

ELIOT WEINBERGER

## The Rhinoceros

### I.

From the newspaper *Ka Lama Hawai'i*, Lahaina Luna, February 21, 1834:

No Ka Laehaokela  
[About the Rhinoceros]

1. O ka Elepani wale no ka mea i oi aku kona nui mamua o ka Laehaokela. Eono paha kapuai kona kiekie a he umikumamalua ka loihi, a he umikumamaha kekahi.

[The Elephant is the only animal larger than the Rhinoceros. The Rhinoceros is about six feet in height and twelve feet in length. Some reach fourteen feet.]

2. Ua loihi loa kona kino, a ua nui; ua pokole kona mau wawae; ua manoanoa hoi; a ua kaumaha; ua palahalaha kona pepeiao, a ku pono iluna; ua oi aku kona lehelehe luna mamua o ka lehelehe lalo; ua uuku kona mau maka ua mimino nui loa kona ili, e like me ka lole manoanoa, i hoalualuia; ua loihi kona nuku, a malaila kona pepeiaohao nui, ikaika loa; a ua pokole kona kapuai, a ekolu no manamana.

[His body is very long and large; his legs are short; he is thick and heavy; his ears are flat yet stand straight up; his upper lip protrudes over his lower lip; his eyes are small and his skin is very wrinkled, like thick cloth that is gathered; his snout is long, and on it is his large, extremely sturdy horn; he has short, three-toed feet.

3. O kona pepeiaohao hookahi, ma ka nuku, oia kona haokela; oia hoi kona mea kaua aku i ka Liona, a me ka Elepani, a me ka Tiga, a me na ilio e ae. No kona ikaika loa, e hiki no ia ia ke hou aku i ka laau nui a puka no i kela aoao, e like me ka hou ana o ke kui laau iloko o ka uwala.

[As for that single hard protuberance upon his snout, that is his great horn; it is the weapon with which he battles the Lion, the Elephant, the Tiger, and other four-legged animals. Because of his great strength, he is able to pierce a large piece of wood clean through, like a nail poking through a sweet potato.]

4. O ka mauu ka ai a ka Laehaokela, a e ai no hoi ia i ke kakalaioa a me ka lala laau, a me ke ko, a me ke kurina, a me na mea maka a pau e like me ka

nahelehele.

[The Rhinoceros eats grass, but will also eat thorny brambles, tree branches, sugar cane, corn, and all other green things such as bushes.]

5. Ua oi kona lehelehe luna, a e hiki no ia ia ke o aku ia mea, i hookahi kapuai paha, a me ia no ia i holiili ai kana ai.

[His upper lip is pointed, and he is able to stick it out reaching perhaps a foot or so, and that is how he gathers his food.]

6. Aole ia e kolohe mai ke kolohe ole iaku ia, aka, ina kii aku kekahi ilio ia ia, a o ke kanaka paha, alaila, hihui loa la Laehaokela, aole hoi he mea i oi aku ka ikaika i ka hakaka ana. No kona ikaika, a no kona akamai i ka hou aku me kona haokela, aole hiki ka Elepani ke lanakila maluna ona, a he hapa ka makau o ke Tiga i ka Elepani, he nui kona makau i ka Laehaokela.

[He will not bother you if he is left alone, but should another animal, or human perhaps, approach him, the Rhinoceros becomes extremely vicious, and there is nothing stronger in a fight. Because he is so strong and skilled in wielding his great horn, the Elephant cannot triumph over him. The fear a Tiger feels for the Elephant is but half of what he feels for the Rhinoceros.]

7. No ka manoanoa loa o kona ili, aole e komo nui ka maiuu o ka Liona a me ke Tiga.

[Because his skin is so thick, the claws of the Lion or Tiger will barely pierce him.]

8. Aia maloko o na ululaaui o Asia a me Aferika kahi e holo nui ai ka Laehaokela; ma kahi haahaa ma kahi wai; no ka mea, makemake loa ia e haluku maloko o na kiolepo, e like me ka puua.

[The Rhinoceros roams mainly in the forests of Asia and Africa, in low-lying wet areas, because he loves to wallow in mud holes, as does the pig.]

9. E hiki no ke hoolaka iki i ka Laehaokela, a noho malie ia maloko o ka pa; e hiki no ke ao iki aku ia ia i ka hana. Aole nae ia i akamai, ua hemahema no, kokoke like me ka puua.

[One is able to tame a Rhinoceros a little so that he will live quietly in an enclosure; it is also possible to teach him to perform some tasks. However, he is not intelligent but rather inept, almost like the pig.]

10. E ai no na Inikini a me ko Aferika i kona io, a olelo lakou, ua ono.

[Indians and Africans eat of his flesh and claim it to be delicious.]

11. He mea maikai loa kona ili, no ka manoanoa a no ka oolea. O kona haokela, he laaulapaau ia, i ka poe naaupō.

[His hide is very good both for its thickness and durability. His great horn is of medicinal value, according to the ignorant.]

12. Makemake no ia, e hele wale me ka mehameha; no kona hupo loa, aole lealea ke hele pu me kekahi Laehaokela. O ka haluku maloko o ko lepo, o ka ai i ka ai, a me ka hiamoe, o kana mau mea lealea no ia.

[He likes to travel alone, and because of his extreme stupidity, he does not find pleasure in traveling with another Rhinoceros. Wallowing in mud, eating, and sleeping are his pleasures.]

13. E kanalua paha kekahi me ka ninau mai, “Ua hanaia ke Laehaokela, i mea aha?”

[Uncertain, one might ask, “Why, then, was the Rhinoceros created?”]

## II.

The first rhinoceros in Europe in the 1300 years after the fall of the Roman empire arrived in Lisbon on May 20, 1515, a gift from Sultan Muzaffar II of Gujarat to Afonso de Albuquerque, governor of Portuguese India, as a consolation prize, after refusing to allow the Portuguese to build a fortress on the island of Diu. Albuquerque, in turn sent it on to his king, Dom Manuel I, “The Fortunate,” a connoisseur of the exotic. Dom Manuel quickly put to the test Pliny’s famous assertion that the rhinoceros and the elephant are deadly enemies, and that the rhinoceros would run under the legs of the elephant, ripping open the tender underbelly with its horn. Both were placed in a rink on the third of June. The rhinoceros stood motionless, and the elephant walked away.

Nevertheless, the rhinoceros was a sensation. Within two months, a doctor in Florence published a paean to it, in twenty-one stanzas of ottava rima. The Emperor Maximilian had a rhinoceros drawn in the margin of his prayer book; Raphael placed one in a fresco of the Creation of the Animals in the Vatican. Someone, it is not known who, sent a sketch of the animal to Albrecht Dürer in Nuremberg, whose heavily armored version— Dürer was a

designer of armor– remained the standard image of the rhinoceros for centuries, though Dürer never saw one.

In December 1515, Dom Manuel demonstrated his piety by sending the rhinoceros as a gift to Pope Leo X. The rhinoceros was dressed as a bride with a gilt chain and a green velvet harness decorated with roses and carnations and edged with fringe. On the way, the ship stopped at an island off Marseilles, where the rhinoceros was presented to the King and Queen of France as part of an elaborate battle pageant, with oranges for cannonballs. The ship sank in a storm on the Genoa coast in January. The carcass of the animal was found on the beach, stuffed, and taken to Rome.

The second rhinoceros in Europe came to Lisbon in 1579, as a gift to the Spanish King Phillip II, who now ruled Portugal and had temporarily moved his court from Madrid. An Italian in the court wrote a letter home that the rhinoceros is “beyond the imagination of anyone who has not seen it”; he compared it to Petrarch’s Laura.

When Phillip returned to Madrid in 1583, the rhinoceros went with him, and was often displayed in the garden of the Escorial. It was described by a visitor as “curious, melancholy, and sad,” and after it suddenly charged and overturned a carriage carrying royal guests, its horn was cut off and its eyes put out.

In 1607, the Reverend Edward Topsell, who had never seen a rhinoceros, wrote that it is “a beast in every way admirable; both for the outward shape, quantity, and greatness, and also for inward courage, disposition, and mildness.” Topsell, somewhat contradictorily, repeated the legend, taken from the unicorn, that the wild beast could only be captured by a virgin maiden, for the smell of virginity makes it fall asleep. Marco Polo, who had seen rhinoceroses in captivity in China, had said this wasn’t true.

By the time of the third rhinoceros in Europe, 1684, the Spanish and Portuguese empires had waned and the British was rising, so the animal was sent to London. Typical of the new world order, it was not a bauble for kings or popes, but a commercial enterprise, on exhibit for twelve pence a head, or two shillings if you wanted to attempt to ride it. The rhinoceros died within two years.

The fourth rhinoceros in Europe, in 1739, was also in London and also a commercial spectacle, the price having now risen, after seventy years, to two shillings sixpence for a look. James Parsons gave a detailed report to the Royal Society: “He appeared very peaceable in his Temper; for he bore to be handled in any Part of his Body; but is outrageous when struck or hungry, and is pacified in either Case only by giving him Victuals.” Parsons notes its

extraordinary sensitivity to “any Noise or Rumour in the Street”; in 18th-century London, these must have been considerable. “In his Outrage he jumps about, and springs to an incredible height, driving his Head against the Walls of the Place with great Fury and Quickness, notwithstanding his lumpish Aspect.”

The fifth rhinoceros in Europe, perhaps the most famous rhinoceros who ever lived, the cause of a continental “rhinomania,” was trapped in the Kingdom of Assam, presented to the director of the Dutch East India Company in Bengal, and sent to Holland in 1741. It toured Europe for sixteen years.

In Berlin, Frederick the Great viewed the rhinoceros at a fish stall in the Spittelmarkt and left a tip of eighteen ducats. He later insisted that his friend Voltaire strike out a sentence in the *Philosophical Dictionary*, arguing against the Newtonian theory of the “intelligent design” of all creatures: “Modern natural philosophers have found God in the folds of the skin of the rhinoceros.” Voltaire complied.

In Vienna, the Empress Maria Theresa came down from her country house, Schloss Schönbrunn, to see it, and made its owner, a Dutch sea captain, a Baron of the Empire. The boy Archduke Karl Joseph was painted on a miniature holding a book with a drawing of a rhinoceros. In Dresden, at the Red Stag near the Prina Gate, Augustus III, King of Poland and Elector of Saxony, and his heir, the sickly Elector Prince, came for a viewing. In Leipzig, the popular hack poet, Christian Fürchtegott Gellert wrote a poem about it, and the scholar Friedrich Gotthilf Freytag, a pamphlet in Latin with quotations in Greek. In Mannheim, the Elector Palatine, Carl Theodor, came with his heir presumptive, Duke Christian IV of Zweibrücken, the Duke’s brother, Prince Frederick Michael, and their wives. In Strasbourg, three commemorative medals were struck; in Nuremberg, a medal was struck weighing 5,000 pounds. In Würzburg it was given the nickname “Miss Clara,” which stuck. In Versailles, its owner tried to sell it for 100,000 écus to Louis XV, but the king refused.

Ormolu rhinoceros clocks, coins, ribbons *à la rhinocéros*, rhinoceros dummies at royal wedding pageants, rhinoceros hairdos with a feather horn. Casanova tells an improbable story of his current mistress mistaking the rhino’s dark-skinned and “very masculine” attendant for the rhinoceros itself; Jean-Baptiste Oudry paints it for the collection of the Duke of Mecklenburg-Schwerin; Buffon includes it in his *Natural History*.

In Lyons, rumors that it had killed five people and then died from the “heat of love”; in Naples the Marquis d’Argenson spreads the rumor that it had perished in a shipwreck off the coast. Rome, Florence, Bologna, Venice for the Carnival. Pietro Longhi and his school are commissioned to paint it many times: surrounded by visitors in masks, standing next to the Irish giant, Magrath. In London, Miss Clara is exhibited as an “Uncommon Natural

Curiosity, “ along with two dwarfs, a Negro contortionist, and a crocodile. Warsaw, Danzig, Cracow, Copenhagen.

Rhinos on Gobelin tapestries, in a fresco in the Garden Room of the Schloss Ober St. Veit, rhinos on delftware drug jars with the arms of the Worshipful Society of Apothecaries, on Sinceny faience table tops, on the Northumberland Service of Meissen porcelain, Chelsea oval dishes, tureen stands for the Japanese Service of Frederick the Great, Saxon enameled humpens, Schapen glass bun-footed beakers, and Dresden goblets with half-nude Moorish girls; bronze and marble sculptures of rhinos, and shell collages; rhinos on inlaid Marquetry card tables, Venetian green lacquer bureau-cabinets, bouille table tops, chessboards of tortoiseshell and mother-of-pearl, gold and piqué snuffboxes, verre églomisé panels on giltwood stands, rhino bookplates and title-pages, rhino allegorical paintings. The colors of the Saxony-Altenburg Infantry Regiment are a rhinoceros standing by a palm tree, with the legend “Non recedo nisi vincam,” “I return not unless I have conquered.”

The sixth rhinoceros in Europe arrived in France in 1790, after an arduous journey in which it was regularly rubbed down with fish oil to keep its skin moist. It lived a quiet life alone in Versailles for twenty-three years, with its own shelter and pool of water, rarely noticed, and unaffected by the Revolution and the Terror.

The seventh rhinoceros in Europe was acquired in 1790 for Pidcock’s Exhibition of Wild Beasts at Exeter Change in the Strand in London, the place where William Blake may have seen his only tiger. It was displayed with “three stupendous ostriches,” and George III summoned it for a viewing at the Queen’s Lodge. It died within two years. The Reverend W. Bingley wrote: “His docility was about equal to that of a tolerably tractable pig. He was very fond of sweet wines, of which he would often drink three or four bottles in the course of a few hours. His voice was not much unlike the bleating of a calf. It was most commonly exerted when the animal observed any person with fruit or other favorite food in his hand. During the severe illness which preceded his death, this noise, but in a more melancholy tone, was almost constantly heard, occasioned doubtless by the agonies he underwent.” The animal was stuffed and continued to be exhibited around England for many years.

The eighth rhinoceros in Europe, acquired by Pidcock in 1799, was soon sold to the Emperor of Germany, Francis II. Awaiting shipment across a war-torn Europe, rarely seen, it died a few months later, in a stable on Drury Lane.

### III.

Editorial note, *Journal of the Royal African Society*, April, 1924:

The British people have in the last hundred years wrought great changes for the better in Africa. They have abolished slavery for the negro and have induced other great nations of white people to do the same. They have taken the leading part in placing the interior of Africa on the map; have produced that remarkable work *The Flora of Tropical Africa*, and added enormously to our knowledge of African peoples and their history, African languages, and African zoology. But in one direction they will have incurred the severe blame of civilized posterity: their reckless, sometimes brutal extermination of the more interesting African mammals. Their latest victim is the white or square-lipped rhinoceros. This truly remarkable and harmless monster a hundred years ago swarmed in Southern Africa between the Orange River and Zululand, the course of the Zambezi, and Southern Angola. Livingstone met with it on the Upper Zambezi close to the Congo watershed. Speke and Grant obtained specimens of its horns in the west of Uganda. But in Trans-Zambezian Africa, Boer and mainly British sportsmen steadily shot it down (though it was of little or no use for any purpose), until at the beginning of the twentieth century its numbers were reduced in all South Africa to a herd of twenty which found refuge in North Zululand.

In Equatorial East Africa the white rhinoceros was thought to be extinct; but about 1907 or 1908 it was re-discovered, north of Uganda in the southern part of the Bahr-el-ghazal Province. Here, close to the Nile, near Lado, Colonel Roosevelt was permitted to shoot two or three specimens for American museums.

In 1919 a British official on the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan computed its numbers at not quite 3,000. Up to that period it was placed under strict protection by the Sudan authorities. Two or three years later this protection was removed or not enforced, and Dr. Cuthbert Christy now estimates the extent of its "killing out" so highly that he declares there are scarcely one hundred of these beasts left alive. A Government Game Ward in South Africa accuses the Natal Government of similar negligence or indifference, and declares that the white rhinoceroses in the Zululand preserve have been reduced by British game-killers from twenty to a doubtful twelve. One man alone killed four. What angers the American naturalists especially is the silence of the British press while the white rhinoceros is being done to death.

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*Mongalla, 1st August, 1924*

*To the Editor of the Journal of the Royal African Society.*

Dear Sir,

[. . .]

This is a most unfair attack on the Game Preservation Department of the Sudan and on the officials stationed there. The exceptional co-operation of all officials with the Game Preservation Department make the carrying out of game laws in the Sudan the admiration of sportsmen and naturalists and the disgust of all butchers of game. No American or Press aid is necessary for the protection of the White Rhino. In fact he was probably never so numerous as he is to-day since the Lado was administered by the Sudan Government.

Dr. Christy's alleged "killing out," therefore, requires some amplification in order to be taken seriously by anyone possessing even an elementary knowledge of the subject and I challenge him to support his statement by facts.

I remain, Sir,

Your obedient servant,

G. G. Carpenter,

*Captain,*

*The Suffolk Regiment,*

*attached, Equatorial Battalion,  
East Africa*

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February 6th, 1925

*To the Editor of the Journal of the Royal African Society.*

Dear Sir,

My attention has just been drawn to a letter, dated August 1924, from Capt. Carpenter, stationed at Mongalla in the Upper Sudan, with reference to the subject of the regrettable "killing out" of the White Rhinoceros, and published in the *Journal* of October last.

Owing to my being in America from June to November the letter in question escaped my notice, and I hasten to repudiate any desire to attack or criticise the Sudan Game Preservation Department, with which Capt. Carpenter apparently wishes to embroil me. He does not mention where "Dr. Christy's sweeping statement" is to be found in print, if published at all, nor has he a good word to say for the White Rhinoceros, which most of us who are aware of the facts know is a diminishing species, though still a fairly common animal over a wide range of country between the Upper Nile and French Equatorial Africa. Few persons have travelled up and down over more of this



particular region than I have, and I am able to tell Capt. Carpenter how the case for the White Rhinoceros stands.

Everywhere he is decreasing in numbers, the natives south-west of the Nile-Congo Divide spearing a great many annually for the price of their horns. Throughout the Welle region of the Congo, after the annual grass fires have opened up the country, the bleached bones of these animals are common and conspicuous objects amongst the burnt and blackened surroundings. [. . .]

If Capt. Carpenter wishes to know what I myself have said on the subject he may refer to the chapter on the White Rhinoceros in my *Big Game and Pygmies*, published in April 1924. [. . .]

No large animal in my opinion is less harmful, less dangerous, and more easily shot than is this comparatively defenceless walking gargoye of the bush.

I am, Sir,

Yours faithfully,

CUTHBERT CHRISTY

#### IV.

African black rhino, c. 1900: 2,000,000 -3,000,000.

African black rhino, c 1970: 65,000

African black rhino, c 2000: 3,600

Between 1970 and 1987, 85% of the world's population of rhinos were killed.

Northern white rhino: 25 left, *extinction inevitable*.

Javan rhino: 60 left, *extinction inevitable*.

Sumatran rhino: 300 left, *extinction probable*.

Indian rhino: 1700 left, *declining rapidly*.

Southern white rhino: 4,600 left, *preservation possible*.

#### V.

In the British Library there is a box of fragments and dust from a birch bark scroll buried two thousand years ago on the Jalalabad Plain, west of the Khyber Pass. It is the oldest known Buddhist text, written in the Gandharan language. Some of the chips contain only a single letter, but the scholars have pieced them together to reconstruct a sutra:

Doing no violence to living things, not even a single one of them, wander alone like a rhinoceros.

Affection comes from the company of people, misery comes from affection,

wander alone like a rhinoceros.

The old bamboo is entangled, the young shoot is unattached, wander alone like a rhinoceros.

A deer goes to eat where it wants to eat, wander alone like a rhinoceros.

Give up your children and your wives and your money, wander alone like a rhinoceros.

Everyone wants your attention, wander alone like a rhinoceros.

Two bright bangles on an arm clang, a single bangle is silent, wander alone like a rhinoceros.

A bird who has torn the net, wander alone like a rhinoceros.

Fire does not return to what it has burnt, wander alone like a rhinoceros.

A tiger is not alarmed by sounds in the forest, wander alone like a rhinoceros.

Cold and heat, hunger and thirst, wander alone like a rhinoceros.

With eyes cast down, wander alone like a rhinoceros.

At home anywhere, wander alone like a rhinoceros.

*From An Elemental Thing, New Directions, 2007*

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