

# Eggshells and Ashes

*by Jeff Baker*

The summer I turned fifteen, I began raising Pharaoh quail in a wooded lot that adjoined our back yard in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. Their feathers were a rusty tan color, and they made a pleasing, delicate call that we could hear across the wood fence at our patio. Each evening the pinestraw floor of their pen would be dotted with small eggs that were mottled with chalky brown splotches. When the first few arrived I hollowed them out and set them on my bookshelf, but after that I saw no use for them, and I would throw each day's gathering into the woods, where they would give off a tiny pop when they burst against the branches of the pines, which became striated with dark-yellow scabs of detonated yolk.

My grandmother, who was visiting us from Mammoth Spring, Arkansas at the time, would have been appalled had she known I was wasting all those eggs. She'd told me once that if it had not been for her parents' garden and the fact that her brother was a good shot and had killed so many squirrels, her family would have starved during the Depression. Even after she married in 1933, she and my grandfather had loaded up their four small children each summer and driven up to Michigan, where there was work picking cherries, apples, tomatoes, and other crops. They would often stay for three months at a time, steadily moving from farm to farm, living in a canvas tent at the edge of the fields.

Ma'amaw was not someone I wanted to disappoint: She hand-stitched quilts for me, took me fishing, advised me on dating ("never be impressed when someone says a girl has a good personality or makes her own clothes"), taught me how to catch a snapping turtle, helped with my botany homework, laughed at the off-color jokes I told her, kicked the soccer ball around the yard with me, and shared my liking for Dwight Yoakam's music. She could be mischievous and was endlessly curious, often at the same time: at one point I'd kept a few chickens in the lot, and when we found one of my roosters dead of mysterious causes, she leaned over to me and said, in a conspiratorial whisper, "We'll just have to do an autopsy on that dude," then sent

me on a mission to sneak a steak knife out of my mother's kitchen to use for a scalpel. (Her official ruling: broken neck. Main suspect: the larger rooster scratching guiltily in the corner of the coop.)

She was particularly interested in my quail, in part because she'd been there when they hatched. Though she'd lived on farms most of her life and had witnessed the phenomenon many times before, she had sat peering through the plastic window of the incubator for two hours, freshly amazed each time another of the chicks struggled out of its shell.

Not long after she arrived, she walked out with me one evening to feed the quail. The sun was going down but it was still hot, and the cicadas in the woods behind us droned so deeply that we had to speak loudly to be heard. "They're layin' good," she said, pointing to the half-dozen eggs in the pen. When I saw shards of eggshell stuck to the bark of a nearby tree, I wondered if she'd noticed and looked over to study her face, which was textured with wrinkles that had been smoothed over with softness. Her gray permanent was smashed down by a plasticine visor, and in the blue shade it cast I could not quite make out her eyes, which were capable of throwing light in spectrums ranging from gaiety to dismay. I stood braced for a reprimand, or for her to walk off, disgusted at how far I had diverged from good sense. "You could've give 'em to somebody," I expected her to say, but what she said was, "Ever had pickled quail eggs? They're real good. You save up about four dozen of those, and we'll make us some." She went on to say that they were a workingman's delicacy, a staple at taverns and beer joints, which made the idea seem exotic, even a little decadent.

We began our project on a Saturday morning. I was not the first person she'd coached—she'd recently taught my father how to make tapioca pudding and sourdough bread—but I was a special challenge, considering that my cooking skills began and ended with glopping a neon-orange sub-

stance called "Pizza Now!" onto cheese toast. She did not seem deterred.

After shooing my parents and my sister out of the kitchen, she opened the refrigerator and handed me a jar that had two dill pickles in it. "First thing you need to do," she said, "is to eat these." When I asked why—wondering if this was some sort of superstition or egg-pickling rite—she looked at me as if she shouldn't have to explain. "We'll need the jar."

She took the eggs out and washed them and lined them up on a dish towel on the counter, then filled a mixing bowl with water. "Our next job is to make sure the eggs are fresh," she said. When I claimed that I *knew* they were fresh because I'd collected them twice a day, she looked at me over the top of her glasses with the expression of a veteran police sergeant interrogating a bad liar. "Do you know what a rotten egg smells like?" she asked. When I nodded she said, "You interested in finding out if they taste any better than they smell?" I saw her point.

She had me drop each egg into the bowl of water. If the egg were fresh, she told me, it would sink to the bottom, if it were old the large end would tilt upward, and if it were rotten it would float. She didn't comment when two of the eggs went belly up.

"You've heard the saying 'a watched pot never boils,' haven't you?" she asked after she'd set a large red pot on the stove. "You're going to disprove that for us. Give it a hard stare, and let me know when that water is boiling good."

I watched the water as if a bass were about to jump out of it. As she moved around behind me in the kitchen, her mind settled like a dragonfly on various facts about eggs before whirring off again: *Egg whites are a good salve for a burn. There's more than five hundred different ways to prepare eggs. Ever told you about the time I was working at the White Frog Café over in Forsyth, Missoura and we cooked forty-eight dozen eggs in one breakfast shift? Take and crush up some eggshells and sprinkle them in the garden and it'll help keep deer out. Now, Black Orpingtons are good calm hens, but leggerns are nervous and bad to fly out of the coop. If it thunders hard while a hen is a-setting, not an egg'll hatch...*

When I showed her an egg that was larger than the others, she stopped pulling down spices from the cabinet. Her eyes went somewhere for a moment and then she laughed. "Makes me think about a boy named Grady," she said. "He grew up with us out there at Wirth, and he was, well...*simple*. Grady had him a blue parakeet he just doted over, and one day some on'ry old boys snuck in the window and put a turkey egg in the cage. He went around telling everybody about this huge egg his parakeet had laid, and those boys never had the heart to tell him any different."

Soon after, she was somehow reminded of my grandfather, whom I'd never known. She told me about how he once decided he'd try to make wine out of tomatoes. (She told him it wouldn't work; he tried it anyway. It didn't work.) She remembered the time he was out loading cattle and noticed that their flock of guineas had flown up into the barn loft.

"Well, see, Walter didn't want them up there because they'll get mites in your hay," she said, measuring out vinegar. "Picked up a little old pebble that was laying there and chunked it up there to scare 'em out. Hit one of 'em square in the head—killed it *boneyard dead* right there. Didn't even flap once, just fell out. Only rooster we had."

"What'd he say?" I asked, laughing.

"Best I can remember," she said, "he just stomped his boot, hollered *damn*, and then walked over and started plucking it."

She told me about Mr. Semrau, the eccentric old German bachelor who would ingratiate himself into getting invited to supper by a different family every Sunday. Once, when she asked him if he wanted iced tea, buttermilk, or coffee with his meal, he'd pulled at his old-world collar, stood up, and shouted, "Oh, I bleef I haff all tree!"

Suddenly I realized that she had lifted the pot off the stove and was pouring an amber-colored liquid into the pickle jar. I'd barely been aware she had been making the brine all that time, much less of what it contained; I'd been on the dirt roads and in the dim farmhouses of Wirth, Arkansas, not in a brightly lit suburban kitchen in a college town. She packed the eggs into the jar, sealed it tightly, shook it seven times, and set it in the back of the refrigerator.

There was nothing left to do but wait. My grandmother had a surprisingly astute sense of natural cycles that was a mixture of country lore, intuition, and experience. She said the eggs would be ready "when they were ready," and when I pressed further would only say, "a week or ten days." After five days the eggs had become a blanched tan, and I decided to check on their progress. *She won't miss one, will she?* I thought, and had my hands firmly on the jar when she materialized behind me—I'd thought she was taking a nap. I'd also forgotten my sister's dictum: *Ma'amaw sees all*.

"You aren't getting into them eggs, are you, boy?" she said. As with many of the questions she asked me, she already knew the answer.

"Uh, no," I stammered. "Just checking to see how much Pizza Now! I have left."

"Next time you fool with that jar," she said, "you might just find a rat trap rigged to the back of it." When I turned around, she smiled and pat-

ted my shoulder. "It'll be worth the wait," she said.

On the evening of the ninth day, she set the pickle jar on the table in front of me at supper. When I unscrewed the lid, the jar gave a belch of atomized vinegar that raced up into my face and my anticipation waned a little. They eggs didn't look so great, either: by then the brine had turned cloudy and tiny particles of egg were floating in it. None of was going to stop me. The first egg tasted tart, mildly salty, spicy like a deviled egg, with an afterbite of cayenne pepper and the confluence of several unknown spices. My reaction was to reach for another, then another and another. I fished one out for Ma'amaw's verdict. "Pretty good," she said. "But we should have used a little more paprika." Her use of "we" was typically magnanimous; I'd done little more than collect the eggs, get in the way, and listen, but I was proud to have merely been present.

The eggs lasted only a few days. I'd like to be able to say that we shared the last one in some sort of symbolic gesture, but I'm sure I simply stabbed around in the murky brine with a fork until I realized they were gone.

Soon after we made the eggs, my grandmother went back home to Arkansas, and we never got around to making them again. The next time I ate pickled quail eggs was last fall, eighteen years later, when I bought a jar at a roadside stand. Tasting them again was a tangible reminder of what I gained from her, how I was a slightly different and possibly even improved person when I walked out of the kitchen that day. Our eggs had been better, of course. The ones I bought tasted merely pickled, but I could swear that ours had exuded wild flavors—the shattered shale that crunches under tires on the dirt roads of Wirth, an onion dug from Michigan ground, a limp guinea's blood.

Ma'amaw died in April of 1997 at the age of seventy-eight. Later that year, when I encountered an African proverb that read, "When an elder dies, it is as if a great library has burned to the ground," I understood it completely. I regret profoundly that I cannot have her show me even one more thing, invite me inside just one more story. Aside from some letters and photographs, memories are what I have. I am grateful that this memory is one of many. Some of them are everpresent, others are still buried in ash. This one hovers somewhere in between, and it comes to me now at unexpected moments, as subtle as the soft and distant trilling of a quail.

