

# A Time for Refusal

It is a Sunday afternoon in a provincial town in France. Two men meet at a cafe. One of them, Berenger, is half-drunk. He is being berated by his companion, Jean. All of the sudden, they hear a great noise. When they and other townspeople crane their necks to figure out what's going on, they see a large animal thundering down one of the streets, stamping and snorting all the way. A rhinoceros! Not long after, there's another. They are startled. It's outrageous. Something must be done. What they begin to do is argue heatedly about whether the second rhino was the first one going past a second time or a different one, and then about whether the rhinos are African or Asiatic.

Things become more disturbing in the next act. (This is a play: *Rhinoceros*, written by Eugène Ionesco.) The rhino sightings continue to be the subject of pointless dispute. Then, one by one, various people in the town begin to turn into rhinos. Their skin hardens, bumps appear over their noses and grow into horns. Jean had been one of those scandalized by the first two rhino sightings, but he becomes a rhino, too. Midway through his metamorphosis, Berenger argues with him: "You must admit that we have a

philosophy that animals don't share, and an irreplaceable set of values, which it's taken centuries of human civilization to build up." Jean, well on his way to being a rhino, retorts, "When we've demolished all that, we'll be better off!"

It is an epidemic of "rhinocerotitis." Almost everyone succumbs: those who admire the brute force of the rhinos, those who didn't believe the sightings to begin with, those who initially found them alarming. One character, Dudard, declares, "If you're going to criticize, it's better to do so from the inside." And so he willingly undergoes the metamorphosis, and there's no way back for him. The final holdouts from this mass capitulation are Berenger and Daisy, his coworker.

Eugène Ionesco, who was French-Romanian, wrote *Rhinoceros* in 1958 as a response to totalitarian movements in Europe, but he was influenced specifically by his experience of fascism in Romania in the 1930s. Ionesco wanted to know why so many people give in to these poisonous ideologies. How could so many get it so wrong? The play, a farce, was one way he grappled with this problem.

On August 19, 2015, shortly after midnight, brothers Stephen and Scott Leader assaulted a man named Guillermo Rodriguez, who had been sleeping near a train station in Boston. The Leader brothers beat him with a metal pipe, breaking his nose and bruising his ribs, and called him a "wetback." They urinated on him. "All these illegals need to be deported," they are said to have declared during the attack. The brothers were fans of the candidate who would go on to win the Republican Party's presidential nomination. Told of the incident at the time, that candidate said: "People who are following me are very passionate. They love this country, and they want this country to be great again."

That was the moment when my mental alarm bells, already

ringing, went amok. There were many other astonishing events to come—the accounts of sexual violence, the evidence of racism, the promise of torture, the advocacy of war crimes—but the assault on Rodriguez, and the largely tolerant response to it, was a marker. Some people were outraged, but outrage soon became its own ineffectual reflex. Others found a rich vein of humor in the parade of obscenities and cruelties. Others took a view similar to that of the character Botard in Ionesco's play: "I don't mean to be offensive. But I don't believe a word of it. No rhinoceros has ever been seen in this country!"

In the early hours of November 9, 2016, the winner of the presidential election was declared. As the day unfolded, the extent to which a moral rhinoceros had taken hold was apparent. *People* magazine had a giddy piece about the president-elect's daughter and her family, a sequence of photos it headlined "way too cute." In the *New York Times*, one opinion piece suggested that the belligerent bigot's supporters ought not to be shamed. Another asked whether this president-elect could be a good president and found cause for optimism. Cable news anchors found means to express their surprise at the outcome of the election, but no way to vocalize their fury. All around were the unmistakable signs of normalization in progress. So many were falling into line without being pushed. It was happening at tremendous speed, like a contagion. And it was catching even those whose plan was, like Durdard's in *Rhinoceros*, to criticize "from the inside."

Evil settles into everyday life when people are unable or unwilling to recognize it. It makes its home among us when we are keen to minimize it or describe it as something else. This is not a process that began a week or a month or a year ago. It did not begin with drone assassinations, or with the war on Iraq. Evil has always been here. But now it has taken on a totalitarian tone.

At the end of *Rhinoceros*, Daisy finds the call of the herd irresistible. Her skin goes green, she develops a horn, she's gone. Berenger, imperfect, all alone, is racked by doubts. He is determined to keep his humanity, but looking in the mirror, he suddenly finds himself quite strange. He feels like a monster for being so out of step with the consensus. He is afraid of what this independence will cost him. But he keeps his resolve and refuses to accept the horrible new normalcy. He'll put up a fight, he says. "I'm not capitulating!"