

# A field of beans is ripe for musing on the meaning of life

If you're hungry for a morsel of delicious farm writing, sit back and savor this from Terra Brockman.

## Farm Notes: Bean by Bean

Henry has a number of different bean patches in the field (to confound insects and deer, and to take advantage of microclimates). I was in the far patch, near Walnut Creek, and took one end of the daunting 200-foot row of haricots verts, while farmhand Matt took the other end and we began the slow crawl to meet in the middle.

Haricots verts are masters of disguise. Unlike the yellow wax or royal burgundy beans, they are nearly indistinguishable—in color, size and shape—from the stems of the bean plant. They also tend to hide down near the base of the plant, hugging the stem and the earth, resisting the searching hand and the easy pluck from plant to basket.

Which was just as well, because after this wet week, some beans near the soil were starting to soften. Every once in a while you see the white cotton fuzz of mold beginning. Those beans you toss aside, along

with those that have more than a touch of rust, or more than one or two nibbles by a bean beetle.

All these less-than-perfect beans get tossed into the neighboring bed, recently tilled under and seeded with cover crops, on its way already to a long winter's rest. The good beans go into the half-bushel basket that you move, half-foot by lurching half-foot, down the row.

A dozen or so feet into the row, you realize there are 400 half-feet in a 200-foot row, and that you are spending maybe 5 minutes picking the beans

from every six inches of row. You do the math, and feel the chill air slip down the hillside and around your ankles. Preferring a warm bed to midnight bean-picking, you start plucking smarter.

You concentrate on the way the beans arrange themselves, and the way your fingers can grab the greatest number in one motion from bush to basket. You listen to the evening calls of the birds, the beginning of the insects chorus, muted by coolness, and you notice the first goose-bumps rise up on your arms.

At some point, the Zen of rep-

etition takes over, the efficient pathways establishing themselves in your brain and down your arm to your fingertips.

Time slips by and then Matt, who seemed an eternity away at the other end of the row, is suddenly within talking distance, and then touching distance.

You slowly unbend your body—ankles, knees, vertebrae, neck, head. Bipedal once again, you notice the perfect half-moon halfway up sky. The evening softens, deepens, brings perspective. You are a dot on the horizon, a small part of something much bigger,

much longer than one human life.

Standing on the earth, you know that you are a part of the same something that everything came from, and to which you and everything will return, and from which you can never be separated.

You take up a handful of soil and hold a miracle—the possibility of life, the product of death. You balance the bushel basket of beans on your head and walk—half-weary, half triumphant—to the end of the row where the pickup is waiting. A job well-done. Bean by bean.

## FARM: Poetry and prosaic mix in writings

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

the Evanston Farmers Market to e-mail about five years ago. "I'm thinking I've got this stock that's blowing up, and she lulls me with her poetry and stories from the farm."

Indeed, Terra Brockman is not just spitting out a grocery list of what's coming to the Saturday morning market; she is by turns farm writer, poet, philosopher and darned good cook. When she's not typing Farm Notes into the night, she works the farm, writes for Oxford University Press among others, and is executive director of The Land Connection, an educational not-for-profit that is saving farmland, training new farmers and linking local farm foods to the folks hungry to eat them.

"I certainly don't sit down to write a sermon," said Brockman, 47, one of six children who grew up on her family farm, with her genetics-professor father and her nurse mother, just across the creek from where her younger brother, Henry, now farms.

"There's a lot of wisdom in the land. I feel like it's not me writing. I almost feel like I'm just trying to speak for something that doesn't have a chance to speak for itself."

She writes of Henry nearly chopping off a finger whacking the stem from a head of broccoli but carrying on with the harvesting, the afflicted digit wrapped, makeshift, in a Kotex pad, the only bandage their sister, Beth, a veterinarian, happened to have in the glove compartment of her truck.

She writes of a hen that dies,



Tribune photo by John Dziekan

Terra Brockman and intern Michelle Huynh (left) bag fresh lettuce at the farm.

reminding her of a feathered Ophelia floating away in a little River Styx. And, lyrically, she writes of the sex life of corn.

### E.B. White and geotropism

She peppers her writing with literary references to Pablo Neruda, John Milton and E.B. White, to name but three. Ever the scientist's daughter, she laces her prose with biogenetics and thermodynamics, and unspools lucid explanations of how something called geotropism accounts for the fact that roots are hellbent on heading straight down.

She leaves you jaw-dropped with a sentence such as this, in a discourse on the lack of rain: "You have to at some level become a good Buddhist and accept the suffering with equanimity." And then she moves on merrily to a recipe for onion, raisin and garlic compote.

Come Friday morning, some 150 miles away, city and subur-

ban folk alike, crank up their BlackBerry, their laptops and their PCs, and take in one deep, long breath of Brockman's country air.

Liz Sarnik of Rogers Park saves Food & Farm Notes for Friday night when she's finally home from work. "I look forward to it coming every week. I print it out, I sit down with my dinner. I can't wait to just sit with it and read it. It's pure pleasure. It's the simpleness of nature, really."

Zachary Michael Jack is a fourth-generation farmer's son, a writer and a scholar who has spent his lifetime pondering why the farm resonates so deeply in our souls, and why it is such fertile turf for great writing.

Now an assistant professor of English at North Central College in Naperville, and the editor of "Black Earth and Ivory Tower" (University of South Carolina Press, \$24.95 paper),

the collected reflections of 30 contemporary farmer-writer-teachers, Jack unfurled a mini-lecture on the great American tradition of farm writing.

It is a lineage that begins even before Thomas Jefferson, the farmer-philosopher-president and one of a handful of founding fathers who claimed farming as his occupational passion.

In fact, farm writing goes back to ancient Greece and Rome, with Hesiod, Virgil and Pliny the Elder all weighing in on organic matters. Hesiod the Greek's great poem "Works and Days" doles out agricultural ad-

## On the Internet

For more photos of Terra Brockman and the Brockman farm, go to [chicagotribune.com/farmvoices](http://chicagotribune.com/farmvoices).

vice aplenty, albeit wisdom of the 8th Century B.C., and is considered an essential of classical studies.

"That's really where it all begins, the idea that the yeoman life is the good life, and that it begets ideas, thought, contemplation," Jack said recently from his family's 500-acre, corn-and-soybean farm just outside Mechanicsville, Iowa. He drew a straight line from Hesiod to Jefferson to poet and essayist Wendell Berry to the farmer writers he unearthed for his book. He is not surprised by the resurgence in writings from the farm, nor by the clamoring of city folk for a deep drink of farm tales.

### Agrarian longings

"Most of us are not more than two or three generations removed from the farm life," he said. "I think in our heart's deep core we long for the rhythms of that life. It's almost like an occupational ghost that haunts many families, particularly in the Midwest because they grew up spending weekends on their grandparents' farm or hearing stories."

Smearing a glob of goat cheese on a chunk of peasant sourdough ripped from the loaf, Brockman chews heartily on why her farm notes—and the notes of farmers typing and tilling all across the country—mean so much to so many.

"When your life is surrounded by manmade things, your

house and your apartment and your car and your sidewalk and your cubicle, it's all hard and cold and impenetrable and unyielding," she began. "It's gone so far in that direction, but I think people still have something deep inside them, because we're all animals; it's something primordial inside. They still remember blue skies and tall trees."

"So I bring them back. When I write about that field, it's all soft and mushy and changeable. They're sitting in their cubicle and they open my e-mail, they breathe in a little bit of country air. I bring them soft light and fresh air and bright stars. They look forward to that. They tell me every Saturday morning."

That's when the city and suburban folk troop into Henry's six green tents on the asphalt lot that otherwise serves as a car park for a chain hotel in downtown Evanston.

Because they've inhaled the late-night dispatch of Food & Farm Notes, they rush in like family and old friends. There is a hug for Terra. Questions posed to Henry. Is his finger healed? You know a Kotex is not a sterile bandage, one stern nurse reprimands.

And because Henry's big sister can harvest one mean swath of poetry and prose, wisdom and pure delight, the farm in Congerville doesn't seem 158 miles away. More like just a ways up the road.

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Subscriptions to Food & Farm Notes are free via e-mail. Contact Terra Brockman at [info@thelandconnection.org](mailto:info@thelandconnection.org) or call 847-570-0701.

## FROM THE MAYO CLINIC Don't fret about skin tags

Tribune Media Services  
**Q Where do skin tags come from, and how can they be removed?**

—West Babylon, N.Y.

Skin tags are small, soft, flesh-colored growths that protrude from your skin. Because they are composed entirely of skin tissue, they are benign and certain to stay that way.

The tags may be flat, slightly elevated or sticking out from the skin, connected by stalks. They may grow with time and tend not to go away.

Skin tags are caused by friction, which explains their occurrence in folds of the skin.

There is no need to remove a skin tag unless it is frequently irritated or unsightly.

Removal usually is as straightforward as snipping it off with scissors or scalpel. An alternative procedure is electrocautery, the use of an electric needle. Freezing (cryotherapy) is another removal option, though it can damage tissue adjacent to the target.

Do not try to remove a skin tag yourself, as this may result in infection or excessive bleeding.  
—Marian T. McEvoy, MD, dermatology, Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minn.

### Shingles risk

If you've had chickenpox, you may be at risk of shingles, a painful skin disease that can lead to health complications.

Shingles, most common from ages 60 through 80, is a reactivation of the varicella-zoster virus that causes chickenpox.

You should see your doctor if you suspect shingles. The earliest warning signs are a burning, tingling or numbness in your skin and a red rash around one side of your face or body.

Although there is no cure, prompt treatment with antiviral medications can reduce the disease's severity. These drugs also may reduce the painful aftereffects of shingles, a condition known as postherpetic neuralgia. Other drugs that may be used for shingles or PHN include corticosteroids, antidepressants, anticonvulsants and topical skin creams.

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Presented by  
**Dr. Drew Kandilakis**

### Tired of Headaches? Medicines Not Working? Try Acupuncture, it really does work!!!!

I have been treating hundreds of headache patients who seek acupuncture treatments out of desperation. Take Linda for example. Her first stop was her family doctor, who tried several headache medicines, both over the counter and prescription with no luck. After months of suffering she went to a neurologist who put her on antidepressants. No luck she finally got the nerve to ask her family doctor for a referral to see a chiropractor who specialized in joint "adjusting" and acupuncture for headaches and musculoskeletal pain. Luckily her doctor was agreeable. Linda was amazed in just 3 visits to be headache free. Now she only gets an occasional headache that is very minor and lasts briefly.

There are three major headache types, Migraine, Muscle Contraction, and Mixed Headache type. Muscle contraction headaches, like the one Linda had are often caused by poor posture, often hours at a desk job, with your neck and shoulders causing the muscles at the base of your neck to contract for prolonged periods of time causing a spasm around several nerves that pass through muscles at the base of your skull. Previous incidents of whiplash or trauma to the neck predispose a person to muscle contraction headaches.  
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