

Dürer &
the rhinoceros

tanya desai



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cover image: Dürer, Albrecht.

The Rhinoceros.

1515

Woodcut on laid paper

National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

book design: Vidura Jang Bahadur

migration
stories

The Migration Stories Chapbook Series, 2019

Drawn from the community at and around the University of Chicago

Edited by Rachel Cohen and Rachel DeWoskin

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Tach Christus gepurt. 1513. Jar. Abt. i. May. Hat man dem großmichtigen König von Portugal Emanuel den Königin pracht auß India ein sollich lebendig Thier. Das nennen sie Rhinoceros. Das ist hie mit aller suner alt Andersoner. Es hat ein farb wie ein gepackte Schildkröt. Und ist vñ dicken Schalen vberlegt fast fest. Und ist in der größ als der Sclafant über nyderrechter von paynen/ und fast wech afftig. Es hat ein scharff klaff Horn vom auff der nase/ Das begynde es allge zu wegen wo es bey steynen ist. Das dößig Thier ist des Sclafant tödt feindt. Der Sclafant suchet es fast vber/ dann wo es In ankumbe/ so laufft In das Thier mit dem kopff zwelchen drey so dem payn und reyt den Sclafant vnden am pauch auff n erweigt. In des mag er sich nit erren. Dann das Thier ist also gewapent/ Das In der Sclafant nicht kan thun. Sie sagen auch das der Rhinoceros Schindl/ staydig und listig sey.

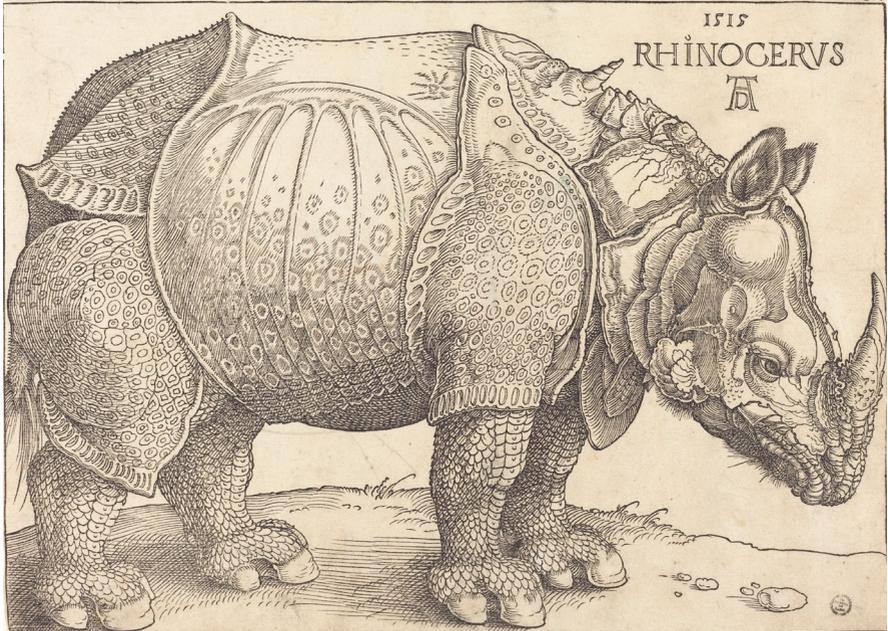


Figure 1. Dürer, Albrecht. *The Rhinoceros*. 1515. Woodcut on laid paper. National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

I. India to Portugal, 1515

Twenty years after the opening of the sea-route from Lisbon to Calicut, a rhinoceros was brought aboard a ship in the docks of Goa. During the loading of the usual cargo of cinnamon, pepper and nutmeg onto the ship, the rhinoceros must have stood on the deck, the sea-breeze stirring the folds of its skin for the first time, the sixteenth-century horizon expanding before its eyes, till it was taken down to the hold with the rest of the tradable goods. There, in the dimness of its makeshift pen, the days of the voyage bled one into another. Ears pricking, attentive to the rhythms of the human bustle, it passed its time, snuffling stale grass, shifting around uncomfortably in the cramped space, cowering with uneasy

dreams during storms, until on May 20, 1515, it finally lumbered down the gangplank into the dazzling Portuguese sun – the first rhinoceros to discover Europe.

The animal had been taken from its Indo-Gangetic wallowing grounds to serve as a gift from the sultan of Gujarat to the governor of the new Portuguese India. The governor had, in turn, sent it on this long sea-journey to please the king. Dom Manuel I, already in possession of a large bestiary culled from his nation's widening trade network, would, six months later, ship the animal onward to Rome to cement his standing with Pope Leo X. Hobnobbing with the nobility of two continents, the rhinoceros physically traced the colonial map of its era.

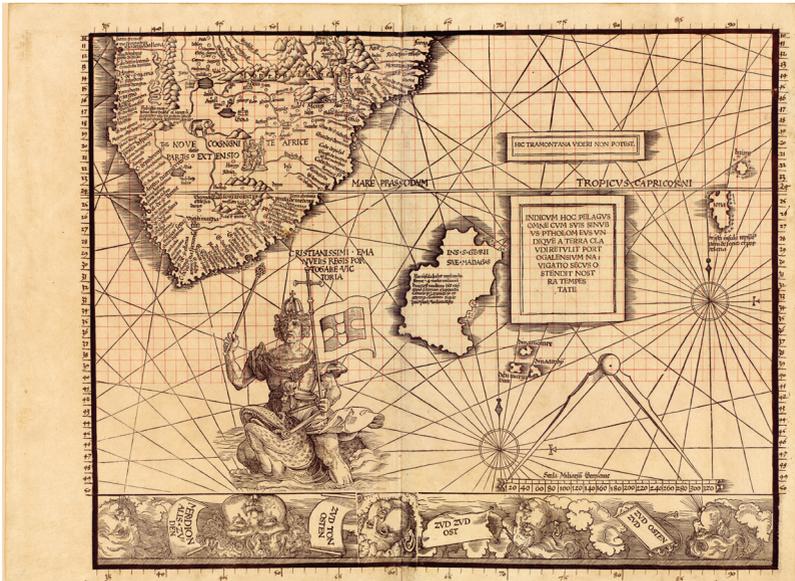


Fig 2. (Detail) Waldseemüller, Martin. *Carta Marina*. 1516. Woodcut. Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

In 1516, under commission of the Portuguese king, the German cartographer Martin Waldseemüller produced the *Carta Marina*, twelve sheets of woodcuts sub-titled “a nautical chart that comprehensively shows the Portuguese voyages, and the shape of the whole known world.” On the map, under the recently circumnavigated Cape of Good Hope, Dom Manuel I, self-proclaimed *Lord of the Conquest and Navigation and Commerce of Ethiopia, Arabia and India*, is presented astride a sea monster. The oceans lie flat and still on the map, their waves subdued by authoritative navigational lines. But, framing the edges of the

world are depictions of the wind gods, capable at any moment of disrupting these lines, written in wood, and changing the courses of men and rhinoceroses. Within the coastlines of knowledge, the lands are bristling with rumor, with tribes of monstrous races, dog-faced and cow-footed men as well as cannibals roasting a leg. The rhinoceros blown into Lisbon in the summer of 1515 was considered one such fabulous creature. Its European disembarkment engendered a flurry of descriptions and sketches among merchants and traders. One of these was inside a letter that soon reached the house of the German artist Albrecht Dürer in Nuremberg.

II. Dürer's Animals

Well-rooted under the red sloping roofs of the walled city that bordered an imperial forest, Dürer was already attentive to the creatures and plants within the range of his perambulations. In his watercolor paintings from the first decade of the century, animals began to step out of their medieval heraldic poses and, stretching their limbs and shaking out their fur, to enter into the light of Renaissance perspectival art. To the south in Florence, over the past decade, Da Vinci had been elbow-deep in the entrails of cows and criminals, pulling muscles to make legs twitch, discovering the



Figure 3 (Detail) Dürer, Albrecht. *Young Hare*. 1502. Watercolor. The Albertina Museum, Vienna.



Figure 4. (Detail) Dürer, Albrecht. *The Great Piece of Turf*. 1503. Watercolor. The Albertina Museum, Vienna.

workings of biology to transfer the spark of life to art. On an early trip to Venice, Dürer absorbed the anatomical stirrings of Italian art, and would later call for artists to observe life in nature, to “look at it diligently, follow it, and do not turn way from nature to your own good thoughts...For verily, art is embedded in nature” (*Treatise on Proportions*, 1523). In a 1502 watercolor, a passing hare becomes the artist’s familiar, its nose twitching and eyes hooded in annoyance at being peered at by the artist until the contour of its hind muscles, the cartilage of its ears and the feel of its hair could be delivered by his brushwork. Dürer’s painting from

the following year, *The Great Piece of Turf*, attests to days spent by the artist, in Italian plain air style, bent down on the muddy earth by a riverbed in observation of a reclusive patch of weeds.

Dürer's engravings of this period seem to expose the existence of a minute infrastructure of lines etched under the paint of the watercolors. The intricate grooves that charted out the surface of the world in the *Carta Marina*, here support the fine textures of fur and vegetation. By 1515, when Dürer began to carve in wood the newest trundling visitor to the continent, he had reached the apogee of his skill with a burin



Figure 5. (Detail) Dürer, Albrecht. *Knight, Death and the Devil*. 1513. Engraving. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Figure 6. (Detail) Dürer, Albrecht. *Melencolia*. 1514. Engraving. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

and was already recognized for his three great engravings—*Knight, Death and the Devil*, *Melencolia I* and *St. Jerome in His Study*. Each image exemplifies a way of life—action, art and study—presented through an ideal persona in a symbolic

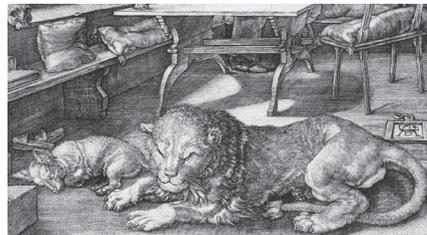


Figure 7. (Detail) Dürer, Albrecht. *St. Jerome in His Study*. 1514. Engraving. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York..

habitat and in the company of a dog. The luckiest of the three canine companions gets to doze under the dappled shadow of St. Jerome's study windows,

imbibing the concentration of its master, irritably pushing away the heavy crowding paw of a lion. Though mellowed by gratitude to the saint for taking a tormenting thorn out of his paw, the lion in the room suffers the further passivity of not being drawn from life. Dürer would not get to see a live lion until his visit to the Ghent zoo five years after this engraving.

III. Two Cheetahs

Long before the navigation of the seas, the land route between Europe, Arabia and Africa was trafficked with lions, camels, giraffes and cheetahs on



Figure 8. (Detail) Titian. *Bacchus and Ariadne*. 1520-3. Oil on Canvas. National Gallery, London.

diplomatic missions. European princes and aristocrats owned expansive bestiaries and loved to lean over the belvederes of their palaces to look at the wild denizens of their own Edens. The Duke of Ferrara, one such ruler over a collected animal empire, commissioned the then-young Venetian artist Titian to make a painting for his residence in 1522. It was to take for its subject the ancient myth of the return of Bacchus from India, revitalized by the contemporary spirit of imperial discovery. The triumphant Bacchus, with his band of drunkards and satyrs, comes across the abandoned Ariadne, and the look that Titian arrests between the lovers is mirrored in the curious glance between the two cheetahs drawing the carriage. Brought out from the Duke's bestiary, tamed and acquiescent through the years of pacing a courtyard, the cheetahs were perhaps paraded in front of the artist poised with his tinted oils, and then were led, to their astonishment, directly into the painting's tableau vivant. There, the warm yellow of their fur gathered the dust of the long roads from India to Greece.

IV. The Rhinoceros in Lisbon

When the rhinoceros joined the ranks of these pioneering beasts and arrived in Lisbon, it was housed in a stable in the Ribeira Palace where it made the



Figure 9. (Detail) Dürer, Albrecht. *The Rhinoceros*. 1515. Woodcut on laid paper. National Gallery of Art, Washington. D.C.

acquaintance of the rest of the royal menagerie. By this time, owing to the exploits of the trading company Casa de India, this included herds of elephants and gazelles, a lonely cheetah, and a noisy aviary. The year before, in 1514, seven elephants had been



Figure 10. (Detail) Dürer, Albrecht. *The Rhinoceros*. 1515. Woodcut on laid paper. National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

captured by the Portuguese in a battle in Malacca. Like the city, the elephants changed masters and the sum of their creaking weight had made its way to the Portuguese shore.

The nose-horned newcomer warranted research. In the palace's extensive library lay Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia* and it contained a one-paragraph entry on the rhinoceros, calling the animal the "natural enemy of the elephant," describing how the rhinoceros would sharpen its horn on a stone and charge at the elephant, aiming for its underside, "which he knows to be more tender than the rest." Tickled by this depiction and fancying a revived connection with the imperial prestige of the Graeco-Roman world, Dom Manuel arranged a tournament between the rhinoceros and one of the elephants. On the Sunday of Holy Trinity, ten days into the rhinoceros' stay in Lisbon, two big grey mammals, roped into human schemes, faced each other, representatives of their kind. The young elephant, freshly conscripted from its herd, was used to grazing its days away in the King's yard. Pushed onto the field of combat, it turned skittish and fled. The rhinoceros, stomping around, still finding its feet on land after the swaying of the seas, looked on at the elephant's retreating behind amicably, and preserved its ancient reputation.

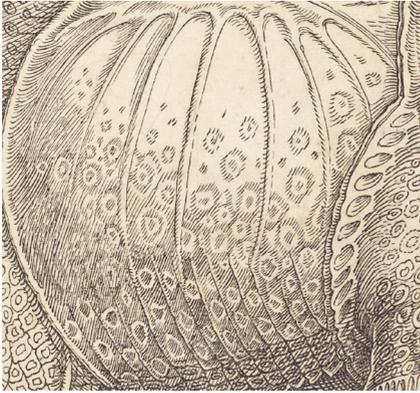


Figure 11. (Detail) Dürer, Albrecht. *The Rhinoceros*. 1515. Woodcut on laid paper. National Gallery of Art, Washington. D.C.

V. The Rhinoceros in Wood

Pliny's information, now tried and tested, is dutifully imprinted on Dürer's woodcut, along with the added flourish, "they say also that the rhinoceros is fast, impetuous and cunning." Working from a



Figure 12. (Detail) Dürer, Albrecht. *The Rhinoceros*. 1515. Woodcut on laid paper. National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

hastily drawn sketch, Dürer uses a series of dashes and speckles to fill out the animal's rounded form. With the belligerent tones of the bestial tournament ringing in his ears, Dürer arrays the beast in ornamental breastplates, shields and chainmail, drawing on his experience of designing opulent crests and battle armor for the Emperor Maximilian I. But on reaching the head and especially the face of the rhinoceros, the artist's strokes depart from the stylized patterns of the decorative arts and turn geological and wild.



Figure 13. (Detail) Dürer, Albrecht. *The Rhinoceros*. 1515. Woodcut on laid paper. National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.. A singular creature emerges in this engraving—a relic, a portent, a near living thing bestowed with a potent will. On the strength of the reputation of both Dürer and the rhinoceros, more than 5,000 copies of the woodcut were circulated, and at five florins each, it was affordable for any of the curious to carry home their own print pet rhinoceros. The imaginative force of the image would resonate for decades afterwards and it would become the standard

bearer for its species in the animal encyclopedias such as Conrad Gessner's *Historia Animalium* in 1551 and Edward Topsell's *History of Four-Footed Beasts* in 1607. Even as soon as 1516, the woodcut rhinoceros appeared in the Portuguese *Carta Marina*, though it was confused with its African sibling and displaced onto Nigeria.

VI. An Opossum

On the South American coast of the *Carta Marina* stands “a strange monster, the foremost part resembling a fox, the hinder a monkey, the feet like a man's, with ears like an owl; under whose belly hung a great bag.” This was

the first European illustration of an opossum, and those were the words of Vincente Pinzon, a Spanish conquistador, recorded in the year 1499. Unable to contend with the Portuguese in terms of trade in the east, Spain had faced their fleet in the opposite direction and by 1515, quantities of gold, silver and animals were on their way to the Iberian peninsula from the New World. On an excursion through Venezuela, Pinzon spotted an opossum with a litter of three in her pouch. The mother animal, hissing and confused, was packed in a wooden crate, along with her squeaking babies, and off they went – the first marsupials known to Europeans – to Granada for the



Figure 14. (Detail) Waldseemüller, Martin. *Carta Marina*. 1516. Woodcut. Library of Congress, Washington D.C.



Figure 15. Simivulpa or Apish-Fox. Topsell, Edward. *The History of Four-footed Beasts and Serpents*. 1658. University of Houston Libraries, Texas.

edification and merriment of King Frederick and Queen Isabella. The opossum's three cubs did not survive the journey and the raging opossum, in a burst of worldly glory for her species, transformed herself into a mass of anger and claw and could be found glaring down at humans for the next two centuries as the fabled ferocious Simivulpa, half-ape half-fox, in the pages of the encyclopedias of Gessner and Topsell. The suckling young are added in memoriam by Topsell, who notes down that this opossum, on reaching Granada, "soon after by reason of the change of aire and incertainty of diet, did also pine away and die."

While the encyclopedias and the map still traded in the archaic power of wonder and in the moral force of animality, they

also showcased the emerging mode of empirical knowledge and classification. The New World animals, bright, diverse and detached from European history, perched on this cusp. Over the course of the sixteenth century, the screeching, chittering and cawing delegates of the kingdoms of ant-eaters, armadillos, sloths, tapirs, chinchillas, capuchin monkeys and parrots of all flocks and feathers were deposited on European shores, not to slouch, caper and shuffle off freely through the countries, but to be studied, collected, displayed, made pets and traded. Transported with more hubris than care, animals very often did not reach their destination alive, but their value persisted in their remains, whole and dismembered, stuffed, dried and preserved in jars of alcohol. Their wings, feathers, pelts, bones, paws, hair and teeth would be displayed in cabinets of curiosities and traded in market squares.

VII. Dürer Abroad

"On Thursday after St. Kilian's Day, I, Albrecht Dürer, at my own charges and costs, took myself and my wife from Nuremberg away to the Netherlands, and the same day, after we had passed through Eriangen, we put up for the night at Baiersdorff, and spent there three crowns, less six pfennigs." (*Diary of His Journey, 1520 – 1521*)

Five years after engraving the rhinoceros he never got to meet, Dürer went on a year-long journey, carrying abundant copies of his woodcut prints. He would sell and give away these prints to sustain his lengthy stays in the houses of friends in Aachen and Antwerp and in the inns of various small Flemish towns. His journal of this time consists of a relentlessly meticulous account of all daily economic transactions, leaving the personal and social impressions of his travels to be deciphered under the reports of purchases made in the eighteen different kinds of currency of Europe's unconsolidated economy.

He did, however, also keep a visual diary in the form of a sketchbook. Along with the portraits of his acquaintances and clients, a lioness and a lynx inhabit these pages, faithfully presented with their heavy coats of fur, powerful



Figure 16. (Detail) Dürer, Albrecht. *Sketches of Animals and Landscapes*. 1521. Pen and black ink. The Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts.



Figure 17. (Detail) Dürer, Albrecht. *Sketches of Animals and Landscapes*. 1521. Pen and black ink. The Clark Art Institute, Williamstown, Massachusetts.

padded paws and carnivorous mass of muscle—all in drowsy disuse at a bestiary in Ghent and a zoological garden in Brussels. The sketches are completed with quick, deft strokes of the pen, and the shabby cats are soon pressed back behind the turned pages of the diary. These were the exotica of the Middle Ages, unable to compete with an armored rhinoceros or even with the meager viciousness of an opossum. The real energy of the times vibrated in the bustling marketplaces and their counters crowded with trade items. Dürer participated fully in this new economy, acquiring

a wealth of organic curiosities – buffalo horns, elk feet, fish scales, snail shells, white coral, ox horns, fish fins, ivory combs, a small skull and a tortoise shell – by parting with coins, exchanging books, winning at gambling or as payment for his prints. As recorded in an entry in December of 1520, he also bought a little monkey for four gulden and his wife was given a green parrot. The last we see of the two short-lived pets is in their new cages tumbling through the streets of Antwerp.

Later that month, he notes in his journal, “At Zierkzee in Zeeland a whale has been washed ashore by a great tide and storm...and the fish cannot get off the land. The people would be glad to see it gone for they fear a great stink for it is so big they say it could not be cut in pieces and the oil got out of it in half a year.” He heads there with his rolling entourage, but to the disappointment of the artist and the relief of the residents, by the time he reaches the coastal town, the miserable decaying heap of the whale has been recouped by the North sea. In a museum of wonders nearby, an institution of growing popularity, he does find a smaller dead giant.

With its hairy, blubbery skin, intact tusks, and expressive whiskers, the stuffed head of a



Figure 18. Dürer, Albrecht. *Head of a Walrus*. 1521. Pen and Brown ink, with watercolor. British Museum, London.



Figure 19. (Detail, walrus) Waldseemüller, Martin. *Carta Marina*. 1516. Woodcut. Library of Congress, Washington D.C.

walrus prompts Dürer to return to the vivacity of watercolors. A walrus can also be spotted floating off the coast of Norway in the *Carta Marina*, imagined as a sort of sea-elephant. The animal had not yet lost its status as a frightening sea-monster, and this made walrus detritus a favored diplomatic gift from the Scandinavian kingdoms. While Dürer was resurrecting one dead beast through the art of his brush, the salted head of another unlucky walrus was bobbing its way from Norway to the Vatican, an offering from the Archbishop of Trondheim to the Pope.

VIII. The Rhinoceros Sails for Rome

Pope Leo X was known for his passion for exotic animals and art. He had gained notoriety at the beginning of the 16th century for selling indulgences to build St. Peter's Basilica and for the gold he showered on his pet white elephant, a gift from Portugal, received in 1514, when a reputed forty-two animals had been dispatched by Dom Manuel on a large embassy to Rome. The largest of the assemblage, a young Cambodian elephant, had caused trouble in the docks, refusing to come aboard. Since Pliny's *Naturalis Historia*, it had been accepted that elephants were intelligent and moral creatures. So, the keepers reasoned with the elephant and reassured it of its safe arrival, finally coaxing it on the ship by making it walk backwards on the plank so as not to lose sight of land. The oaths were kept, the elephant travelled via Alicante and Majorca and made its home in Rome to the delight of the worldly Pope.

In the winter of 1515, in order to retain the papal edicts for navigation and colonization granted to Portugal, Dom Manuel resolved to send another present to the Church – our rhinoceros. After six hazy months spent ambling in the Palace grounds, the rhinoceros was led back to the docks, and it must have balked in dread on

glimpsing again the empty waters. The rhinoceros was decorated for the occasion with gold links and a velvet collar embroidered with roses and carnations. Perhaps its will had been weakened by captivity for it boarded the ship submissively. And so, it found itself, heavily chained, for a second time in a dank despairing hold. Though well-prepared for the two-month journey around the Iberian Peninsula to the Vatican, the ship was wrecked by a storm off the coast of northern Italy and never reached port.

Dürer's woodcut prints survive, and the rhinoceros continues its travels on paper, its living bulk

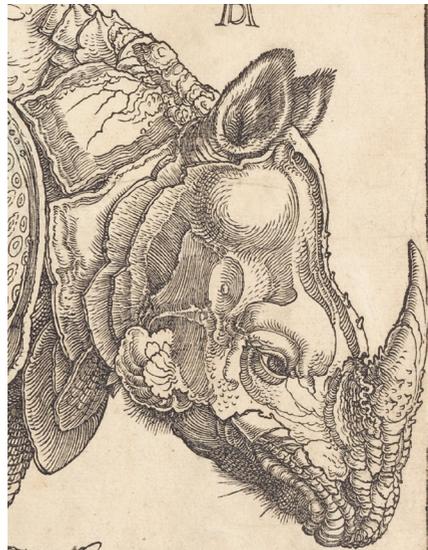


Figure 20. (Detail) Dürer, Albrecht. *The Rhinoceros*. 1515. Woodcut on laid paper. National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

transformed into the intricacies of ink. Under Dürer's hand, the rhinoceros undergoes a sea-change—its flanks get plated with coral shapes, its legs turn iridescent with fish-scales, and a second horn rises from its shell-encrusted neck. The elaborate design remains true to the rhinoceros' experience; each earthy and watery terrain it had felt under its feet is embedded on its rough hide. The thick protective shields around the body give way to the rich and strange interiority of the lowered face, hollowed out with craters that offer us an entry into the world of the rhinoceros.

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About the Author

Tanya Desai is a graduate student in the Cinema and Media Studies department at the University of Chicago.

Afterword

We are proud, pleased, and grateful to present this series of five chapbooks as part of the ongoing Migration Stories Project at the University of Chicago. We decided to introduce a chapbook series because it feels important for writers in our community to have a place for longer reflections about histories and experiences of migration. In these pages, Tanya Desai writes on animals shipped across oceans and among royalty in the early modern period; Tina Post traces movements of paper and people through the *Chicago Defender* and the Great Migration; Felipe Bomeny pieces together one man's experience of leaving Xelajú during the Guatemalan Civil War; Liana Fu uses poetry, prose, found texts, photography and two languages to think about coming of age in the Hong Kong diaspora; and Susan Augustine chronicles the work of the Hyde Park Refugee Project to support two Syrian refugee families arriving on the south side of Chicago. Each piece illuminates another moving line in the vast map of the history of migration, and helps us to see more clearly how these lines shine through the life of our shared neighborhoods.

The Migration Stories Project began in November of 2016 as a project of the Creative Writing Department in the hopes of making more spaces to tell and listen to migration stories, and to help elucidate the collective history of migration in the community at and around the University of Chicago. Over the last three years, the Migration Stories Project has created or co-hosted nine public readings, and has collaborated with the Smart Museum, Student Support Services, and the Regenstein Library. In 2017, we published an anthology of migration stories, written by people from all around our community, now accessible at <https://knowledge.uchicago.edu/record/1236>. We are glad to be a part of the new Migration Studies Cluster hosted jointly by the English Department and Creative Writing, which creates research opportunities for our students and fosters new collaborative relationships among our faculty. More information on Migration Stories Projects can be found at <https://creativewriting.uchicago.edu/>.

We hope these chapbooks inspire new readers as they have inspired us, to keep reading, writing, and imagining stories of migration.

Rachel Cohen & Rachel DeWoskin

Creative Writing
University of Chicago

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The Pozen Center for Human Rights, University of Chicago

The Pritzker Traubert Family Library of the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools

The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago

Student Support Services at the Center for Identity + Inclusion at the University of Chicago

The University of Chicago Library

Visual Resources Center (VRC), University of Chicago Department of Art History

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Migration Stories Chapbook Series

Susan Augustine, *Jumping In*

Felipe Bomeny, *Leaving Xelajú*

Tanya Desai, *Dürer and the Rhinoceros*

Liana Fu, *Origins*

Tina Post, *Paper Trails*