2011

PUSHCART PRIZE XXXV BEST OF THE SMALL PRESSES

EDITED BY BILL HENDERSON
WITH THE PUSHCART PRIZE EDITORS

LORES OF LAST UNICORNS

by JEN HIRT

from THE GETTYSBURG REVIEW

When I was a young girl, I collected unicorns.

I received them for birthdays and Christmas and Easter and straight-A report cards. Glass, ceramic, stone, brass, wooden, pewter, plastic, plush, necklaces, T-shirts, bedspreads, pillow shams, and wallpaper. I owned snow-globe unicorn music boxes, a tinkling chorus of "Born Free." For my first slumber party, my dad rented a new device called a VCR, and I selected the animated feature *The Last Unicorn*. The party, the VCR, the movie—I was thrice cool and showered with unicorn gifts.

At some point, I linked the action of collecting to the fervor of believing. I collected unicorns for study, preparing to separate the charlatans from the real deal. At school, I cultivated this aspect of my personality, haughty and armed with esoteric knowledge at the prime age of nine. For example, I called the unicorn's horn by its correct name, *alicorn*. My first foray into creative writing, for the annual Young Author's Conference, was a short story called "A Quest in Alicorn Forest." With my cousin's white Arabian stallion as a model, I illustrated the capricious adventure of three unicorns who had to save their herd from fuzzy pink things. My ten-page book was displayed on the fourth-grade fiction table.

My belief got a boost when my grandparents gave me Odell Shepard's dense history, *The Lore of the Unicorn*. They were wishful. I was too young to read anything more complex than *The Black Stallion* series. Undaunted, I studied the historical illustrations for hours. So many variations to consider—would I believe in the unicorn with the

lion's tail and cloven hooves? The bearded unicorn? Or the ones like deer? I favored the unicorns that looked like Arabian horses, but these, I realized, were the offspring of whimsical T-shirts and the horses I learned to ride on at Valleywood Farm. Reconciling my imaginary unicorn with the historical ones was my first lesson in compromise. I still resist Shepard's book.

No one gift or illustration sparked my bullheaded devotion to believing. I constructed a circular logic: I believed in unicorns because they were real, and unicorns would be more real the more people believed in them. I was a little girl for whom biological evidence was incomprehensible. My world was simple magic. A reputation followed me, and small towns don't let you shake your past. Here is proof: my brother gave me a porcelain unicorn for my twenty-seventh birthday.

A couple years ago, when I was moving for the sixth time in as many years, lugging a box of carefully wrapped glass unicorns from my childhood, I started to wonder why I had ever gotten into unicorns.

On the subconscious level, I must have believed in unicorns because adults did not. I was a well-off child who had everything except grounds for defiance. What better animal for covering that ground than a unicorn, an incredible creature discredited by the practical world of moms and dads? It is as if I were saying, "You think you can give me everything, but you cannot give me a unicorn."

In 1983, renowned photographer Robert Vavra published *Unicorns I Have Known*. The bestseller was an oversized photo collection of what appeared to be real unicorns in real locations. When I received the book, probably in '84 or '85, it quickly trumped the black-and-white illustrations of *The Lore of the Unicorn* as my primary resource. My favorite photo is on page eighty-five. A lone unicorn canters along the edge of a barren woodland in winter. Vavra snapped the shot just as the unicorn's tremendous mane blew back. There are so many shades of white—sky, snowfield, hide, horn, mane, tail. To the left of the picture, Vavra reprinted a claim by Dr. Olfert Dapper. In 1673, he had seen unicorns running along the border, two legs in Canada, two in America. "They live in the loneliest wilderness and are so shy," Dapper wrote. Vavra appended epigraphs to each picture, but this one is notable. He had all but located Dapper's unicorn, just three hundred years later. I was enamored. I thought this was real.

The back pages of the book offer Vavra's written narrative as he traipsed around the globe, slung with cameras, lucking again and

again into unicorns. Each picture has an imaginative endnote. If one is wondering why there is a picture of a peacock on page nine, the endnote explains: "This peacock, practically hidden in deep foliage, had just screamed to warn a unicorn of my presence in the forest of southern Nepal." Vavra adds enticing bits of discovery to his pictorial descriptions. A friend in Sudan had seen three unicorns. Vavra himself had translated a secret unicorn document at the Archives of India in Spain, a document then mysteriously stolen. And, of course, there was the acquisition of a bizarre journal, found in a Madrid flea market and conveniently written in perfect English, purporting to be the only true account of all things unicorn. To these cryptic rumors, Vavra adds pseudo-scientific claims, such as the one positing that unicorns communicate by a crude language of lines and dots scraped into bark. I turned the pages of that book so many times that they eased from their binding. The gold-embossed title wore away to *Unicorns I Have*.

The 1988 sequel, titled *The Unicorn of Kilimanjaro*, was equally satisfying. I studied Vavra's claim that Hemingway knew of the solitary unicorn who roamed Africa's famous mountain. I looked long and hard at the photo where Vavra, leaving his camera in the hands of a trail guide, bowed his head and stepped to the tolerant unicorn, so close, so there. So connected.

Describing the beauty of the unicorns is difficult, even now. They are uncanny, clearly horselike, but endowed with voluminous manes, huge eyes, and self-awareness, as if they know they are being photographed for the first time. On one page, a unicorn lowers his horn and charges the camera. A single damning eye—milky blue like that of a husky—glares through the lavish forelock swept aside by the force of the charge.

In 1995, when I was twenty years old and considering writing about unicorn lore for a college class, I browsed my Vavra books. On page sixty-six, I saw something that changed everything: the Kilimanjaro unicorn was shod with the faint metal curve of horseshoes. It was the first time, in seven years of meticulously perusing the book, that I had noticed. My past disconnected.

In the photo, the unicorn, which Vavra refers to as a stag because it is male, is cornered against a red cliff. His hind legs are planted firmly, front hooves raised, muscles tensed. The horseshoes are obvious on the front feet. Vavra wrote in his endnotes:

First African unicorn! . . . Slowly pick up camera with 500-millimeter lens. Side of mountain is very dark. Hopefully, with 400 ASA film and white unicorn, will be enough light.

During the sighting, he was aware of the "sharp smacking of stag's hooves against red rock." I bet.

Reconsidering *Unicorns I Have Known*, I was suddenly aware that the unicorns looked suspiciously like the Spanish Andalusian horses from Vavra's renowed book, *Equus Reined*. Andalusians, an ancient breed, can be nearly white with tremendous manes and tails. They are smart horses, easily trained, the foundation stock for the Lipizzaner stallions. The "unicorns" I was looking at were Andalusians. What I was seeing was no longer evidence of existence; I was seeing, carefully obscured in all the other pictures, evidence of the human need to promulgate legend, to proclaim from the heights of deception that yes, the unicorn could be real, not because the world was once a blank slate of possibilities, but because the definition of *real* is as blurry as Vavra's first photo of a unicorn, a shot of a vaguely equine tornado of white mane spotted in the Tamazunchale jungle of Mexico in the spring of 1968.

In the moments after noticing the horseshoes, I felt startled, then annoyed, then silly. Ridiculous, this belief. Here I was, a student at a private liberal arts college, surrounded by scholars, and I was still lost in unicorn books. I closed my book, slid my fingers over the cover shot—the unicorn's head turned toward the reader with an inquiring eye, the savanna sun lighting a soft evening background. So airbrushed. I opened the book and started at page one. I became a Sherlock Holmes, in search of horseshoes and halter marks.

By the end, page sixty-six was my only evidence, albeit incontrovertible. I surfaced from the undertow with a realization. Maybe I had been looking for those horseshoes all along. What made me finally see them?

I caught myself daydreaming on a hike along the Appalachian Trail near my home in Pennsylvania. I could almost see that slip of white equine through the vines and brush, could almost hear the startled thunder if I were to happen upon a few unicorns around the next bend. It was absurd. But I wasn't the first. So many before me, from Pliny the Elder to Marco Polo to Robert Vavra, had wished into near

reality these vivid imaginings. Greeting cards would have me believe that wishing is all sweet surprise and happiness. But I know that in every wish lives a fiction, often a dark fiction.

In 1577, a cadre of European explorers poking around the Arctic for the Northwest Passage found a dead "sea unicorn." Captain Martin Frobisher ordered the company to pause to consider the fishlike creature "which had in its nose a horn straight and torquet." One of Frobisher's assistants, a man named Dionise Settle, later wrote about what he heard secondhand. The sea unicorn's horn tip had been broken some time ago, and the men could peer into the space of the spiral. Well-steeped in the lore of the purifying powers of a unicorn horn (be it from sea or land), and giddy over the price such a find would bring at the feet of the queen, ambitious seamen put the horn to the test. They scuttled spiders into the hollow horn, and the spiders died. The sailors declared the horn authentic and gave it to Queen Elizabeth. Today, it is on display at the British Museum.

The acquisition of the alicorn was the single bright spot in Frobisher's northern adventures. Not a stellar navigator, he wasted time getting lost in northern bays and inlets. One of his ships deserted. He brought back chunks of black topsoil supposedly speckled with gold; when experts proved him wrong, authorities threatened him with jail. Settle—the writer of the spider account—did little to promote international harmony when he advanced his belief that the Inuit were savage cannibals who had obviously eaten five men missing from an earlier expedition.

I don't know what to think of the unicorn story in light of Frobisher's mistakes and misconceptions. I have to agree with Odell Shepard, who analyzed the story this way: Surely what the men found was a decomposing narwhal. The males have a wayward tooth, not a tusk or horn, which grows through the head. Narwhals, which are white, were hunted to near extinction in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and many historians agree that the fabled alicorns presented to royalty were actually narwhal tusks. The legend was that an alicorn chalice neutralized poisoned wine, because another legend claimed that unicorns dipped their horns into rivers to purify the water for the woodland creatures. Meanwhile, I recently read that all of Britain's drinking water contains molecules of Prozac. This could mean Britain has no unicorns. It could also mean Britain's unicorns are hard at work.

I don't doubt that the spiders died that chilly day in the wild North. Consider the context: medieval explanations of the animal kingdom held that it was split between the pure and the impure, and that in a just and godly world, the pure animals would reign victorious over the impure. It was a rehearsal for Armageddon. Here is what I think happened: the spiders died because they were overcome by a horn saturated in sea salt and the detritus from a rotting whale head. Or they froze.

I did not see the Living Unicorn at the Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus in the mid-eighties. The controversy I remember well—was Lancelot the Living Unicorn a surgically altered goat, or was he the unicorn of myth and legend? The circus debuted the animal in New York City to much fanfare, embracing the crowd-drawing debate. Starry photos were leaked to the media. The animal had a delicate head, cascades of curly fur, and an undeniably huge and single horn on his forehead. At the request of animal rights activists, the USDA made an appearance and proclaimed the beast to be a male Angora goat whose horn buds had been spliced together when he was a kid and then shaped into a ten-inch horn as he matured—not a *natural* unicorn, but *technically* a unicorn. The circus responded with a full-page ad in the *New York Times*, suggesting that the government was out to destroy the fantasies of childhood. The ad was a ringmaster of propaganda, urging parents to bring their children to the circus before government officials ruined everyone's Sunday afternoon.

The second controversy—where did Lancelot come from? A handful of publications tentatively provided the peculiar answer. Morning Glory Ravenheart and Oberon Zell Ravenheart were his owners. The Ravenhearts are part of a polyamorous and pagan organization living in California, whose members go about their peaceful, randy ways while awaiting the next great event in the Age of Aquarius. Oberon is the patriarch of the Church of All Worlds, a religion he invented after reading the sci-fi novel *Stranger in a Strange Land*. Oberon also conceived of a "handfasting" ceremony that allowed Ravenhearts to marry multiple Ravenhearts. Morning Glory, however, has been his main soul mate since the sixties, when they met at a New Age conference.

No news media gave the Ravenhearts more than fifty words of print, and a single obscure Web site published this rebuttal to the USDA: Lancelot was not a surgically altered goat. He was a unicorn

created with "appropriate magical rites" involving spirits, a waxing moon, and chunks of quartz.

Controversy helps all, however. The Ravenhearts hired a lawyer and secured the patent to the technique for creating one horn from two, even though they weren't the first to splice the horns of goats or sheep or cattle. The Prince of Wales received a gift of one-horned rams in 1906, and in 1933, Dr. Franklin Dove spliced the horns on an Ayrshire calf at his farm near Orono, Maine. I have read teasing fragments of the prince's gift, but I have seen actual photos of Dr. Dove's creation. In the most famous photo, the mature Ayrshire stands at attention, a front leg slightly forward, in the traditional pose for bovines led around state fair arenas. He is all white except for a black spot around his eye and jowl. He is almost neckless. His body, such a rectangle of meat cuts, cannot be graceful. The background offers no context, invites no speculation. His horn, which appears black in the colorless photo, looks like an obelisk. It doesn't come from his forehead—it angles from the lumpy poll between the ears, almost like an extension of the spine. This, a unicorn? Dove published his findings in *Scientific Monthly*, making the bizarre claim that the calf was "conscious of peculiar power; . . . his ability to inherit the earth gives him the virtue of meekness." Dove, I think, did not know the difference between meekness and dullness.

Thankfully, the Ravenhearts didn't indulge in the pretense that their Living Unicorn would inherit the earth—its ability to siphon circus profit would do. They licensed Living Unicorns to the Ringling Circus from 1984 to 1988. When not fulfilling his duties as a mystic lover, or to augment those duties, Oberon trailored the animals to participate in Renaissance fairs. Nothing woos a girl like a unicorn. With the substantial revenue, the Ravenhearts hired a film crew and struck out for New Guinea to solve the mystery of mermaid sightings. Soon broke, they claimed they had solved the mermystery but had no finances for finishing the film. The footage remains unseen. Morning Glory and Oberon now run Mythic Images out of Sonoma County, selling New Age statuary and accoutrements. According to one Web site, they are hoping to breed a phoenix.

I was ten or eleven at the time of the circus unicorn controversy, in possession of *Unicorns I Have Known*, and I remember turning a very cold shoulder, as cold as the icy waters around a dead narwhal. I had no desire to be part of a crowd looking down at a unicorn on display. News photos were enough—Lancelot was sparkling white, displayed

on a rolling stage with a beautiful woman at his side, always in the spotlight. He looked fat under all those long Angora curls, like a house cat, and he was, without doubt, a goat. The horn looked too thick, heavy, and vaguely obscene because it was dark and marbled and smooth, not delicate and ivory and spiraled.

When I would finally see my unicorn, I wanted to be the *only* one to see it. I wanted it to be wild. I wanted to be Robert Vavra, my eyes the gateway to something never seen, my camera and film the book of a new bible.

The circus unicorn was too easy. Buy a ticket, go to the show. Unlike the tigers and elephants and ponies, the circus unicorn didn't have to earn its keep. It could just *be* while other animals mastered their tricks. The Living Unicorn was a human trick mastered by Morning Glory and Oberon. I would not go to a circus to see the results of a trick.

Despite my disdain, I had no problem lingering over Vavra's photos for more than a decade, themselves another result of another trick. How come? The isolation of those unicorns drew my allegiance and my sympathy. I was romanced by the idea that something so enchanting was destined to a life of solitude. I imagined that the unicorns accepted their fate as loners, yet desired companionship. I didn't know much about the complexities of desire when I was twelve, lost in Vavra's books. Now I know that often we desire most intensely what we cannot have. For me, the unicorns have been the best breed of desire—reliably eternal because it is perpetually unfulfilled.

The lonesome unicorn is as solid an archetype as the noble unicorn. In a famous moment from Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, John notices that all of Laura's glass animals have real counterparts, except for the unicorn. John comments, "Poor little fellow, he must feel sort of lonesome." The line resonates with anyone who feels different, who knows they are one sidestep from the pack, two shadows from the sun. Another example: in *The Last Unicorn* by Peter Beagle, a solitary unicorn befriends an outcast magician and a hard-nosed barmaid. The three learn the secret of the vanished unicorns. A lonely old king used a demonic red bull to drive the unicorns into the ocean where, with the unicorns captured in the waves and undertow, the king could peer down at them from his tower whenever he wanted. It is not the only tale about unicorns, water, and loneliness. Shel Silverstein wrote a rollicking poem about how Noah could not convince the

unicorn pair to board the ark. Frisky play in the rising waters turned into a desolate demise, and that is why, according to Silverstein, there are no more unicorns. Another biblical story claims that Adam named the unicorn first, before even looking at all the other animals, and thus it was forever set apart—set alone.

I grew up on unicorn mythology. At the same time, I was being indoctrinated into the group activity of public school, a place where you couldn't even go to the bathroom alone. Naturally, I resisted. I remember trying to play alone at free time. The teacher would ask if I was sick. I would say no. Then why wasn't I playing with the other kids? I never had a satisfying answer.

Did I sense that the unicorn's mystique was a halo around privilege and solitude? Public school in northeast Ohio offered little in the way of privilege or solitude. If I aligned myself with unicorns out of a rebellious need for defiance in a stable life, it makes sense that my belief in unicorns was just an analogy for my belief that young people could benefit from solitude, that we didn't all have to be running around in adult-approved groups.

Maybe, when I was twenty, I saw the horseshoes on the Kilimanjaro unicorn because I was finally an adult. At college I was learning to see, and more importantly, to see *through*, to think critically. For the first time in my educational history, tests were not about memorization, success not about practical applications, and if I wanted to research unicorns, I could, and *I could do it alone.* When Alice met the unicorn in Wonderland, they struck a deal. "Now that we have seen each other,' said the unicorn, 'if you'll believe in me, I'll believe in you. Is that a bargain?' " As a child, I had an irrational fear that no one would believe in me, that no one would notice me in the group. Chalk it up to being the shortest girl, relegated to the end of the line or the vulnerable front row on class-picture day. Believing in unicorns was part of a secret and altruistic exchange. I would notice them so they would notice me.

By the time I was on scholarship at that small private college, trying to decide whether or not to write about unicorns, I was long over the fear of not being noticed. My deal with the unicorns was done. I could see them for what they were.

Humans have a history of not being able to see things for what they are. Sight is the sense we rely on the most, so one might suppose that it would be the most acute sense. Yet wild claims pockmark history,

supported always by the power of witness. We all know the cliché "seeing is believing." The unicorn is hardly an egregious example of something made more real after the seven-word testimony of "I saw it with my own eyes." Consider, for instance, the vegetable lamb.

The vegetable lamb is the least sexy of the mythical beasts. They are so obscure they rarely make the cut in books about dragons and centaurs. Nonetheless, someone claimed to have seen one, and the myth lingers.

The story is that vegetable lambs birth themselves from deep flowers, such as the orange canal of the trumpet vine flower. Wet with pollen and bleating bees, they shiver on the grass, bound to the throat of the flower by a vine in place of an umbilical cord. Eventually, a vegetable lamb will eat all the grass within reach of the vine. Days later, it dies from hunger—it refuses to eat the trumpet vine, because that would be eating itself.

What if Vavra had created seventy photos sequencing the struggle of vegetable lambs? What if, in his endnotes, he referred to a fourteenth-century monk named Brother Oderich? He was the first to document vegetable lambs, writing, "There groweth a manner of Fruyt that men fynden with inne a lytlle Best, in Flessche, in Bone and Blode." Oderich ate the first vegetable lamb he saw. He noted that the entire event, from discovery to lunch, was a marvel. "Of that fruit I have eten," he wrote. He was on a fifteen-year vacation to the Far East. The vegetable lamb was something to write home about.

So what the hell were vegetable lambs? They were a folktale about cotton, that peculiar plant whose pods burst open with white fluff, which, for lack of a better comparison, early farmers held up against wool. Cotton was like wool, wool grew on lambs, but cotton came from plants, so maybe there was a lamb inside the plant.

I don't know what Brother Oderich ate in the fourteenth century. I think he was ripped on opium. Regardless, I want to paginate the book of the vegetable lamb's life because narratives don't belong exclusively to the beautiful, the mystical, the long lived. Enough with the shampooed hides of circus ponies. The vegetable lamb was white too.

I imagine Robert Vavra would not be interested in the dire plight of vegetable lambs. I blame him and I don't. There is something helplessly placental about vegetable lambs, as if we would all be better off

the quicker they died. But unicorns are not all sugar and pillows either, and while some of Vavra's unicorns are clearly aggressive, ready to pummel the next groom who approaches with a comb for those impractical manes, none are so aggressive as the unicorn in Albrecht Dürer's 1516 etching *The Rape of Persephone*.

In the etching, Pluto is riding a unicorn as he kidnaps a buxom Persephone. Pluto gropes Persephone's naked hips, clutching her to his side. He is mounted on the unicorn, bracing Persephone against his right thigh. Pluto leans back to balance—the powerful animal and the resistance of the captive frustrate him. His free hand clutches a wisp of mane. Persephone's arms are thrown back in futility. One hand points to the edge of the unicorn's eye, wide as a hole, wide as lust, as if Persephone's pointing is an accusation—"You witness. You are complicit." The unicorn's horn curves down—a scythe. It lacks the spiral detail. His horn looks shaggy, made of bark or hide. His chin is tucked to his neck, and his mouth swallows Persephone's scream. His mane tangles her hair. He is a Clydesdale of a unicorn, ready to crush fairies and piss on rainbows. He probably put Pluto up to this. The unicorn wears no saddle, doesn't fight a bit and bridle. He is wild but obedient to the scent of cunt.

A merging of myth and mythology, it is one of the few works on paper outside of the fantasy genre that shows someone riding a unicorn. It is also one of the few depictions of the unicorn that not only breaks from the status quo, but tramples it. This is no virgin subduing a unicorn in the woods behind King Arthur's castle, no tapestry pet wearing a collar, no coat-of-arms insignia. This is virile, violent. No unicorn-as-metaphor-for-Christ for miles around. The unicorn is a mad mix—muscle bound as a bull, hooves cloven like an old ox, eyes wide as a gator's, a mouth like a raptor. And he has thick hair in all the wrong places, on his hindquarters and where his front legs meet his belly. Odell Shepard says that Dürer was evoking a tradition attributed to Zoroastrian artists, who represented "not any single species of animal but a combination of several species which they regarded as the leaders of the pure creation." This leader of a pure creation is brutal, not the white of heaven but the cold wet whites of the eyes that can't believe what they are seeing.

Last year, I rented the special edition DVD of the 1986 movie *Legend*. Directed by Ridley Scott of *Alien* fame and starring a young Tom

Cruise, *Legend* was a mostly forgettable live-action fantasy using the worn conflict of good versus evil. Highlights included two live unicorns filmed in the blurry sun of slow motion. Forest Dweller Jack (Cruise) introduces the lovely but naive Princess Lily (Mia Sara) to the unicorns. He explains one rule: never touch them. Naturally, she pets one a split second later, and all of creation is thrown out of whack. The black-horned devil named Darkness (Tim Curry) sends his minions to find the unicorns (made mortal by the touch of a mortal). He wants to cut off their horns and squander everything good in the world. Jack and Lily team up with an oddball club of gnomes and sprites as they try to save the unicorns, or in more blatant terms, as they try to restore the ivory-horned metaphor for harmony, love, and respect.

I rented the DVD for the special feature. It was titled "The Fastest Steeds." While footage of the unicorn pair plays, Ridley Scott narrates in a voice-over about how he obtained the unicorns. He sent a producer to Seville, Spain, location of the renowned Andalusians—the same place Vavra pointed his camera just a few years earlier. The producer returned to Britain with six white Andalusians and a trainer named Jorge.

Most of the feature shows the horses on set as unicorns, and Scott's narration is unfocused and not worth remembering. Except for one sequence—one of the more fascinating events I have ever seen.

Grainy footage shows a white mare held by two men, one on each side. She tosses her head against the halter, which is slanted against her eye because the handler on the right, who is not paying attention, is pulling the halter down at the wrong angle. The man on the left lifts a prosthetic horn and twists it onto what appears to be a screw-centered patch of fur glued to the mare's forehead. The handlers chuckle and converse with someone out of frame, but there is no sound for this, just Scott blathering on in voice-over about something other than unicorns.

As the handler secures the horn, the mare lowers her head obediently. The handler on the right still pulls her halter. He is not paying attention, will not ease up now that she has obeyed. He is smoking, and he never takes the cigarette from his mouth. The long ash hangs in the space between man and beast. It hangs perilously, making me nervous. The ash is going to fall into the mare's eye.

In the narrative voice-over, the producer laughs about the travails

of getting the horses to the soundstage during a storm. Then it ends, and the next feature is about how the soundstage (and entire set) burned down in the middle of filming.

I watched again. I paused it, forwarded it frame by frame. Here is the horse. Here is the horn. Here is the unicorn. The resistance, the obedience, the curve of ash, and the black eyes of the mare. I was reminded of other unfortunate footage—a state fair's diving donkeys, or Edison electrocuting an elephant. Routine, unique. Justified in context, bizarre when out.

And singular. Seeing a horn screwed to a horse's head was as rare an event as seeing a unicorn. As a child, I had hoped to see a unicorn but also understood I probably wouldn't. At the same time, I had never even thought about the possibility of seeing a horn screwed onto a forehead. I had finally seen *something* in the two minutes of footage—but *what*?

It is the long ash on the cigarette that remains the important detail. White horse, fake horn, gray ash. Sacred, profane, and simultaneous. Sometimes, the unicorn is a prop to be assembled. In the moment between horse and unicorn, there is a fabulous disappearance.

Legend claims unicorns can disappear at will. Vavra capitalized on this attribute by claiming that unicorns could also disappear from photos. In *Unicorns I Have Known*, he included landscapes of red poppies, no unicorn in sight. The endnotes explain that the unicorn disappeared sometime between the aperture smacking shut and the print dripping dry on a clothesline in a darkroom. Following that line of logic, I might open the book one day to find on every page a simple landscape.

But I don't anticipate a mass vanishing. Unicorns disappear only when it matters. The book is out of print—a compromise? What about the special feature from *Legend*? I used to think those unicorns were real. I wrestled with uneasiness—why didn't all the unicorns disappear? What was the magic that let them be seen?

I am on my way to an answer. I will become a magician yet. Where once I saw the unicorns, I can't stop seeing the long ash of the cigarette and how the halter rubs the wrong way, like an unwitting hand on the genie's lamp.

Unicorns don't exist. But something does. I can't stop seeing the unicorn disappear. I have no strength to look away. What am I collect-

ing? Collect because you believe—I thought that was how it worked, back before I saw the horseshoes. Now I doubt because I desire, and desire because I doubt. If Pluto and his mad unicorn run me down, I might like it. But I am also the mare on the movie set, caught between halter and horn. She and I have learned something. We blink our eyes a heartbeat before the ash falls.

Nominated by Jeff P. Jones, Gettysburg Review