



Buttonhook Press 2022 Pamphlet Series

Hanno

John-Michael P. Bloomquist



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Hanno, the Papal Elephant

And in my brutish beast they perceived human feeling
—from Pope Leo X's Elegy for Hanno

I was the surprise gift. The night of Leo's coronation, a boy-cupid dipped in gold dancing in the center of a fountain welcomed the new era, the royalty plucking olives from the crown. A Venetian waiter with bird of paradise plumage in his masque served the hors d'oeuvres—ostrich tongues in cream and jellied cakes of stork eggs drizzled in dove-blood.

I could tell the Pope was frightened. He looked like a baby elephant with a golden egg on his head. I bowed, and he came by my side, touched, then stroked, my ear, then began to giggle. He called me Hanno, for I'd navigate him through the gates of Hercules to the New World, where he said there were magical fruits we'd never eaten, another race of Adam eager to enter the gates of Peter, and wild new creatures, but none, none at all as extra-

ordinary as me—he'd read these reports, sitting on me as I carried him through the basilica. Sometimes, we'd stop in his private gallery, where *A Botticelli*, he said, *is an Eden bringing the Kingdom of Earth back to Heaven*. Looking into their foliage, I felt a ray break through the canopy and warm my back, I felt as if my trunk could siphon the clear water the pink shell floated in.

Oh, to spray a whole trunk-load on my back!

The oxpeckers pecking the bugs off my skin flying off then coming back. Oh, to cool down in the jungle, again!

He told me that, like Aquinas baptizing Aristotle to edify the body of Christ, his family had resurrected these gods to represent His form. Before bedtime, we'd head to the library. He'd point to a book on the top-shelf and I'd reach my trunk up, my pink snout moving across the spines until I picked the one that made him

clap like a monkey.

He'd read me some of Aesop's fables, or some of Petrarch's sonnets—the verses ploughing rows of virid grass in a jungle path. I came to understand that even if all we do is appreciate great works of art, we can live on forever. Not because of the object itself, but because of what the object opened—that which is immortal, the jungle behind the sun that doesn't burn out. Certainty, this is worth indulgence, worth working on the basilica we'll never see finished. The long exhale from muscles loosening, releasing their gases into it. Art captures that breath—our spirit adds to its leverage against the soul of God, the cathedral's collateral through the ashes of Lent.

Don't all God's creatures have their part to play?
I understood God in my own small way.
Leo was a chubby St. Francis, telling me state secrets.
And he knew I tried to listen. He never left my side
when I became sick. As I ate the gold-laced
laxatives he had shipped in from Venice with my hay,
I thought of that first night, when he paraded me
around the party, offering me the bird hors d'oeuvres.
While that gold-dipped boy continued to dance,
I felt as if I'd cheated him of his golden day.
The next morning, he was found paralyzed by
his skin of glistening gold and mercury. Leo wept

when the purgative came out bloody and I couldn't
bring myself to eat anymore even as he begged—
I was sad to watch God's king made powerless.
He ordered monasteries to pray without ceasing
and asked them to send castratos. They sang like birds
of paradise, singing hymns of paradise. Tall candles in
their thick, soft hands. I waited until Leo fell asleep.
It is sad to wait. Elephants take so long to die.

La Primavera According to Savonarola

A small light in a dark cell is a bright light if it is the only light. Shadows barely hide what the candle flicks—

Savonarola painting his back with a cat-o'-nine-tails,
pomegranate beads of blood joining into streams,

blow after blow. The painting seduced him with
its white myrtles of skin. The petals the Lord beholds

us in—who is Botticelli? Who is he to try and see us
as God sees us, naked in the garden? Ribbons of
blood reach around his belly like madder roots.

Angels dump their amphorae of blue and yellow light,
their wings fanning above Venus's rhododendron tunic.

Venus stands at the center, Christ's place. And Savonarola
cannot resist, the crucified body he prays to become

—to be eaten of, drunk of, as he eats and drinks of
Him—is now Her. From Venus's mouth, daisies,

geraniums, and carnations slither into the basket of Flora—
the Spirit breathing life into us who walk through the vale of
death, impregnating earth with roses. Venus's left hand

pulls the red tunic up her thigh, while the right hand lifts
like it's signing a blessing, showing the inner lining—

the star-blue bells of her vestment tasseled with grapes.
What secret do her eyes harbor? A gaze placid

listening, unconvinced of anything he believes.

Savonarola believes himself a fire-prophet for the *popolo*
minuto, the *little* malnourished *people* shrunk from the slave-

wage labor— farming on loan what they can't
even afford to eat. The gods are tall because their growth

wasn't stunted. Tall, sabered Mercury, on his toes, steals
the out-of-reach fruit before it falls to the street,

as if waste or charity were the height of vanity.

The Burning of the Vanities

Lavender smoke rises in the city center.
Botticelli drags a bag with canvases of naked
myths. He is trapped, calculating invisible causes
like an old haruspex slaughtering goat after
goat until he finds the liver that bodes well for
war. When he throws his gods into the fire,
who are we to say how he ought to clean his brushes?
Let us sate our appetite on his conviction.
In Botticelli's *Annunciation*, Mary receives the news
like the divine enters into the artist again.
Whoever hasn't felt the water reentering
after a long drought can't rejoice the labor
God took in limiting himself to come here.

Savonarola's Zephyr

In his dreams Savonarola floats up to the moon. The Queen of Heaven has a prophesy for him: another Cyrus the Great will come, riding on the howdah of an elephant. He will blaze the fields, and his tongue will eat the coffers of the church swelling with indulgences—termites bubbling the bridge on the Ponte Vecchio, falling into the Arno, scattering the path to heaven. The moon touches Savonarola's back with her pearl scepter, healing the lacerations from his flogging, and the itching of the scabs wakes him, giving him faith his body is one with the Lord. He splashes himself with water from a pail, and then takes off running to the city center, each sway of his cassock brown as the sparrow flying above him, coarse as mooring rope, scratches his back, assuringly. He reaches the footsteps of the Santa Maria, the sun on the red bricks of Brunelleschi's dome squaring the circle. A crowd gathers steadily as his vision loads its spring arcade. He points to the morning moon setting over the hill— *there*, there is their New Jerusalem, built upon a foundation of emeralds with pinnacles of pearl and ruby bridges. And *here*, here in this square, Oh hear! the bells of a church-ship dropping its mainsail, setting out, moon-bound.

The Mystical Nativity According to Botticelli

I saw Savonarola and two of his followers
stripped of their garments in the plaza of Florence.
In thin white shirts they ascended the gallows.
He told me to burn the nude gods since they were
meant to hang inside palaces the poor couldn't go.
Places fretting with cosmetics and sauces.

The bishop rang a bell, closed a Bible, put out
a candle. The hangman tightened the nooses.
And let go the floor with a lever. A bucket full
of water slipping down the well. The hangman
climbed down the steps. Then he lit the wood bundle
below their kicking feet. And stood back. I saw

the three kings walking empty-handed before
their Lord born in a cave. The newborn
babe swaddled in a shroud of linen looking up
into the eyes of the mule he'd ride into Rome
as it ate from the trough of hay nearby.
As the fires rose, their kicking turned into
the dancing vortex of angels, linked hand
to hand above the manger. I thought of the army
Savonarola forced out of our city. Now he rises

to heaven. This is the only canvas I'd sign,
the only one I'd roll up and hide. An icon for
when their ashes were dumped into the Arno
and we, his followers, without relics, were left
like the condemned scurrying into the crevices.

About the writer:

John-Michael Bloomquist lives in Washington, DC, with his wife and their needy black cat, Zbigniew. He is an editor of *Poems from the Jail Dorm*, a collection of incarcerated men's poetry. His poetry has been published in *The Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Third Coast*, *The Southeast Review*, and many others.

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