creativity, problem solving, lack of prejudice, morality).

I suspect that humans don't just need to feel like they belong socially; they need to feel like they belong to their environment as well, and I know that for me, personally, I attain a sense of belonging through labor, creativity, and care. Maybe that's why I made the curtains in my bedroom instead of buying them, or why I brew kombucha in my kitchen and wash my laundry on a washboard. Simple things that make us responsible for ourselves, ways we can aid in the production of what we're consuming, help us feel engaged and connected. When I have a hand in creating something, like the patterned rug on my bedroom floor,

## Frequently Asked Questions: #6

*Now that you have a child, has your writing practice changed?*

Digging rock from hardscaped beds, I think, is a bit like not writing poetry—like thinking about writing poetry but digging rock from my backyard instead. If you've never pulled rock, with your own gloved hands, or a trowel, with a flat-headed shovel, on your knees, or squatting, or half bending so your back will hurt by nightfall, never learned how best to corral the rugged little stones so you might scoop them and haul them to a container that will bear them away, turn them into some other fool's problem, or if you have and your fingertips remember like mine remember a day's work that wore holes into sweet, pink, flowered, garden gloves—though when I called it quits after more hours than I labored with my daughter, it seemed I'd hardly cleared any rock at all—you might wonder why, when my shovel came down on a pyramid of knob-sized gray and white and speckled stones near the struggling young juniper and opened a nest of lice-small cream eggs and writhing red and black bodies I checked first that these were not termites—my mercy limited by my love for the wood and mortar I call home—then replaced the river stones on the teeming anthill and turned to clear rock from some other section of my hardscaped bed.

—Camille Dungy

it feels more my own than if I bought it, because the money exchanged for a rug is an abstract thing that doesn't solidify ownership the same way carefully cutting each flannel scrap into a perfect square does. In the words of E. F. Schumacher, economist and author of *Small Is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered*, "When a thing is intelligible you have a sense of participation; when a thing is unintelligible you have a sense of estrangement." I want to belong in my body, my house, my life. I want to eat intelligible food and feel satiated, not consume blindly and feel empty.

By involving myself in the production process, I see the extent of my needs and their effects on others: Am I using too much water? Is it morally correct to eat animals? How much waste am I generating? I appreciate the warmth from my woodstove more than the hot air that comes blasting out of my wall-heater because pushing a button is *too damn easy*. There's no work, no feeling of accomplishment. I feel like I've earned nothing, because I haven't.

**WHILE THE STOCK SIMMERS**, I add carrots, beets, garlic, celery, potatoes, onion, tomato, salt, and a couple ounces of apple cider vinegar, then cook the soup for an hour and a half. It is thick and steamy. Small globules of oil and yellow fat bob to the surface. It's full of meat, long, juicy strips and chunks, and I'm amazed by this fact: the chicken meat I found in my chicken was pink, just like the kind you find at the store. It smelled similar. It is somehow surprising that chicken meat that comes in plastic and Styrofoam looks about the same as chicken meat that comes to your house in a cat carrier and poops in your Shasta daisies.

My mother reluctantly agrees to come for dinner, but asks if she should bring pizza, "just in case." At the appointed time, she sweeps through the door bearing bread and salad, arriving alone because my father had plans.

"Okay," she says. "How was it?"

"It was uncomfortable, but it was a good experience." I take a breath, feeling grounded and steady. "I would do it again."

I set the table with the same placemats I'd wrapped the chicken in (they're the only placemats I own). I don't tell Mom this. I light a few candles, serve up the soup, and we settle down to eat.

"Well?" I ask. Tashi noses around our feet, then resigns herself to not getting table scraps and lies down on the rug.

"This is so flavorful," she tells me. "I think it's the best soup you've ever made." ✎

Find more great writing about food in Orion's recent anthology, *To Eat with Grace*. Order your copy at [www.orionmagazine.org/books](http://www.orionmagazine.org/books).