

J A M E S D O Y L E

Exhibition of a Rhinoceros at Venice

It is 1741, the first time a living
rhinoceros is brought to Europe.

The rhinoceros is led around the courtyard
at the palace of the Doge. A masquerade

ball is taking place. The rhinoceros, who
began history as a unicorn but couldn't

stop taking on armor, blinks at the masks
that approach him and recede in waves.

Some are of wild beasts, some of ancient
spirits. In the corners of his eyes,

glints of light come and go. He cannot
know they are jewels on the hands that brush

his hide quickly and withdraw. The candles
cast his dark armor in twisting shapes

that could be from the jungle. The costumes
of the revellers move in and out of view.

Hoods draw the ivory faces tighter
and tighter. The faces can't stop flickering

as if hesitant light were their mime and chant.

They dance in a circle. The rhinoceros

is at the center, the dark sheen of the past.

The evening is a great success. The Doge

raises a toast to the company, kisses

the hand of his mistress. His servants

wind through the candelabra and guests,

prod the rhinoceros into his burnished cage.

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