

Dürer's Rhinoceros

1515

The imagination, improvising, translated burly leather
into an overcoat of armor, converted brawn to iron.
For wrinkled folds, die-tooled metal plates
secured with welded struts. For mottled hide,
stamped medallions and, bellywise, rippling bursts
like sunspots Galileo's glass would mark a century hence.
A submarine should be riveted so impeccably.
A Swiss vault should be this stoutly tamperproof.

Chimerical and mechanical, one foot in biology
and the other in technology, Europe's debut rhino
poses on a patch of stylized turf, outsize toenails
planted squarely at the crosshatched intersection
of hearsay, surmise, awe, and steely virtuosity.
Making the most of slender evidence, the Master erred
on the side of industrial-strength intimidation:
spiked shanks, serrated hindquarters, vulcanized anatomy.

Where brute facts are lacking, exactitude takes refuge
in preternatural convictions. Here, the prevailing temper
called for ornament to shade into armament;
ascertained a galvanizing center of gravity
in a lordly girth; branded the newfangled implacable.
Here, the spirit of revelation elevated the nubby backup horn
to an exalted position, plucked from the creature's snout
and stuck between the shoulder blades, a crowning touch.

Did he clank when he walked? Could he, so much as
 his mistakenly furry ears under all that battlegear?
 Let us not dare to read the mind of the Almighty.
 The chronicles only tell us he was to be a king's gift
 to the Pope, an impenetrable marvel doomed to perish
 in a shipwreck en route to Rome. Lost to the deeps,
 he's already a full-blown apparition in the woodcut—
 a wonder reconstructed, a secondhand stab at a likeness.

Palm-frond tail, barnacled jowl, muttonchops of bony
 matter—

no question, he's more than a little clownish, our poor
 tinhorn monster: a bulky hyperbole, a Falstaff on all fours.
 Oh, but look him up and down, and it's amply evident
 allegedness has worked a certain alchemy on him.
 Shackle or tether would be superfluous: his fearsomeness
 has gone the way of all flesh, all this staggering regalia
 houses a will-o'-the-wisp. Lapidary in its declivity,

his one eye's neither wary nor bellicose. In the shop,
 he scanned sinewy fallen angels harvesting lost souls.
 Inked into his element, the perspective is reversed,
 and he broods, a dour nightwatchman, on the prickly heavens.
 He's built to outlast edicts and categorical imperatives.
 Taxonomy can't touch him now. His burden's to be wise
 to the whispers that he's altogether otherworldly,
 he who was immortalized as a champion of the earthbound.