Nelle

Volume 3 Article 31

2020

# Chicken

Virginia Bell

*Virginia Bell*

## Chicken

One day the Deviled Egg Lady showed up at my father's house. She brought her son with her, and the two of us were told to go down to the basement to play. She and my father stayed upstairs. No one else was home. We started down dutifully; it was very dark even after they flipped on the bare bulb hanging from the rafters. Part way down we heard a push and another soft click—they had locked the door behind us.

⋆

Why did the chicken cross the playground? To get to the other slide.

Why did the rooster go to KFC? He wanted to see a chicken strip.

Why did the chicken cross the road, roll in the mud, and cross the road again? Because he was a dirty double-crosser.

Isaac Newton: Chickens at rest tend to stay at rest; chickens in motion tend to cross roads.

Albert Einstein: The chicken did not cross the road; the road passed beneath the chicken.

Why did the feminist cross the road? To suck my cock.

⋆

The boy and I stopped on the stairs, not knowing what to do or what we wanted to do. We had met before but didn't really know each other. And we weren't playmates. I considered running right back up and pounding on the door, yelling loudly until they gave in. But the boy's lower lip shook like Jello; he gripped the railing with hands so pale I could see the blue of his knuckles, and his legs went all Gumby and Pokey. So, I pushed him down the last steps and took him over to the workbench.

⋆

I am telling this story because I never understood it. Because I haven't known how to translate it into the stories my mother later told me. How to conform it to *her* story.

⋆

The average life expectancy in years for a chicken is eight to ten, but they can live for fifteen or twenty in the right circumstances. My father had a pet chicken that lived less than one. He rescued her from the biology lab, where he taught his students how to incubate fertilized eggs. Normally, he gave the hatched chicks to a local farmer, but he took this one home and she grew rapidly into a full-sized chicken. When he brought me to his house one day, she was sitting on a plastic folding chair on the porch.

It was the beginning of summer—the air, orange—and after dinner my father lifted the chicken gently, tucked her sharp talons in and under her feathers, and settled her back down onto his lap, petting her like a cat. The next day she walked around inside the house, past the fish tanks, around the dog and the cats, skittering away if I tried to get close. She pecked at the cracks in the floorboards, the dandelions out in the yard, the curled edges of linoleum in the old kitchen. I would have liked her to be a silkie, white with tufted feet like Zsa Zsa Gabor's slippers, almost a cartoon chicken, but Dad's was a lightly speckled bantam, a common, practical breed, the June Cleaver of egg-layers.

⋆

Chicken Little, Henny Penny, The Little Red Hen, Lady Kluck, Clara Cluck, Miss Prissy, Chicken Boo, Babs, Scratch, Ace, Roy Rooster, Chanticleer, Foghorn Leghorn, Fowler, Rocky, Cornelius, Buck, Charlie Chicken, Chicken with Pants…

⋆

Among the odds and ends on the dusty workbench, there were parts of a lamp my father was trying to fix and a row of outlets on the wall. I demonstrated to the boy how to lick your finger and then stick it into a live socket. When he refused, I

tied him to the workbench legs with a jump rope, grabbed his hand, licked his finger, and stuck it in the socket for him. (The zap is immediate. The finger bounces back out, and your head suddenly swims and swoons. The pleasure is the pleasure of distraction, part cool tingle, part numbing burn. It's a little earthquake rippling up your arm. A small terror. And then you do it again.)

⋆

At the end of Anne Carson's essay, "Variations on the Right to Remain Silent," she celebrates the impossibility of translation by giving different iterations of Ibykos's sixth century B.C. lyric poem about erotic desire. For each iteration, she uses different source material; that is, she chooses the word in English from a lexicon created by the work of someone or something else, Beckett's *Endgame*, for example, or a microwave oven owner's manual.

In one translation, "desire" overtakes the speaker as a "black…north wind" that shakes his "whole breathing being."

Ibykos left his home to lead a wandering life. His lyric poems are now referred to as expressions of "homosexual feeling."

And what about Beckett's Hamm and Clov? What *is* the nature of their coupling?

⋆

The minutes passed into more than an hour; our fingertips tingled and grew sore. The boy slumped on the dank cement floor, against the bench legs. He sulked, but I untied the jump rope, tossed it to the side, and he didn't even try to get up. When the basement door was finally unlocked, I pulled him upright, we stumbled back upstairs, and we entered the kitchen's harsh light.

⋆

Chickens will often attack a newcomer in their midst because its presence upsets the established pecking order. And because chickens hate overcrowding. There is no organized attack, however, just a series of intermittent pecks, usually to the

comb and wattle—hence "seeing red"—but more fatally to the "vent" or "cloaca" (the exit for everything: poop, pee, and eggs); the pecks intensify until the mob homicide is complete. Some folks call the cloaca the chicken's "vaganus," although that is inaccurate as the colloquial "vaganus" refers to the perineum in female human anatomy, the area of skin *between* a woman's vagina and anus, not a conflation of the two into one, all-purpose hole (the perineum often tears during childbirth and has to be stitched back up; in the 1950s and 60s, when my siblings and I were born, doctors tended to stitch this up too high so that the vagina would be nice and tight for renewed intercourse).

⋆

One Sunday morning in high school, I was curled up reading Lawrence Ferlinghetti's *A Coney Island of the Mind* when my mother came home from church. She wore a small, glamorous row of silver bangles on one arm, white polyester slacks with an elastic waist, a yolk-yellow top, clip-on faux-pearl earrings, and red lipstick. She only dressed up for church.

Her eyes were red, as if she had been weeping, and she sat down close to me, her arm touching my knee. She needed to tell me something, she said. She had been listening to the sermon, she said, and she wanted to tell me she was sorry.

In another translation of Ibykos, Carson offers that when it comes to desire, "the charge is clear: one is condemned to life, not death."

⋆

To be a chicken, to chicken out, to play chicken, chicken shit, running around like a chicken with its head cut off, don't count your chickens before they hatch, she's no spring chicken, a hen party, a hen house, mother hen, henpecked, to fly the coop, which came first—the chicken or the egg, dumb cluck, stick your neck out, your chickens have come home to roost, cock-eyed, cock-sure, there ain't nobody here but us chickens…

⋆

Back up in the kitchen, I stared at the Deviled Egg Lady's

legs. Her tan stockings and shoes had disappeared, her skin was bright pink, and her ankles narrow and bony. Like Barbie ankles. She was sitting at the table sipping coffee in bare feet. Her toes touched the linoleum, but her arches, molded high by the heels she always wore, lifted the backs of her feet into the air. Like Barbie feet. Her coffee smelled like ice cream. Dad's coffee smelled dark and bitter, like charcoal. He at least had socks on.

⋆

My mother told me she was sorry for not being able to forgive my father. "For what?" For being a "homosexual," she said. He had been "sick," she said.

He had been dead for seven years. You would think this news would have surprised me. In yet another Carson translation of Ibykos, desire "will burn your nose right off."

Somehow it didn't. The revelation seemed like the keystone, the linchpin, the piece that would finally hold everything else in place. It made all my mother's stories make sense.

Except the Deviled Egg Lady.

This is my story.

⋆

The use of the word "devil" in relation to food first appears in English in 1786 to describe a highly-seasoned fried or boiled dish. Although humans had been scooping out egg yolks, mashing them with stuff, and re-stuffing them probably since ancient Rome (see the cookbook of Apicus), etymologists date the American name "deviled eggs" to the 19th century because of the recipes that began to call for mustard. Washington Irving also described hot curries as "deviled."

⋆

I became obsessed with deviled eggs one spring afternoon when my father took me to a party at a pretty lady's house in a development in the town where he lived. Everything was new in the development. The trees were so young and small and pale green, that nothing blocked the sun. The split-level houses

were painted powder blue and mauve and all the doorbells chimed. The lady wore a dress and brought out a field of deviled eggs on a shiny, round platter. The filling in the eggs varied in color—just a few held plain old yellow. I wanted to eat them, to taste each one. Green, like *Green Eggs and Ham*, pink as bubble gum, purple as a bruise, blue like the taste of the sky or the inside of a lake. I imagined the lady in the kitchen that morning, an apron protecting her dress, mixing little mounds of egg stuffing in five separate small bowls, squirting in the dye, and stirring until they were each just the right hue. From then on, I thought of her as The Deviled Egg Lady. From then on, there were eggs, and there were *eggs*.

⋆

How can a thing both be one thing and another? Perhaps I am an incompetent storyteller.

⋆

During her party, I played on the wooden floor with her son's plastic horses and tiny cowboys. On my hands and knees, wrinkling my dress, scuffing my party shoes, I made them leap onto the horses' bare backs and gallop down the lanes of the wood. When I dragged my cowboy-gripping hand across the floor to dramatize the event, I got a splinter and sat up, then cried out. The Deviled Egg Lady ran over and lifted me up, sitting me on the edge of the bar. She hugged me at first, then held me tight, pinned me down while my father fished around in my skin with her tweezers. The boy grabbed up his horses and his cowboys, stood off to the side, and watched.
I only saw that boy one other time. The day in the basement.

⋆

Near the end of summer, Dad took us camping and boarded his pet chicken with the farmer, who tossed her into the coop with the rest of his egg-layers. When we came back two weeks later, she was dead. "Too domestic," my father explained.
The pampered house chicken had sashayed into the farmer's humble yard with an entitled air, expecting a softer bed and hands to scoop her up and scratch her under the neck. Like

a scene from Hitchcock's *The Birds,* I pictured the other chickens waiting until dusk then encircling the visitor in the dark, closing around her, pressing in, and all pecking until she collapsed in a silent pile of blood and feathers. An *Animal Farm*-style plot to assassinate the individualist.

For most of my life, I believed this explanation and my fantasy.

But really, chickens will attack any newcomer, no matter how domesticated, no matter where she comes from.

The killing is random, piecemeal, loud, chaotic.

⋆

My father had loved birds for years. When my parents lived in Pakistan, he was a pigeon fancier. They lived in a house made for a hot climate with a partially covered staircase on the outside so that in the evenings you could climb to the roof where it was cooler. During the hottest months, the whole family slept on the roof on *charpoys,* low beds made of rope woven and strung between four wooden legs. The roof is also where my father kept his pigeons in a clay loft with painted wooden perches. To the rest of the family, they all looked the same, but he knew and had names for each bird. When he came home from teaching at the end of each weekday, he went straight up to take care of his pigeons.

My mother was hurt that he didn't come in the house to see her first; trained as a 50s housewife, she was ready for him in a pretty, but modest Jackie O. dress or a gauzy *salwar kameez* (harem pants, topped with a tunic) and *dupatta*, a long, netted scarf draped backwards around her neck, each end reaching down her back. As missionaries, they weren't cocktail drinkers, but she was ready to make him tea and serve him snacks, a little "hot mix" (spicy, salty crackers, with sweet yellow raisins) and listen to his day.

In the first year, when they had only one infant child, he never came in at the expected time, and it took her months to figure out that he had walked up the outside stairs and was on the roof right above her visiting his pigeons. Once she

understood that he was in fact at home, she still felt hurt, yet resigned herself to the circumstances. When dinner was ready, rice, curry, *chapatis*, and a little mango fool, still she waited for him to come down and join her and the children (first one boy, then after several miscarriages, another boy, then a girl, then eventually, another girl). He was always late.

She would go into the bathroom and brush back her thick, dark hair, wavy from the rag curls she had tied into it the night before. She would brush it back again, letting her widow's peak become visible in the mirror. And where was her husband? On the roof, she figured by now, calling his birds home as the sky began to purple, feeding them, listening to their insistent talk, marveling at the way they walk awkwardly, each step cocking their soft gray heads forward and forward, marveling at the way they can fly for miles and still remember to come home.

*

Chickens are the opposite; their attempts to fly are pitiful.

*

Addled: an egg in which the contents are decomposing.

Aviary system: housing where mezzanine floors are installed to increase the floor space.

Beak trimming: the removal of the tip to prevent cannibalism and its associated vices.

Candle: to assess the internal characteristics of the egg by viewing it in a darkened room with a bright light shining from behind.

Cannibalism: the practice by some birds of attacking and eating other members of the same flock.

Moult: the process of shedding feathers and ceasing egg production, usually initiated by hormonal influences but often triggered by stress.

Spent hen: a layer that has reached the end of her economic egg-laying life.

*

The pigeon business made sense. Or, the revealing of the secret that my father was gay (bi, queer, poly, or…?) made my

mother's hurt make sense.

In her own poem on the pitfalls and possibilities of monogamy, Anne Carson admits to the desire to simplify:

*I try to conjure in mind*
*something that is the opposite of incompetence.*
*For example the egg.*

*This perfect form.*
*Perfect content.*
*Perfect food.*

The pigeon business also made me want to rescue my father from all the shame he must have felt, from all the hiding. But. The Deviled Egg Lady. If he was also hiding plain old hetero adultery, hurtful and mean, what then? I had been taught to perceive the whole world in binary terms. Was he victim or perpetrator? Sufferer or inflictor of suffering?

Not understanding is frustrating. When things don't fit, most of us want to smash something.

⋆

My father was not the only pigeon fancier in Lahore. Men all over the city kept pigeons on their rooftops—the tradition dates to the sixteenth century when the city was part of the Moghul Empire. Some of the favorite breeds include: the ash red saddle fantail, the yellow shield cropper, the double-crested swallow, the black tail English, the red spangle, the blue-checkered hana, and the silver priest. Twilight on the rooftop was, among other things, a form of communion with the other fanciers all over the city. Did their birds fly to each other's homes, hone in on each other's territory, or just tangle on the occasional weekend when a pigeon race was organized and bets were placed?

⋆

How do you even rescue someone posthumously? How do you rescue someone not just from others, but from themselves?

I had been taught that missionaries in Pakistan were do-gooders, plain and simple. Of course, it's not that simple.

⋆

Recently, I checked this story about my father's pigeons with my much older brother. He made two corrections: 1) The staircase to the rooftop was interior, not exterior. Anyone in the house would have heard, if not seen, someone enter and climb up to the outside. 2) To the best of his recollection, our father did not train the pigeons or send them out to later find their way home; rather, every so often he harvested one and we ate it for dinner.

⋆

For breakfast as a kid I always wanted "dippy" eggs, fried eggs with the yolks still soft and runny enough that you can dip your toast. One morning as I ate them with my father, he drew my attention to the patches of mold on the oranges in the fruit bowl and gave me a little lecture on the discovery of penicillin. It was an intriguing story, and later I wanted him to tell me more, tell me other stuff I didn't know I wanted to know until I knew it.

I came out on the front porch when he was sitting with the chicken on his lap. I let the screen door bang shut behind me and asked my father the meaning of words I had heard that day: "What does 'ambidextrous' mean? How do you spell 'pneumonia'?" "Go look it up in the dictionary," he answered, disinterestedly. At first, I resisted the idea; eventually, I took his offhand advice. I opened the gray-blue tome on the bottom of the living room bookshelf and fell in love, not with the words at first, but with those odd little black and white illustrations in the left and right margins for, say, "prosthetic limb" (a painful looking contraption of wood and metallic straps), or "peninsula" (a bony finger of land stuck alone out in the cold water), or that word I couldn't pronounce, "isthmus" (an improbably skinny piece of land, neither here nor there, stuck between bodies of competing water).

⋆

It seems so easy now, in the twenty-first century, with my adult mind, so obvious, to hold the concept of "both and neither." To love and to betray the beloved. To eat the beloved.

To frame a story through intersectional identity. To see a person as both oppressor and oppressed. Patriarch and patsy. Colonizer and conned.

⋆

One weekend at my father's house, he announced that he was getting married again. Oh, no! To the Deviled Egg Lady, I thought!

But no, he explained that he was getting married to some other lady, someone we had never met. He said that we were going to Kansas for the wedding and that we had to go shopping for the right clothes. He took me to K-Mart, and I found a dress for the occasion. The material was a slinky purple but covered all over in a repeating print of small, white, cheerful hippos. They seemed to move when I walked, and the polyester shivered and rippled down my pre-pubescent body and limbs, making the hippos gallop in the way of hand-drawn flip-books.

⋆

In her own poem, Carson describes the sensation of confusing one thing for another:

*The first thing I saw […]*
*was a crow*

*as big as a chair.*
*What's that chair doing on top of that house? I thought*
*Then it flapped away.*

Disorientation. Disorder. Chairs aren't supposed to be on top of houses. Chairs aren't supposed to fly. Gay dads are not supposed to have affairs with women. Or get married again. Christian missionaries in the twentieth century were supposed to live up to their righteousness. Not to hurt others. Not to

hurt each other.

⋆

This lady was from the same small town in Kansas as my grandparents. And *this* lady turned out to be a very skilled seamstress, better than my mother. She could make finely-tailored Barbie clothes, slacks and gowns that cinched the tiny waists perfectly. I would dress, undress, and re-dress the Barbies just to marvel at the fit. Then I would try to flatten their feet into normalcy. If I pushed down too hard, half a foot snapped off. It turns out there are long, thin plastic sticks running down the length of Barbies' legs into the balls of their feet. Back in those days, anyway. Like bracing spines holding everything in place.

⋆

At the receiving line before my father's open casket—his blue eyes forever hidden under leaden lids, the dyed hair grown out to gray, his skin like the skin that forms on cooling cooked eggs, light pink lipstick making his lips femme—I stood alongside my siblings, in order from tallest and oldest to shortest and youngest, obediently shaking the hands and accepting the embraces of strangers who came to mourn. One of them suddenly stood before me with her familiar, deviled egg face, now tear-stricken. When she reached out for me, I kicked her, then screamed and ran out of the room into the undertaker's dusty office. And when my mother came into that darkness to comfort me, I screamed again and hid under the desk.

⋆

Let me be clear. It's not that I can't conceive of sexual desire outside of a binary system. It's that mother's stories were supposed to explain everything. The story I was told was that "the secret" could make it all—scandal, return, separation, divorce, death, loss—a grief that sinks to a manageable depth.

⋆

Let me be clear. It's not that I ever bought the self-righteous claims.

It's that *she* did.

But this is my story.

⋆

At the end of Salman Rushdie's novel *Shame*, the character Omar is finally decapitated, becoming a "giant, gray and headless man, a figure of dreams, a phantom with one arm lifted in the gesture of farewell." Sufiya Zinobia slits his throat like a chicken. Following an explosion, the house they are in catches fire and both characters burn to death.

Earlier in the novel, she had twisted the necks of real chickens, as well as four boys. Critics argue that she is the embodiment of shame. Critics also argue that the concept of shame is usually feminized, embodied in the female.

⋆

If the story I was told didn't add up, wasn't that my fault? If the story I was told didn't satisfy, if confusion persisted, if grief lurked always beneath every surface, wasn't that my fault? I needed to learn how to tell a different story. How to tell a story differently.

⋆

The online Urban Dictionary lists the following definitions of "chicken":

An animal that is processed for human consumption.

A scaredy-cat, wuss, etc.

An attractive woman with big thighs and breasts.

A woman who gives lots of oral sex; in this sense, it's short for "chicken-head" or "chicken-neck."

A dangerous game in which two cars drive directly at each other and the first to swerve out of the way is the "chicken."