On My Acquisition of Jade Elephants

Adrienne M. Krater

Cedarville University, akrater@cedarville.edu

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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/cedarvillereview/vol17/iss1/16
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ON MY ACQUISITION OF JADE ELEPHANTS

NONFICTION BY ADRIENNE KRATER

“Hey, honey wake up.” I heard my mother coo from the doorway. I peeled my eyelids apart to see her outline floating towards my bed. “Something happened. Booka just called.” I looked back at her, panic slithering up my stomach. “Hmm?” I rasped. She knelt down onto the carpet, took my hand in her hand, and began to stroke my hair with the other one.

Fallow shaded curls bounced around my soft, round face, framing my view of the world around me. My small hands flew out to steady myself as the golf cart careened down the path. I let out a cry of glee and simultaneously widened my eyes at my Grandma Joy in terror. Grandma Joy took the fruit of love and squeezed every bit of juice and pulp out of it, until there seemed to be only dry rinds left. Not only did she love humans with reckless abandon, but she loved animals with an equal ferocity. Her curls were bouncing right along with mine, our bodies jiggling along with the stutter of the cart. She had a robin-egg-blue, worn blouse on. Her weathered ears were adorned with chunky amethyst earrings, and a thick fossil necklace with the feathery imprint of the fiddlehead shivered on her age-marked chest. We turned onto the grassy path leading into the field, on the way to her house. A bumbling fly buzzed past my ear and got caught up in my thick curls. While I reached up to free the creature, I looked at the field rolling by me and detangled the panicked little body from the knots of my windblown hair. The scene blurred together, and my seven-year-old mind imagined the field as a sea of green and the golf cart as a boat on a daring attempt across the emerald sea.

“Arghh!” I squealed as my Grandma Joy slammed the rusty brake pedal to the floor, sending me
sailing forward. I caught myself on the edge of the cart, and when I let go of the metal bar I had seized, I was surprised to see my hands shaking.

Steadying myself, I grabbed back onto the metal and swung out of the golf cart, landing softly onto the loamy soil. There stood an aged house with its dirty white siding and its pine green shutters. The shutters had pinecones carved into them. The windows were smeared with mud and mold so you couldn’t see in or out of the house. Three ancient droopy trees loomed over the house leaving it eternally in the cool of shade. Vines and moss took advantage of the dank area, grew over the ground and onto the sides of the house itself. A small, moldy, pale blue shed sat out front of the house. A familiar warm feeling began to spread outward from my lungs, to my ribcage, all the way to the skin wrapping around my fingers. My skin began to feel clammy, and my hands itched to begin working.

“Tasha! Look who’s here!” my Grandma Joy yelled to the house. I started running even before I saw her. My Grandma Joy began laughing a full, unrestrained laugh. A blur of copper and black tackled me to the ground and saliva began to drip onto my face.

“Tasha, I missed you so much,” I whispered and I pulled myself up from the ground, and then pulled the German Shepherd close to my chest. I pressed my face against her fur and grinned. I could feel her heartbeat against mine.

“Alright, now where do you want to start Adri?” My Grandma Joy asked. “We have a lot to get done today before everyone gets back from the lake.”

“I’ll start with the doves!” I gestured to the dusty blue shack resting out in front of the house.

When I say Grandma Joy loved animals fiercely, I mean she loved them above herself. Looking more closely at her you could see the bird droppings crusted into pieces of her hair and on the collar of her flower-embroidered blouse. Mud ringed the bottom of her trousers, giving evidence to her time spent with the horses in the stable that morning. It made her so beautiful to me. Her beauty was in her love for others, and her appearance only added to that fact. The house gave the impression of having been abandoned, but there are not many houses in this world that had been as lived in as this one. At this time, my Grandma Joy had two horses, over one hundred morning
doves, chickens, iguanas, dogs, cats, a cedar waxwing, a parrot, ten lovebirds, three raccoons, a groundhog, a peacock, a few goldfinches, some fish, and other birds I won't take time to name. Helping her take care of these animals was by far my favorite thing to do when we were in New York. She found most of these animals hurt and helpless, and my Grandma Joy would leave no man, and especially no raccoon, behind.

“There are probably some eggs in the shed. Can you handle it?” She gave me a wary look as she disappeared around the corner to feed the groundhog.

“I can do this,” I mumbled. I stood up and wiped some of the moist soil off my jeans as I sauntered over to the shed. Tasha barked in response and ran over to one of the trees, busying herself with some sticks.

The smell was like a cloud that I could feel myself enter as I came within an arm’s reach of the shed. Thick, heavy, and sour, the odor seeped into your very pores. A constant sound in the background, the cooing of the doves was the heartbeat of the household. My stomach tightened as I rested my hand on the crusty iron handle of the shed door. I admired a patch of sun that had snuck through the trees and landed on my arm. I had to be quick about slipping into the shed, because the doves were slippery and if one got out I could have a mutiny on my hands. The smell was so intoxicating that I had to hold my breath as long as I could, for fear of passing out.

“Huuuuup,” I sucked in my breath, cracked the door, and slipped inside.

The humidity made my shoulders slump and my lungs were already burning for breath. I was hot on the inside and on the outside. I gasped and choked on the odor and the debris floating through the air. Plumy feathers brushed my skin, and claws scratched it as the doves became frenzied at the sight of an intruder. I could get them to trust me though. I knew I could.

“You can trust me. It’s okay,” I cooed. Dust specs and down feathers danced in the muffled sunbeams reaching through the gauze curtains that hung over the windows of the shed. The putty-colored doves settled on the curtain rods, on perches, on the small patches of must straw on the ground. One landed on my head, got tangled in my hair, and resigned himself to his imprisonment there for the time being.
The soft noises continued to reverberate from their throats as I began to move about the shed. My skin felt sticky and my nostrils burned with the tart aroma. I reached into a small nest made of straw and squeezed the mother gently to pick her up. Her feathers felt greasy on top, but soft and dry on her underside. My clammy hands held her tight, and I went up on my tiptoes to peek into the nest. Looking up at me were three rosy-skinned mini-doves. The mother began to struggle in my hand when she saw me looking at her babies. I heard Tasha barking and scratching at the shed door.

“I’ll be out soon!” I called to her and the scratching ceased. I placed the mother back down with her babies and looked around. The dove had finally untangled itself from my hair and flown off onto the trashcan filled with the bird feed. I shooed off the disgruntled dove, lifted the lid off, and plunged my hand in. The pressure of the seeds against my hand was therapeutic, and a woody, rich smell wafted upward. I lifted a handful of seed and tossed it onto the ground. I was engulfed in feathers and dust again as chaos erupted. I wheezed repeatedly as I checked the rest of the nests before slipping back out of the shed.

As I gulped the fresh air, Tasha ran up to me with what must have been the perfect fetch stick. I pulled the soggy stick out of her mouth and threw it for her. As she vanished into the tall grass of the field to find it, my Grandma Joy appeared from around the corner. She was singing something soft and low. Her eyes glistened when she looked at me.

“Come on Adri, let’s take a little break. We’ll have some ice-cream.”

I followed her up the stairs, looking back to the field to see the grass rustling where Tasha remained on the hunt for the elusive stick. The house was cluttered and filled with more knick-knacks than a pawnshop. Shadow boxes hung crooked on the wall. Rocks and minerals of every shape and size littered the room, and the walls were either teal or wallpapered. Little fountains sat in corners next to stacks of magazines. Leo, the Iguana with a scotch-taped-on tail, sat on a jade elephant next to the couch. I stepped over a tabby cat named Buster and scooted around Boonie, the bristling raccoon. The kitchen was inhabited by a few of the lovebirds, most likely Art and Tootie, and a goldfinch. They flew around always returning to the brass curtain rods above the window. Mismatched plates and cups with different animals painted on them littered the shelves and counter. Little figurines of monkeys and koi fish could be found all over the room. My Grandma Joy reached
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“You have to soften it up first, or it’ll be too hard to scoop.”

“That’s doesn’t make sense. It’ll just be a big pile of soup,” I replied, perplexed. She pulled it out of the microwave and began to scoop out big soft lumps of ice cream into two, chipped, white bowls.

“Brilliant,” I thought to myself. “It really does work.”

She plopped the bowls down at the table and sat down across from me. The sweet frozen cream slipped over my tongue, cooling down my entire body. I looked up at my Grandma Joy. She smiled back at me. Time passed in silence as we ate in the relished quiet of each other’s company.

My spoon clanged into my bowl as I reached to pet Pansy, the Persian cat who had been rubbing against my legs for some time. I heard Tasha barking excitedly outside. She had found the stick. Took her long enough. My Grandma Joy got up and placed the bowls in the sink with the ever growing pile of dirty dishes.

“So let’s go take care of the lovebirds together. Oh, and Seedy could use a couple of grapes.”

“Okay, I’ll get the grapes!” I yelled.

I held the grapes in my hand and watched as the water from the faucet washed over the mauve skin and splashed into the sink. My Grandma Joy disappeared around the corner to head to the dining room where the birds were.

“She’s really gone Adrienne. I’m so sorry sweetie.” My mom pulled me in tight. My Grandma Joy had died in the middle of the night. I stared off into the distance and all I could think was,

“Who’s going to feed Seedy his grapes?”