DANIELLE WOOD

ELEPHANTIASIS

elephantiasis

A chronic form of filariasis, due to lymphatic obstruction, characterised by enormous enlargement of the parts affected Macquarie Dictionary

My cousin Meredith has elephantiasis. To say this is not to imply that she is fat, though, coincidentally, she is. Not just a little overweight, but quite fat. Meredith has the kind of body that means shopping for clothes in the Big is Beautiful section; that entails judging carefully the width of chairs with arms. Hers is the kind of flesh that feels, sliding over it in supermarkets, in doctors' waiting rooms or worse, the Family Planning Clinic, the averting glances of whip-thin girls with blonde ponytails and long necks with which to flick them.

It's not only Meredith that has elephantiasis. Her villa unit — one of a set of brick and tile triplets nestled on a landscaped block — has elephantiasis also. In the lounge room, the suite is piled with plump cushions embroidered, cross-stitched, latch-hooked, printed and painted with elephants. Others are simply in the shape of elephants. Sentinel to the hearth are two mahogany elephants, which, by virtue of timber that is unrefined and almost hairy, bears a family resemblance to their ancestor, the woolly mammoth. The mantelpiece holds a passing parade of jade, serpentine, onyx, ebony and marble elephants. Elephants have even made it into the bathroom, where the plastic bodies of Babar and Celeste are filled with bubble bath. In the kitchen, the fridge door flutters with no fewer than six fliers (the one that arrived by chance in Meredith's own post augmented by five others passed on by thoughtful friends), all seeking donations to help an unfortunate Thai elephant, the victim of a landmine explosion, in need of a prosthetic foot. Each of the fliers is attached to the fridge with a separate elephant-shaped fridge magnet.

Meredith wonders at how quickly the elephant effect gained momentum. The first elephant, a palm-sized figurine carved in ivory-pale wood, was from no-one of particular consequence. The giver had sat next to Meredith in a personal development seminar, perhaps five years ago. She was a woman with raspy greying hair and a long crooked body which she was always shifting in her chair, as if simply sitting caused her pain in her bones. The woman mentioned she was planning a holiday to Africa, and Meredith — outside in the car park after the seminar was over — gave her a blow-up neck pillow for the plane journey. Meredith had found the pillow uncomfortable, and so it had been lying, deflated, in the boot of her car for months.

The second elephant was a soft toy, pale grey and plush. It was also a thankyou gift, this time from a neighbour whose plumes of agapanthus Meredith watered while the neighbour was away nursing her sick mother. To this day Meredith does not know whether the neighbour chose the soft toy in response to the wooden African elephant on the (then relatively uncluttered) mantelpiece, or whether it was a purely coincidental choice. In any case, after that the elephantiasis spread like a virus to birthdays and Christmases, even to Easter, as friends, family and colleagues were seized by the thematic simplicity of it all.

white elephant

An annoyingly useless possession

Macquarie Dictionary

The truth is that Meredith does not even like elephants, and never did particularly. Before they took over her life, Meredith had for elephants no special feelings. Now that the elephantiasis is advanced, her house a shrine to the order Proboscidea, she resents them. Perhaps, she thinks sometimes, the elephantiasis was a punishment for an act of bad faith: giving away a travel pillow that she already knew to be uncomfortable. She feels, however, that the punishment has gone far enough, since it is now her entire existence that is stretched out of shape, swollen up and distorted with elephants.

Could she have halted the stampede? Yes, almost certainly. She could, at some point, have mentioned that she would prefer to collect butterflies. Or springboks. In her most soul-bare moments she knows why she did not, does not. And it’s not only because she is naturally conciliatory, and polite in a style that is grateful for a gift, no matter how awful. It’s because she knows that her friends, family and colleagues see this (imagined) fondness of hers for elephants as proof of her jolliness. It is evidence of her good-natured acceptance of her fatness. A huge joke against herself. There she is, an elephantine woman surrounding herself with familiars. And a jolly fat woman without jolliness is left, she understands, with only one adjective.

A Word from Rosie Little on: Totemic Worship

Gift shops thrive on people who have chosen — or, as in the case of Meredith, have had chosen for them — an animal totem. Perhaps it is a desire of the domesticated human to connect with an inner wildness that makes African safari animals such popular choices. Giraffes, lions and elephants are usually available as small carved wooden idols, keyrings, pencil cases with zippers down their backs, erasers, blown-glass trinkets and stuffed toys. Elephants, considered lucky, are more likely than the others to be found as tiny silver charms for a bracelet, tinkling against hearts, four-leaf clovers, horseshoes, money bags, and wishbones.

The Howards, who reside at Castle Howard of Brideshead Revisited fame, collect hippopotamuses. I once saw the hippos displayed in the castle's entrance portico, a frippery amid the ancient Greek statues, the overarching frescos, the great, heavy gilt of it all. In a glass cabinet are comic china hippopotamuses decked out for golfing, an elaborate Fabergé hippopotamus, and a group of serene grazing hippopotamuses etched into glass by a leading London artisan. Some of the hippopotamuses were given by the Howards to one another as anniversary gifts, while others have come from well-wishers who know the couple's proclivity for the animals and have no doubt thought of the couple when they've stumbled across an unusual one. The Howards are pleased to say that one of their favourite hippos — a wooden carving with large ears — was purchased for one pound and fifty pence at an Oxfam store. But they regret that they cannot have on display, due to its limited shelf-life, the charming carved-potato hippopotamus that was once sent to them by an admirer.

The memory of an elephant

proverbial saying

For Meredith, the single worst thing about being a primary school teacher is the last day of the school year. On that day the children arrive, all glowing with the joy of giving, presents for teacher in hand. Even the grottiest boys are coy and sweet with gift-wrapped anticipation. Among the presents Meredith receives there is always a mug with an elephant's trunk as its handle. Some of these mugs are slip-cast with Dumbo-type elephants that have fat, pale-grey curves and pink inner ears. Others are of bone china, and bear more serious elephants with trunks finely ridged and delicate pale slivers for tusks. Usually, too, there is a cushion cover, lately in Indian-sari style with small circular mirrors blanket-stitched to the elephants' pink and orange saddles.

Meredith teaches at a private school, and there are newly moneyed parents who like to make expansive gestures of their gratitude. As a result her courtyard water feature (placed according to feng shui principles) is ringed by a conference of solemn pachyderms of plaster and sandstone, soapstone and granite.

When Meredith was nine years old, the same age as the children she now teaches, her mother Rhona took her to the hospital to visit her Auntie Pat, who had just given birth to the baby Rosemary (yes, that would be me). On the way to the hospital Meredith and her mother stopped at a news-agency to buy a card. Meredith, a tall child without ankles and with dimples for knees, was allowed to choose. She was drawn to a small square card with a marshmallow-pink pig surrounded by tufts of green grass, sporting a green polka-dot bow between its peaked ears. It was a happy-looking pig, and Meredith thought that the arrival of a cousin was a happy sort of occasion. She picked out the card and gave it happily to her mother, who crossly shoved it back down into the card rack, dog-earing a corner of it.

‘You can’t give a woman a card like that, Meredith! You might as well call her a pig!’

This was one of a number of psychic slaps that Rhona was unwittingly to give her daughter. Meredith has never forgotten that incident in the newsagency, and as a result of it is always careful not to buy greeting cards with images that might be considered, even in any obscure or tangential way, inappropriate. And every year on the last day of school, after defeating the pit-deep dread that makes her want to vomit or at least call in sick, she takes herself reluctantly to work. She smiles and thanks sincerely each exuberant gift-giver. But she thinks, as she unwraps each parcel, ‘you might as well call me an elephant’.

Elephants do not mate for life

Elephant Information Repository

For a time, Meredith had a boyfriend called Adrian Purdy. He was an information technology teacher at a high school adjacent to her primary school, and it is my strong suspicion that he never entirely discarded his teenage fascination with role-playing games. The internet filled the hole in his life which had opened when his old university mates moved on from Dungeons & Dragons to golf. Although he and Meredith were together for many years, Adrian continued to live with his mother. This was largely because his mother took the view that couples who lived together before they were married did not deserve wedding presents. They had not, she said, sacrificed anything.

Jean Purdy had the long torso, short legs and lopsided gait that were, Adrian told Meredith, characteristic of female trolls. (Who were, Adrian told Meredith, the original ‘trollops’.) Meredith found it hard not to picture Jean — especially when she delivered her doubt-free treatises on everything from the sanctity of smacking children to the benefits of fibre, the cure for leaf-curl in lemon trees and the cheek of indigenous people expecting apologies for things done in their best interests — standing beneath a bridge, her skull knobbled with horns.

Jean was as hard and defined as a stone, and she left Meredith feeling bruised. Jean was loud, while Meredith spoke as if she might diminish her size by keeping her voice small. Jean began dieting discussions with the prefix, ‘Now I hope you won’t mind me saying, but …’ And behind those words Meredith heard the tearing of fabric, the ripping away of her veil of invisibility. Jean might as well have been saying: Of course they notice, Meredith … rip … Do you really think anybody could be looking at you…rip … and not be thinking…fat…fat…FAT!

After a while Meredith learned that when she heard ‘Now I hope you won’t mind me saying, but …’ it was time to go. Her body remained there — monumentally there — in Jean’s fussy Laura Ashley living room. But her mind departed the scene, leaving the

soft flesh of the body to absorb the blows.

What Jean Purdy's son Adrian loved about Meredith was her flesh. He loved every gram and kilogram of it, would not have cared if she put on more weight, just as long as she didn't lose too much. It would be losing, he told her, too much of her self. She told me once, quietly, out the side of one of her chubby hands, that he could not stop himself, during lovemaking, from grasping at handfuls of her. Although she asked him, embarrassed, not to do it, he couldn't help himself.

Adrian Purdy's hands, like the rest of him, were unnaturally pale. They were unworked hands, with fingernails as soft as flakes of mica. With those hands he kneaded her like a cat kneading a pillow into shape. On the rare occasion he stayed the night at her house, his body forming a pale fringe around her, his hands still plied her flesh in his sleep.

Once, Meredith decided to tell Adrian the truth about the elephants. Although he had known her for several years, he had given her only a single elephant item: a jaffle-iron with a hard plastic lid in the shape of an elephant's face. And it was while Meredith was using the jaffle-iron, after a morning in bed during which she had felt particularly close to him, that she realised it was the perfect moment to tell him. When he came out of the bathroom, she was going to say: Adrian, I love this jaffle-maker, I really do. But the truth is, I really HATE elephants. Isn't that funny? And she would laugh, and he would laugh, and they would laugh together in that kitchen-shaped bubble of intimacy. As it happened, Adrian Purdy emerged from the bathroom looking fixated and nervous. His pale hair was neatly combed at the sides but springing up at the crown. He put on his suede jacket and asked Meredith if they could skip breakfast, since there was something important they had to do.

Adrian drove, concentrating on the streets he travelled each day as if they had overnight become foreign. His soft nails flexed against the leather of the steering wheel. By the side of the river, he pulled over and turned to Meredith. Nervously, he fitted over her head the elastic of a sleeping mask. The sleeping mask was hers, she noted. She kept it in the bathroom for shutting out the light when she took long baths. She was momentarily put out that he had taken it without asking. When the car began to move again, Meredith could judge for a time, by the pattern of turns and roundabouts, where they were. Then she became uncertain, and lost her way.

After he parked, Adrian helped Meredith out of the car and took her by the hand. They walked a short way, and then she heard him whispering to someone and the sound of coins falling over each other into a pocket. He guided her through something that felt like a turnstile, cold metal touching her on her stomach and her flanks. She had to push herself through like a boiled egg through the neck of a bottle. Blindfolded, Meredith could smell food, and hear children. Adrian walked her along quickly, talking loudly about trust, and about the ability of the other senses to compensate rapidly for

the loss of sight.

‘Okay Mere, you can take it off now,’ he said.

First there was the sunlight, which made her blink. Then, as her eyes slowly focused, the images that confronted her appeared, between blinks, as if in a slide show. She could almost hear the slides shunting through the carousel. And these are the things she saw:

1. Directly in front of her, Adrian Purdy, down on one knee, a shivering bunch of white daisies in one hand. click

2. A small child in a striped jumper, and in the child’s hand, the stick of a toffee apple. The red bulb of the apple was swinging like a pendulum towards the earth, and the child’s mouth, smeared red, was opened in glee. click

3. Behind Adrian Purdy, a cyclone fence. click

4. Over the cyclone fence, reaching, coming towards the shoulder of Adrian Purdy’s suede jacket, a gently swaying prehensile trunk.

An elephant family is led by a matriarch, with the matriarch being the oldest and most experienced of the herd Elephant Information Repository

My Auntie Rhona, my mother’s oldest sister and Meredith’s mother, does not remember the debacle with the pig card in the newsagency. If Meredith were to tell her about the lasting impact of the incident, Rhona would laugh good-naturedly and say, ‘Oh, you silly girl! What funny things you remember!’ She regards Meredith as her easiest child. She was always compliant, malleable, even-tempered and happy. She could almost have been pretty, with her flawless skin and shining curls a hair’s breadth from black.

For Meredith’s twenty-fifth birthday, Rhona planned a special gift. She had framed for Meredith an enlarged photograph of a female elephant on her knees by a waterhole, her trunk wrapped around the torso of a calf sinking into the mire.

Rhona had been worried about her daughter. Although Meredith insisted she was fine, she had definitely been in low spirits since her abrupt and unexplained break-up with Adrian Purdy. Rhona was looking forward, in a quiet way, to the expression on Meredith’s face when she unwrapped the photograph at her birthday party. The image spoke to Rhona of the extraordinary strength of her love for her daughter, of her determination to pull her through any kind of difficulty. And she was sure that Meredith, who was, bless her, so fond of elephants, would understand the message implicit in that coiled trunk.

pink elephant

A hallucination, esp. as reputedly experienced by drunks Macquarie Dictionary

I was there on the night of Meredith's birthday dinner (my gift to her was a pen in the shape of an elephant's head, the nib extruding from the tip of its trunk) and it seemed to me that all of Meredith's gathered friends were wearing lipstick a shade too bright, or a tie with a cartoon character grinning a little too insanely. They were determined not to allow the celebration to be affected by the absence of Adrian, and so they had brought with them to the little Thai restaurant their brightest, most shiny selves. Katrina King, as the closest friend, took the lion's share of the responsibility for being in high spirits and kept putting her arm around Meredith's shoulders and squeezing tight.

Several of Meredith's friends were wondering why Meredith was not opening her birthday gifts. On a small table behind Meredith a pyramid was forming. At its base was a large flat parcel wrapped in handmade paper and affixed with a card that said with love from Mum. The fact was that Meredith was not opening her presents in case they robbed her of her resolve. She was going to do it. She had promised herself that she was going to stand up in front of her parents, her siblings, her closest friends and favourite colleagues, and confess to them that she did not particularly like elephants. And to this end, she had written for herself a speech:

Meredith's Speech

I have been searching for a collective noun for elephants. I know you're all thinking, It's a herd of elephants, Meredith! In my house, I have so many elephants that I need a collective noun larger than just four letters. I thought first of an 'engorgement' of elephants. Then I thought of a 'lumber' of elephants. Then I got it. What I have is a 'burden' of elephants.

You see, there has been a terrible mistake. I don't even really know myself how it started. Someone gave me an elephant, and then someone gave me another, and then everyone gave me elephants. I never chose elephants for myself, you see. I would not wish for you to think that I have not appreciated your gifts. Even if I am not especially fond of elephants, I am especially fond of all of you and I appreciate more than any material item in the world the love that came along with each and every one of those damned elephants. I have elephantiasis — the condition of being afflicted with too many elephants — and I ask you, as my family and my dearest friends, to help me find a cure.

Meredith's speech was short and, she hoped, sweet enough to save her — although she wondered if she should say the word 'damned' or leave it out for fear of offending

Katrina King’s fiancé, a religious minister in training.

It was a Tuesday night and the Thai restaurant was empty but for Meredith’s party, which took up a long, thin table, broken into thirds by two enormous lazy Susans. Meredith and her friends and family had chosen the banquet menu. Staff cleared the remains of the savoury courses, taking away plates with leftover blobs of sweet chilli sauce and squeezed wedges of lime. Dessert — bananas poached in sweet coconut milk, lychees and a selection of ice-creams — was still to come, but for a moment the table was empty except for wineglasses and splotches of curry sauce on the pink tablecloth.

Meredith chose this clear, foodless moment between courses to stand up, clear her throat and unfold the single piece of paper she had held all night in her pocket, feeling its dangerous secret against her thigh almost as if it were a gun in its holster. Once she was on her feet, and the gathering had fallen silent, Meredith’s bravado abandoned her. It left her standing, breathing heavily, thinking that perhaps she could just fold away the paper and say a few cobbled-together words of thanks and sit down again. Then she remembered Adrian Purdy at the zoo, kneeling between herself and an elephant named Bhutan, proposing marriage. Her resolve steeled again. She would have no more moments of her life destroyed by elephantiasis. So intent was she now upon her task that she ignored the noise going on in the restaurant foyer, and began.

‘I have been searching for a collective noun for elephants. I know you’re all thinking, It’s a herd of elephants, Meredith!’

Sherrilyn Grey, a highly strung teacher’s aide who spent Thursday afternoons in Meredith’s room, emitted a snort of suppressed laughter. Meredith smiled appreciatively at Sherrilyn’s acknowledgment of her wit.

‘In my house, I have so many elephants that I need a collective noun larger than just four letters —’

The restaurant’s sound system began to crackle with the first touch of a needle on vinyl and Meredith looked up to find that she had not had, and did not have, the attention of her guests. They were looking towards the foyer door as if they had become wax effigies of themselves.

The speakers nearly burst with the opening chords of a tune. It isn’t, thought Meredith. And then she thought, Oh God, it is. And it was: The Baby Elephant Walk. Through the doorway came a saggy, baggy pink elephant. It was an elephant in two halves, like a circus horse, and the rear end was jack-knifing dangerously to the left. The guests on the opposite side of the table to where Meredith was standing parted in order to make room for the swaggering animal to approach.

The pink suit split in two. The halves rumpled to the floor in two candy-pink shag-pile cocoons around the feet of blond men — their bronzed backs and buttocks bared — who swayed to comic lurches of the music. Hands clasped firmly over their crotches, they leaped onto the table and took their places on the twin lazy Susans. When they removed their hands, and spun around to face Meredith, she saw elephant ears fanning out over the elegram boys' washboard stomachs, the black circles inside plastic toy eyes spiralling inside their casing, turning around and around in time with the trunks, the long, grey, pink-tipped trunks rotating like tassels on a showgirl's nipples.

Sherrilyn Grey was laughing so hard — mouth open, body shuddering — that her laugh had become soundless. Katrina King was dabbing at the corner of her eyes with a serviette which was almost the same shade as the electric blue mascara that was seeping down under her eyelids. Her fiancé doubled over in his seat and the skin on his face changed to the same colour as the hair of his silk-tie Yosemite Sam. The elegram boys swung their trunks to the left in unison, then the right in unison, then in opposite directions. They threw their trunks in the air and made trumpeting sounds. They smiled. Their perfect teeth glittered.

Auntie Rhona was feigning shock, hands over her eyes. The Thai waitresses in their narrow split-skirts of emerald green lined up along the bar, watching the spectacle, shrieking with mirth. The elegram boys performed the final flourish of their routine before leaping down from the table and positioning themselves to pose for photographs with the birthday girl. They flanked her tremendous bulk like a pair of pink and bronze bookends, their shimmering chests heaving lightly. For quite a long time nobody, not even those with their cameras trained on Meredith and the elegram boys, not even me (I am ashamed to say), but not Auntie Rhona either, noticed that Meredith — her face creased, her cheeks marked by slender tracks of tears — wasn't laughing.