



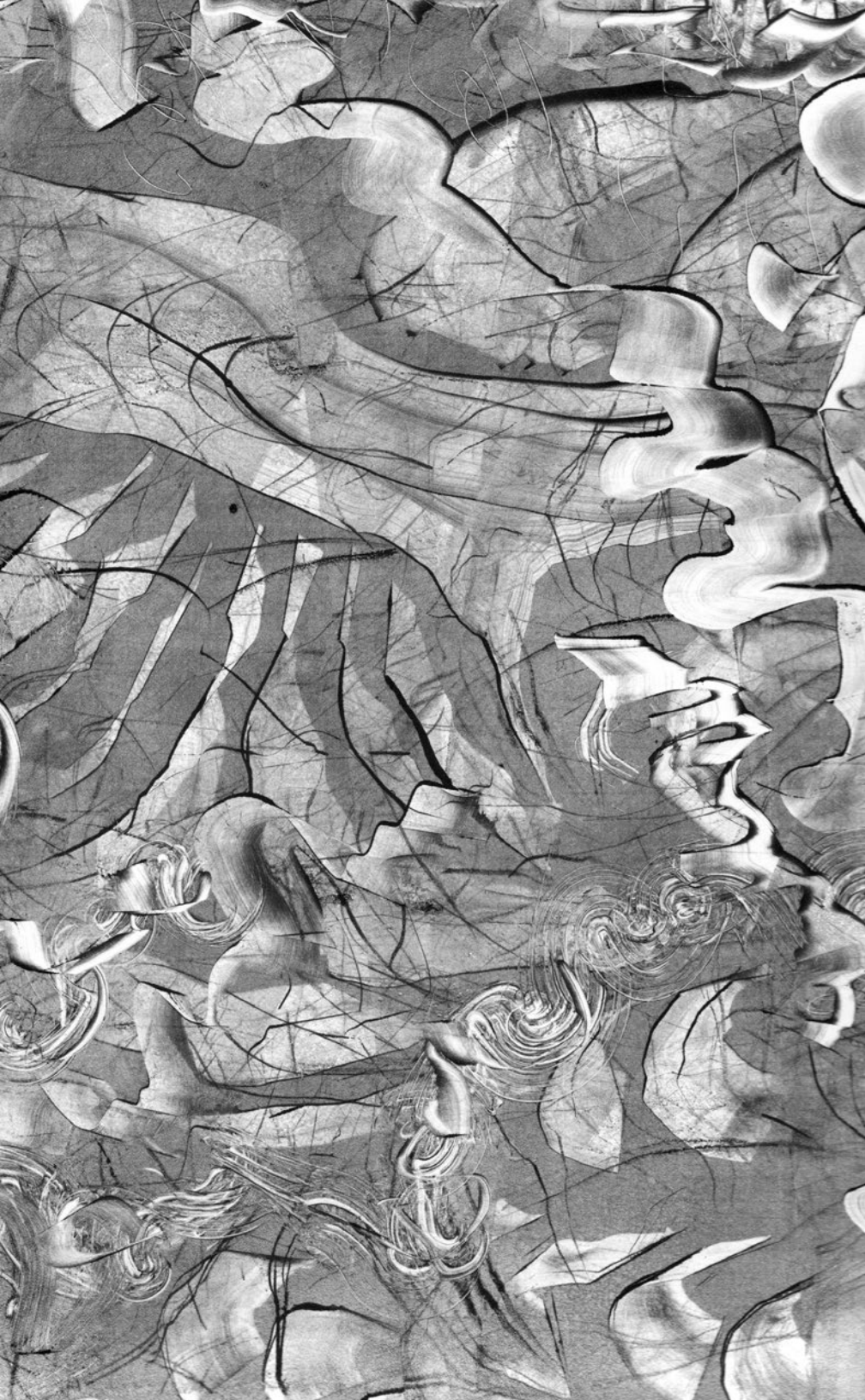
ANATOMY  
— of a —  
MUSEUM  
— or —

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**EVERYTHING YOU EVER  
WANTED TO KNOW ABOUT  
THE *ICELANDIC PHALLOLOGICAL  
MUSEUM*, BUT WERE AFRAID TO ASK**

A. Kendra Greene





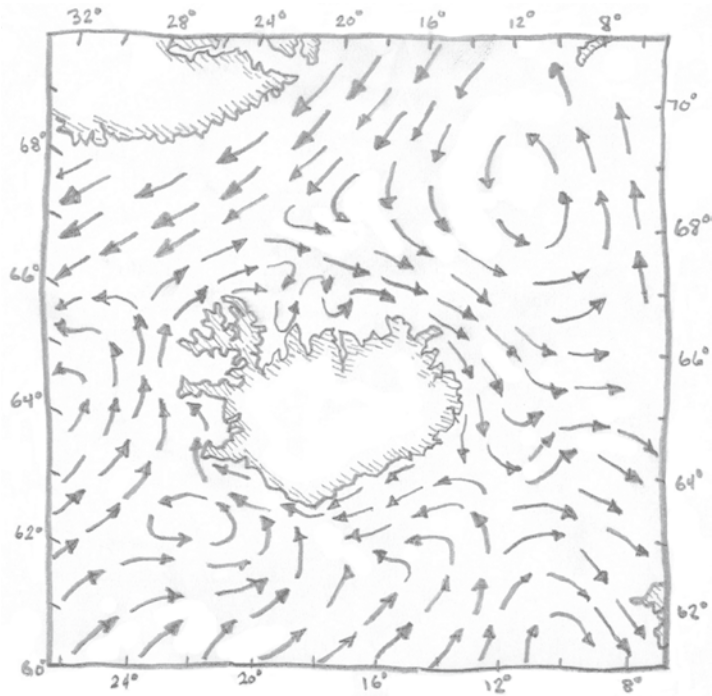
# ANATOMY OF A MUSEUM



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**A. KENDRA GREENE**

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*for Lina, who said the things that sent me  
& for Lilja, who says the things that bring me back*



**I**t's different now. Whaling is legal again only recently—an industry shrunk until one family owns what whaling ships are left—but even though you can get it, people aren't used to eating the meat. It used to be a bounty. The whalers used to give away chunks of leviathan if you showed up at the whaling station and brought a bag to put it in. Plastic grocery bags, mostly. But if you had some garbage bags, if you had some friends; if you called ahead and the whale they had was the right kind of whale—if you brought your own axe—they might save for you a bit of flesh they couldn't use. And so you and your daughter might wrestle the penis of the whale, the tip really, the third that extends from the body when, in death, the retractor muscles relax and the organ comes to equilibrium, wrestle its slippery dead weight into the backseat of your car.

The first Icelander I ever knew was Garðar. Garðar was tall and blond and worked with my sister at a government lab in California. He volunteered to help hang the new cabinets in her new kitchen, and as we sat on the concrete floor smoothing out installation diagrams, I confessed that I really didn't know anything about Iceland. I asked Garðar what he thought I should know.

It occurs to me now that he could have told me about the island skimming the Arctic Circle or having a total national population of 300,000 or the highest literacy rate in the world or a government agency just for making foreign words into Icelandic ones. He could have claimed the singer Björk or the band Sigur Rós and left it at that. He might well have mentioned he was named after another Garðar, the Swedish Viking Garðar Svavarsson, and that for some time Iceland itself was named after *that* Garðar. But he didn't say a thing about Garðarsholmi. He didn't bring up any of that. Straight off the bat, with no further introduction, the one thing he told me about Iceland was this: We have a penis museum.

“Really?” I asked.

“The only one in the world.”

I love a qualified superlative. Best or First or Oldest is all well and good, but the oldest *continually operating* ice cream parlor in the world, for instance, the largest matchbook collection *in Europe*, the *second* oldest museum *west of the Mississippi*—how much more charming are these claims for their tempered braggadocio, their peculiar specificity! And yet, in their precision they manage a curious elusiveness, keeping their calculations to themselves. Are we to suppose this is a humility borne of the limits of even the most scrupulous research, that because there’s just no telling what all exists in the world, honor dictates we claim no more than we can prove? Or do they know well and good that the supreme matchbook collection of the globe is in Uruguay and they just aren’t telling?

At their finest, these titles sound like niches narrowed and narrowed until there is no possible competition. Victory by exclusion. Glory by attrition. And still they are stated with such triumph, as though it were a coveted title to be the self-proclaimed regional nearly almost sometimes runner-up.

By its own estimation, “The Icelandic Phallogical Museum is probably the only museum in the world to contain a collection of phallic specimens belonging to all the various types of mammals found in a single country.”

If any other institution is competing for this honor, it’ll be hard to beat a small island country situated at the kind of extreme latitude that discourages biodiversity. Indeed, if the collecting mission was limited just to the native land mammals of a country, Iceland could have retired after the collection of one single Arctic fox.

And why be limited to just mammals, one wonders? It’s not biology. Fish are certainly fair phallus game, as evidenced by the

Icelandic Phallogological Muesum's own display of two specimens of ocean perch. There are dragonflies with phalluses. And, sure, only 3% of bird species have any kind of phallus, but it's hard to dismiss them as negligible when the duck's penis is a corkscrewing tentacle of an organ that unfurls to a length equal to that of the duck's whole body.

But let's, for the moment, stick to mammals. It sounds straight forward, the Phallogological Museum's collection a kind of mammal-phallus Noah's Ark—all the animals, led in one by one—but in fact there's no official count for the number of mammal species in Iceland. On land you have to decide which of the introduced species count and whether your collecting mission expands with every imported exotic pet. In the water, you have to decide where Iceland ends and the open ocean begins. And then, even once you draw your borders, over time, the ocean itself is changing.

Forty or fifty years ago you wouldn't see a blue whale any farther north than the southern city of Reykjavík. Ditto for the humpback. Since then, changing water temperatures have drawn them farther and farther north, making them ever more present, while, conversely, the right whale and the walrus are sighted less and less often. For that matter, there's less and less ice to float polar bears close enough to swim the rest of the way from Greenland. Historically they arrived often enough that there's legislation about how to deal with them. As it is, the museum has one polar bear penis specimen: boneless, acquired late, the flesh and fur that the national natural history museum didn't need when preparing their skeleton mount. Indeed, belugas used to be spotted off the Icelandic coast, but no longer. The museum has no specimen to represent them. And likely never will.

It's hard to sort out the beginning. Sigurður Hjartarson was born in 1941. Yes, that much is fixed—back when Icelanders were still

born as citizens of Denmark. And in the 1950s he spent summers doing ranch work, up in the north country. And sometimes, in that work, he used a pizzle. And if at the time no one paid much mind to a wizened, dried bull's penis used as a whip, in 1974 it was an object of curiosity. By then Sigurður was headmaster at a secondary school on the south-west coast, where he received a pizzle as a gift from a pupil's parent. He doesn't say why.

Sigurður has a Master's degree in Latin American History. A textbook he wrote is still in use in Iceland's tenth grade classrooms, and the summer we met he was translating an 1806 manuscript on the conquest of Mexico. At this point in his life he is a great visitor of churches and museums; when in Spain he always visits the Goyas at the Prado and a tapestry museum/workshop near the railway station. In 1977 he helped found Friends of the Arctic Fox, which remains active to this day, and has written some fifty articles on the subject. Which is to say a pizzle is not necessarily the obvious thing to give this man.

But, I like to believe, if you *were* going to give a whip to a headmaster, the pizzle would be your choice. Both its use and its origin suggest a certain violence and commensurate authority, and yet to take it out of the country is to take it out of use, to render the dried old skin all the more impotent. Which makes the gift a bit ridiculous, a bite of satire under the mask of tradition. And so it is a good gift after all; if Sigurður has been endowed with anything, it's a sense of humor.

Whatever the intent of the gift, its effect was inspiration. Not for Sigurður—Sigurður kept it on a shelf in his office. But the teachers who worked for him, some of them anyway, worked summers at a whaling station nearby. And once they knew about the pizzle, they started hauling whale penises into Sigurður's office. Which is to say, the initial expansion of the collection started as a joke. Imagine the strange satisfaction of plopping a giant penis

across your boss' desk. Yes, it was a very good joke. And then, it's hard to say when, it was something more.

Hermes, before he was a god of travelers, was a god of transitions and boundaries. Which I wouldn't think about much, even with the oceans warming and all the migrations rerouted, except that I once read about Alcibiades—put on trial in absentia and sentenced to death for the mutilation of the Athenian hermai. Hermai, I should mention, are not people. A herm is a square- or rectangular-based prism of stone the height of a man with the head of a god and, here's the thing, male genitalia protruding from that prism in exactly the place you would find it if the prism were a body and not a slab. I have a certain affection for the hermai. I like to think, though it is certainly not true, that they represent a kind of missing link in the evolution of sculpture. I like to think first there were slabs and then there were busts and then, having mastered the head, someone decided to add the next most important element, and later you get legs and then arms and before you know it we have—both at the National Mall and in the history of representational sculpture—the Washington Monument on one end and the Lincoln Memorial on the other.

When I traveled in Greece I did not meet the hermai at crossroads, as used to be their place, but in museums, where it was easy to dismiss them as juvenile or caricature or the work of an artist too lazy to finish the job. The hermai vary, of course—not even all of them are meant to be Hermes—but I encountered so many with their lascivious grins and lavishly exaggerated genitalia that in my youth and prudishness I could not take them seriously.

And yet, the first time I ever seriously thought about penises was in a Greek museum. Specifically, it was the national museum in Athens, where one bright March day our classics professor Jorgen Ernsten was wearing an ascot, printed with tiny elephants

and palm trees, and casually pointing out that the male genitalia represented in the statues of Classical Greece were disproportionate to the rest of the figure. Too small, in fact.

Jorgen Ernsten had been trying to talk about identification, about how no one could tell if the bronze in front of us was Zeus or Poseidon because whatever the bearded fellow had been holding in his right hand was lost, and without that lighting bolt/trident/something-else-entirely, all we could really say was that the arms were too long for the body. We might have had a different conversation altogether if someone had brought up the eyeless eye sockets, but a group of young men in our cohort elected a representative among them and asked, instead, about the penis.

We can only guess that the elongated arms are because of perspective, that the statue was not situated to emphasize wingspan but with the viewer in the same plane, directly in the path of whatever was being held up as if to be thrown. We just don't know why the arms are so long, but there was definitely an answer for penis scale. At least for purposes of representation, the penis was considered by the Greeks, if not exactly vulgar, then certainly something base. A constant reminder of the physical, the carnal, the hard to control. It was an animal attribute. Man in his ideal, however, was a thing of reason, able to subvert the animal, and so there you were: great men without great endowments.

The males in our group snickered involuntarily. They'd been wondering for a while, actually, and were relieved to have an explanation. But the enlightenment hit me differently. I hadn't noticed. Normally in a hall of naked figures I'd find a way to casually avert my eyes, to draw attention neither to my looking nor my not looking. But this new information made a difference. I felt the permission to look. Not just look, even, but *scrutinize*—and not just permission, but obligation. Just the difference in bellybuttons on figures at Zeus' Temple in Olympia is enough to conclude

that one workshop made the pediment sculptures at the temple's front and another workshop made the pediment sculptures on the back side. One must always pay attention, it turns out. So much depends on an outie. And penis size, I was shocked to discover, meant something after all.

The drinking helped. You cannot receive a whale penis, I think we will agree, and not have your friends find out. Not in a town of five thousand people. Not when these are friends you drink with. And it probably does not matter that your friends are academics and members of parliament: someone is going to make a joke. Indeed, the jokes will get harder and harder to resist. Your friends will insert them everywhere. They'll become a handful. It's natural. There's no helping it. No matter how erudite or how innocent you imagine yourself to be, you will discover everything is funnier when you talk about a penis museum. And eventually you will—you must—surrender to its charms.

And so it was at the bar in Akranes. Before you knew it, Sigurður and his friends were joking their way through the finer points of organizing a hypothetical establishment. The Icelandic acronym they coined for the Phallogological Museum, RIS/HIS, is a play on words that translates as "Rise Happy." The English word *Phallogological* is Sigurður's own coinage, but he credits a colleague in the Latin department for describing the institution as a *Phalloteca*. Oh, they were generous with each other: their contributions rewarded with honorifics from the nonexistent institution, until every one of them was pronounced, at the very least, an upright member in good standing.

None of this was raised as a serious possibility, of course. But that it existed as any kind of possibility, no matter how dubious, changed things. An Icelandic Phallogological Museum was, if only remotely, possible. It had been given the special power of some-

thing with a name. The collection may have started with a whip, but the museum, I believe, was born at the bar.

They weren't necessarily accurate prognosticators. No one at the bar said, "Wouldn't it be great if your daughter and daughter-in-law had a bit of space in their children's clothing shop for your museum and you could sit whittling penis souvenirs while grading papers?" But so it went. The women were having trouble making rent, so offered Sigurður half the 350 square meter storefront in a tidy little alley off Reykjavík's main shopping street. Sigurður was already in his third decade of collecting, and he had representations for 34 of the island's 36 mammal species sitting at home. So it was settled. He moved sixty-two specimens into his half of the shop, and The Icelandic Phallological Museum opened to the public on August 23, 1997. It was Sigurður's 56<sup>th</sup> birthday.

The first article about the collection was published 17 years before there was any museum to visit. The early thrust of the collection was whales, and by 1980 there were all of 13 specimens to report on. Still, a local Reykjavík paper decided to cover the penises, under a headline that translates as: "30kg Whale Penis Delivered in a Plastic Bag." When I ask Sigurður how a collection becomes a museum, he shrugs. It's the same at the Volcano Museum out on the peninsula. These things, he says, who knows? The local newspaper finds out you have an interest and they publish something, people ask to see what you've got, they make appointments to come over, and the whole thing matures, transitions. With every inquiry, the private collection becomes a bit more public. And then one day strangers are giving you money.

In Sigurður's case, someone from a local women's group might call to arrange a field trip, or a friend hosting a few foreign visitors would ask to stop by. In Iceland, a bachelorette party is not a hen party but a "goose party," and the goose parties started calling, too.

Maybe it means nothing. Almost surely, it's coincidence. But I will note that all the museum's speeches opening night were made by women. The men—all the writers and parliamentarians, the left-leaning, beer-drinking men who had been gabbing and joshing and encouraging the museum along for years—were silent. They stood on the sidelines and clapped. As if by that time there was nothing left to be said. Only one of them, a musician, had anything to offer up at all: an original composition he played later that night, when everyone had settled in, when the speeches were over, and the less serious talk had resumed.

The first thing I see when I enter the museum is a half-naked man. Not a photograph or a painting or a sculpture of such a figure, but an actual man standing there with his shirt off. He's a fit specimen, early twenties, and as I top the stairs I notice there's a second man, a brunette this time, in exactly the same state of undress.

"Medium," they're telling the curator. The curator, who seems to find nothing out of the ordinary in this transaction, says nothing in any case, steps into a back room. When he returns a moment later the two shirtless Scotsmen pay for two t-shirts: the brunette covering himself in the IPM seal and the redhead donning a block of text listing the museum's name in seven languages.

The curator is organizing their krona into the slots of a wooden cashbox carved from good Icelandic birch into the shape of a phallus the size of a lunchbox. I am doing nothing so useful, and so they appeal to me to be their photographer. I hear something like, "she doesn't know yet" as they set up the shot. The southwest corner of the main gallery will be their backdrop, the two men flanked by three of the more impressive phallic specimens on display. The redhead shows me where to stand, makes sure the killer whale and the sperm whale specimens are in the frame. And then the two men drop their pants. I click the shutter.

The redhead, it turns out, is a zoologist. His brunette friend is a biologist, and they need this picture because they're on a swim team. There's a tradition, they tell me, when on holiday, of posing in the team swimming briefs in front of monuments and tourist attractions. The swimming briefs are easy to pack. The zoologist and the biologist believe in tradition.

"The pyramids at Giza, the pyramids in Mexico, the Parthenon..." the zoologist explains to me, listing previous photo ops. "One guy got arrested in front of the White House last year," he says with some combination of envy and pride. "We were hoping we'd get chucked out of here, so we could say, 'We got chucked out of the penis museum,' but the guy," he says, nodding to the curator, "he's too nice!"

Sigurður Hjartarson is written up more often for his gruffness, but after 131 articles and one documentary film about his museum, perhaps he's just tired of the same questions. How many ways can you ask: Why a penis museum? And, ultimately, what else is there to say in response but: Why not?

Twenty-seven countries on at least four continents have published articles about the Icelandic Phallogological Museum. The ones in languages I can read characterize the place as *weird*, *kooky*, *odd-ball*, *odd*, *infamous*, *unique*, and *sadistic*. Mostly it's a matter of headlines, and it probably shouldn't bother me, but flipping through the museum's archives—nine scrapbooks on a bookshelf where *Whales, Dolphins and Porpoises* touches covers with *Sexualia: from prehistory to cyberspace*—I begin to take umbrage, I begin to bristle at how rarely anyone seems to notice what an appealing little museum it is. It's curious, yes, but also exotic, familiar, with chairs to sit on and sized to the average attention span. Plus, frankly, it's not all that odd a place.

From a certain perspective, it's downright traditional. Without the individual collector or the amateur naturalist, what mu-

seums would we have left? Both are fundamental and ever-present pillars of museum history. If Sigurður Hjartarson's museum is odd, perhaps it's because it's so old-fashioned, not because it's such newfangled novelty. And anyway, novelty *itself* is a museum tradition. You want to see a human molar rooted in a rooster's skull like a bony comb? You want a hermaphroditic giant moth with one wing the size and pattern of a male and the other that of a female? You want a gemstone in a color you didn't know existed? A mineral formed of its own composition into a perfect cube? Vintage Valentines with racist punch lines? You want to be surprised, you get yourself to a museum. Museums were born of novelty. They specialize in it. And furthermore, they do it well.

But some, the Phallogical Museum reminds me, do it better than others.

The museum is lit, in part, by a string of scrotum-skin lamps. We are standing directly beneath them when Sigurður points up. He has been explaining that it took him a while to find the right round form to stretch the skin as it dried. He points at an early one, and as I look up into the globe of it, I see geometry. I am trying to remember how small you can make a soccer ball when he asks if I recognize the pattern. The skin is denser at the seams, glows darker at those folds, and it dawns on me the lamp skin, by shrinking to the stretching form, has imprinted in the pattern of a handball.

There are penis shrines and penis sculptures and penis festivals the world round. You want sex, there's the Chinese Sexual Culture Museum 60 miles northwest of Shanghai, the Musée de l'Érotisme in Paris, a dozen others in Amsterdam and New York and Tokyo and who knows where else. But this is no more a museum about sex than it is about urination. It is not a museum of function, but of form, and often then not even the complete appa-

ratus intact, just what can be cut, what can be kept.

Perhaps this begins to explain why there are so few museums of specialized anatomy. There's the Nose Academy at the Museum of Student Life in Sweden's Lund University. If you hang around the Phallogical Museum long enough, someone is bound to mention the woman in Europe planning a vagina museum, but it's to be a museum of vagina *art*, not vagina specimens. Or someone will enquire of the curator, "Do you know you have a colleague in the Netherlands?" A collector of testicles, it turns out. Animals only, it turns out—the whole thing minor in comparison, and not even a museum. Just as I was beginning to wonder when exactly comparative anatomy disappeared from the popular imagination, the conversation had already moved on to less scholarly topics. For instance, did I know that Tamparey, Finland makes a traditional penis-shaped chocolate?

"They give them to the ladies."

This information is imparted to me by a resident of said Finnish town, a man who has just been taking pictures of his two sons. Photography is permitted in the museum. Visitors may flash all they like. And so the Finn has posed them, first the taller boy, then the shorter one, next to Specimen A2h: an adult sperm whale beached alive in Hrótafjörður in 2000. The whale was 15.8 meters long at death, and died from an intestinal blockage. Only the tip of penis was taken, and at 170cm and 70kg it's both a popular inducement for portraiture and a little bigger than most of the people who have their picture taken with it. If it were brass, there would certainly be a bright shine on its tip and a band around the back where visitor after visitor would drape an arm around it like some old school chum and grin. Visitors are as well behaved here as in any museum, but I notice that the women, especially the women, touch things. Girls, too, touch things. But men, I notice, prefer to take pictures.

The Finn leaves a chocolatier's card at the curator's desk, says to give him a call, maybe the chocolatier will donate a mold. He gathers up his boys and his camera gear and heads towards the door. He mentions in parting, as if anyone was wondering, "They make them in white chocolate, too."

The Icelandic Phallogological Museum is smaller than you'd think. The domestic collection of 212 specimens fits in one room. The combined 64 items in the foreign and folkloric collections share an oversized alcove. And yet, still, it's a little overwhelming. The first thing I actually do at the Icelandic Phallogological Museum, moments after I have crossed its threshold, is pause long enough to visit the loo.

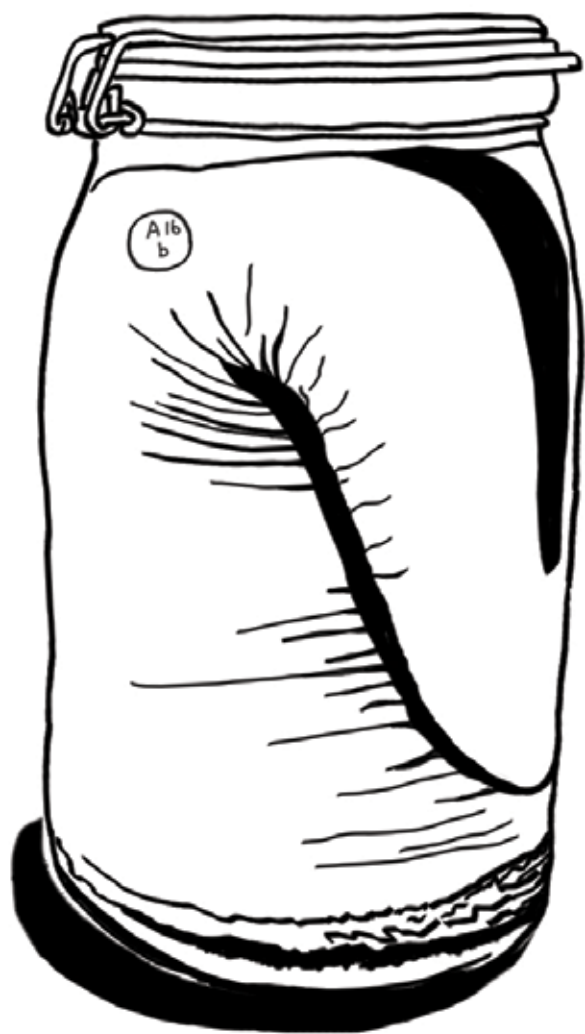
Even for those 60% of visitors who won't be using a phallus to relieve themselves, the water closet seems a natural introduction to the subject—indeed the very architecture of the museum suggests the option. This is not by design. The design suggested for the museum, according to a cartoon in the archives, is a long corridor of a gallery met at one end by a pair of circular structures housing a gift shop in one lobe and a café in the other—a structure not unlike the actual design of Iceland's international airport, the aerial views of which were much commented on after its unveiling. No, that the museum should be here in the peculiar architecture at Hédinsbraut 3a has only to do with the local bank, which offered the location to the museum for pennies on the dollar, glad to have something occupy the hundred-year-old house, someone to look after it and stop up its drafts.

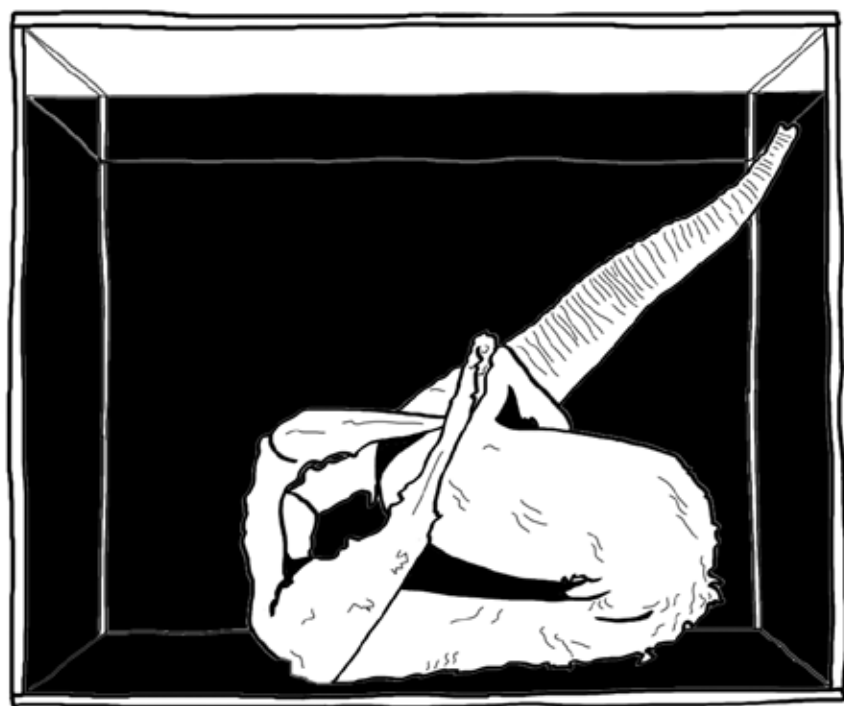
You wouldn't necessarily guess it for a former house. The main door opens not so much to a room as to a landing, a small foyer presenting two options to continue on. Stairs up and to the left arrive at the museum proper; down and to the right they deliver you to locked storage and the W.C. The little signs for the men's and

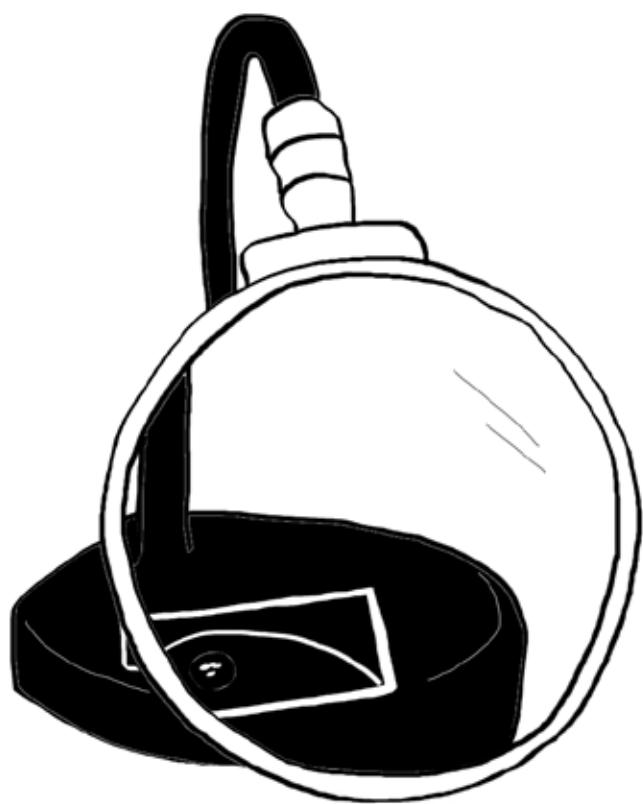
the ladies' aren't of a set. The men's is a painted figure, a shingle of wood cut into the outline of a naked boy peeing into a bowl. The craftsmanship is a little rough, but the action is unmistakable. The ladies' room, on the other hand, is more discrete, mysterious, marked by a porcelain oval displaying a Victorian lady covered up from floor-touching hem to neck ruffle to gloved hands. Unlike the naked boy, she suggests nothing of the room's utility, hints coyly that perhaps behind that door you might—who knows what?—go for a stroll in the country, or adjust your boots without indiscreetly flashing someone an ankle.

If you ask Sigurður why no vaginas, why not a museum of genitalia generally? He will tell you, with the wink of a man married some fifty years, "Women, in all things, are more complicated than men." He's not being arch. It's already a technical challenge to display the emphatically convex. And, to be frank, a museum can only show what it can keep. The museum, this museum, is, as much as anything, a study in preservation. And preservation, especially here, is experiment.

The first two whale specimens, a fin whale and a sei whale, were filled with silicon, then salt to eat away the fat. Sigurður concedes, "I shouldn't have done that." One has to do something, of course, the time is ticking. He chose, and chose quickly, and to be fair that choice has lasted forty years, even if now the skin of the sei whale is cracked down the left side in a meandering squiggle, the skin pulled apart like banks of a lazy river. A different sei whale phallus represents a different choice: bent in half and folded over itself to fit a jar too shallow and too wide for its content. For that matter, one minke whale penis was hollowed, salted, dried and placed on a wooden plaque; another minke specimen was left whole, complete with retractor muscles and pelvic bones, at rest in its own aquarium like an aberrant nautilus, under a glass plate pregnant with cloudy drops of condensation.

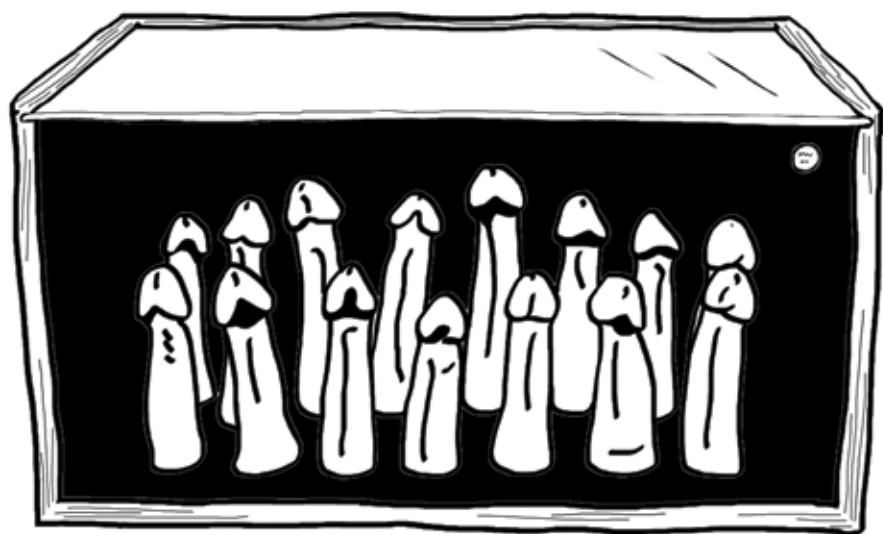












Most of the specimens are not what you'd call scientifically prepared. You would know this from the way disintegrating tissue clouds the formalin in flakes and fluffy blooms. You can see how the skin of a sperm whale specimen has pulled away from its wooden core, a thin mottling black dermis and the rest gone to suede. A 60 pound blue whale penis that once barely fit in the backseat is now shaggy and shriveled to one third its size. Meanwhile, the formalin in a different blue whale specimen's container has been changed three times to clear the blood and oil, most recently three years ago, and since then a layer of oil thick as my finger has leached from the organ and coagulated so that it floats like a plate of amber, 40cm beneath the actual glass top.

Formalin works because it kills. It doesn't maintain or support or somehow nourish a specimen into longevity. Formalin simply kills whatever bacteria and fungi might attack or decay the tissue. It's terribly toxic. It kills everything. Drop the bottle of formaldehyde you're handling and you have five, maybe six seconds to get out of the room, out of the building. You always use it diluted; just a 3.5% formalin solution is enough to keep a specimen forever. Sigurður had to get a permit to handle the stuff back in the 1970s, though no regulators have checked on him since.

It takes two or three days for the formalin to stiffen a specimen. Hopefully you've positioned it well. Hopefully you've drawn out the blood. After that, the magic's done, and the specimen can be switched to storage in alcohol. But, although vastly safer, alcohol is more expensive than formalin, so not everyone bothers.

It was easier in Mexico. Sigurður, of course, has other collections. He collects books, music, bugs, pre-Columbian and indigenous South American art. Growing up, his four children and their friends were always most interested in the bugs, despite the growing number of phallus specimens collecting in the den. For a year the family traveled widely in Mexico, to museums and li-

braries and everything that caught their fancies. And with just a little cotton dabbed in formaldehyde, they subdued and collected all the tarantulas they wanted and more insects than they could name.

Insects, you will know if you so much as dust in the corners, desiccate exquisitely. They virtually dry themselves. When it comes to the simple illusion of enduring form, let us praise the desolate exoskeleton! And then let us bow our heads, and pity those curators ever endeavoring to preserve a pound of flesh.

The important thing is to listen to the news. The news will report whale strandings and polar bear landings and then you make a few calls. Also, people call the museum. "We have a walrus," they say, or "the boat's just brought in something." A farmer up the road loses his prize stud and asks to make a donation in memorium.

Nobody talks about it as a collaboration, but the collection is, always has been, contingent on contacts. Sigurður would have a better polar bear specimen except, as he says, "Greenlanders are worse than Icelanders—they *never* answer a letter." Sigurður is diligent, but in the end, most things come by accident.

Once, some Icelanders were consultants to the sugar industry in Africa. There, an elephant with a sweet tooth had become a nuisance. If an elephant takes a liking to the cane, there's nothing to stop it forever trampling the green-magenta fields, eating its fill. If you are the elephant, this is nirvana. If you own the field, you kill the elephant. After this particular elephant was killed, some local guys cut off the penis of the dead pachyderm and were playing with it, knocking it around like a soccer ball, when the Icelanders intervened. We can do better, they said. We have an idea. The ad hoc footballers gave up their prize and the Icelanders made some calls. And so the curator put up 6,000ISK for the taxidermist to do the prep work and six times that much to ship the

African offering up to the Arctic Sea. Iceland has strict laws about the importation of meat, but bones and preserved specimens come through customs just fine.

In some ways, the specimens themselves are not half as remarkable as the fact that they can be collected in the first place. Imagine: you can drop by a whaling station or call up someone you read about in the paper, arrive with a sharp blade and a container, and go home with a specimen. Strangers call from Africa. This guy, he loved this ram—it had given him more than 200 sheep. When it died he called the curator to ask, “Do you want his specimen?”

No animal has ever been killed for the museum. But, if you know a hunter or a trapper or the crew sent to dispatch a rogue polar bear, what’s the harm in asking for what they won’t use? Who’s to miss such a small bit of mink?

I don’t know what an American Marten is, but I’ve seen its penis. When Sigurður retired from teaching in 2004, he moved to the northern coastal town of Húsavík, and he took the museum with him. In postcards of the old museum space in Reykjavík, there are little pictures of whales near their labels. In the museum’s Húsavík incarnation, even that bit of context is stripped away. Instead, the specimens are marked with little green dots, like tags in a yard sale.

The dots adhere to various jars and mounts and frames, and their code of letters and numbers translates reliably to listings in the guide available at the front desk. The founding specimen of the collection, the pizzle, is marked by “D-10-a,” which corresponds to the additional information in the guide, “young adult bull, tanned, was collected in 1974.” It hangs on the wall between a testicle lampshade and Part I, Act VI, Scene IV of Shakespeare’s *Henry IV*. In addition to Shakespeare, there are

posted passages from Melville and the Oxford English Dictionary on other walls. Folkloric specimen PF119, the Elfin Ram, cites a novel by Iceland's Nobel Prize winner in Literature, Halldór Laxness, but in general the walls are mute. If you want to know anything more than what you can see, you have to carry the words with you.

The guide is printed in six languages, each bound separately. To guess by the curl of their pages, the preference, in descending popularity, is for: Deutsch, English, Français, Icelandic, Italiano, and Español. Visitors ask for Russian, Croatian, Finnish, Lithuanian, but so far the languages of the Icelandic Phallological Museum are the languages that were taught at the school where Sigurður was teaching when he opened the museum, every department chipping in their share. Sigurður claims there are three languages of the IPM: Icelandic, which hardly anyone speaks; Latin, which nobody speaks; and Esperanto, which nobody speaks, "but everyone should."

Where there are jars, the jars are capped with every kind of lid: jars of jams and mustards and pickles washed out and filled with specimens, the metal lids twisted back on and taped shut. There are canning jars, sealed with their orange rubber rings. If it weren't for the labels, I'd believe a collection of sea slugs and tubers had been mixed in with the penises, so many of the shapes more familiar to me as aquatic flora and fauna.

*Capra hircus*, the goat specimens, are notably hairy, look like animals unto themselves, like little opossums curled up and sleeping. The dried phallus of an old boar mounted on a rock looks exactly like some springing desert wildflower. The skunk's penis bone has the lilt and lobe of a day lily's anther, while the penis bones of young Greenland seals are thin and tan as matchsticks. I assume a narwhal tusk is just another baculum until I read its label more carefully, realize the ivory taper is not a penis bone

but a tooth. Of course it's a tooth; why shouldn't it be? Even if it's housed in a glass jar and metal lid identical to the ones storing the rotten phallus of a long-finned pilot whale, five jars over.

Occasionally I'm disappointed. I mean, who would ever know from the four feline penis bones on view that the fleshy phallus surrounding the bone is barbed? As long as we're talking about penises, isn't that a thing worth knowing?

There are three museums in Húsavík, all of them rather recent. The Husavik Whale Museum opened in 1997; followed in 2002 by the combination natural history/folk/maritime/art museum and district archives—known collectively as the Culture House Húsavík Museum; and then the Icelandic Phallogical Museum arrived in 2004. In his paper *Globalized Members: The Icelandic Phallogical Museum and Neoliberalism*, anthropologist Sigurjón Baldur Hafsteinsson links the creation of the Phallogical Museum with what he identifies as the ideologies of a neo-liberal government elected in 1991.

Dr. Hafsteinsson argues that party policies stressed entrepreneurship, commercialization of the culture industry, and enhancing the entertainment value of cultural practices. They also supported individual freedoms, including sexual freedom, and the Phallogical is hardly the only museum to benefit. The second largest town in Iceland has 20,000 people in it, and the third largest to the absolute smallest towns are a fraction of that—yet there are no shortage of museums. When I start asking, it's hard to find a museum that opened before the 1990s. It may signify nothing more than a once poor nation growing wealthy, but at least anecdotally, it seems like something (or some things) happened in the recent past and caused Iceland a bloom of museums. Sigurður cannot enumerate any shifts in culture that influenced his decision to start the museum, but he does say this: "I wouldn't have tried it twenty years before."

At the Culture House I learn about tin water wings and how your breath can freeze in your beard until you have to saw off your mustache in order to breathe. And, I learn this: *Thus, in Icelandic, a piece of unexpected good luck is often called 'hvalreki'—'a whale stranding.'*

I am thinking about *hvalreki* in the Whale Museum, the “only museum in Europe dedicated exclusively to whales and whale related topics.” It turns out, the residents of Húsavík didn't need the Icelandic Phallogical Museum to see a sea-going mammal phallus. The Whale Museum already had the testicles and penis of a harbor porpoise. And when an adult whale beached itself on the north-west coast in November 1997, a specimen notable for having survived for some time without a lower jaw, the jawless skeleton went to the Whale Museum, and the penis, with one testicle, went to the Phallogical Museum, now just up the street.

The whole of Iceland uses one phonebook. The national population of 300,000 people fits comfortably in one volume and, as if to suggest that everyone knows everyone anyway, the listings are done by first name. I'm told this has less to do with the tremendous familiarity between inhabitants of a small island than with the simple practicalities of a patronymic naming system. In Iceland you take your last name from your father, so parents only rarely have the last names of their children, and siblings have different last names according to their gender, my brother christened as a Warrenson and myself a Warrensdóttir.

It takes days at the museum for it to dawn on me that this convention allows for a certain kind of deduction, that the artist Thorgerdur Sigurðardóttir must be some Sigurður's daughter, and most likely the Sigurður in question is the curator himself. With a little more genealogy I later surmise that Embla Magnúsdóttir is not just the twelve-year-old artist behind “Facies clarae Emblensis

(Famous Faces)”—a collage rendering of Justin Timberlake’s head on a giant standing phallus body cut from a magazine’s slick pink page—she is also Sigurður’s grandchild, the daughter of his son-in-law Magnús.

In addition to the catalogue of specimens, the Icelandic Phallogical Museum has a separate guide covering “Works of Art and Other Artistic Oddments,” which are on display throughout the museum. The guide lists 207 separate items, with their faux latin names in parenthesis. Take number 12, for example, The Desirable Marzipan Man (*Homo gastronomicus Marsipanicus*). And number 13, The Christmas Soap (*Homo jabonicus natalicus*). It’s an exotic roll call, altogether: The Philippine Ashtray, The Barcelona Spoon; The Canary Islands Nipple, The Camden Clothes Hanger; The Danish Bottleopener, and The Urinating Portuguese. The distant nation of Papua New Guinea has yielded not one, but two phallic sheaths: one for festive occasions, and one for everyday use. Modesty forbids further explanation of The Golden Birthday Present or the Very Masculine Apron, but suffice it to say, they are not among the packages the curator has received and rejected as too vulgar, as so thoroughly lacking in artistic value that they had to be thrown away.

Reading the museum’s Oddments catalog, Sigurður’s family connections are especially obvious. To start, there’s the Pink McDonalds Man (*Homo rubicundus McDonaldensis*), a gift from the curator’s grandson after visiting a McDonald’s in Reykjavík. There is no longer a McDonald’s anywhere in Iceland, yet this artifact is preserved. Continuing on, the French Keyring was a gift from one daughter who also brought home the Thailand Medieval Jewel and The Self-Conscious Chinaman. The next year another daughter and two grandchildren returned home with The Columbian Love Play and Two Cocktail Straws. For Christmas 2007, the curator unwrapped the Gentleman’s Willy Care Kit and a Columbian Indi-

an Penis Flute, from a granddaughter and a grandson, respectively. The Flyman (*H. operimenti Karsnesius*), a triangular seated figure, was carved by the curator's youngest daughter, Lilja, when she was 13, and it has been part of the collection ever since.

I meet Lilja when she comes to watch the museum for a week, something Sigurður's offspring take turns at. The museum is open 114 days a year, from late May straight through early September. The rest of the year, when the museum is closed but Sigurður is still in town, it's not entirely closed. He leaves a note on the door with his cell phone number. Appointments, the note informs the reader, are available for the "very eager."

"They always call," Sigurður says, though of course there's no way to know.

Lilja is a novelist with short blond hair and her father's great blue eyes. She is wearing wool earrings made by her sister the day we meet, and she confirms that the collection has inspired gift-giving in the family for decades. I think of my own father, a pharmacist-turned-lawyer who always has a book about language or the Civil War on his nightstand. Through no fault of his own, he has always been the most challenging person in the family to buy gifts for. My brother and I, in a moment of genius, once realized we could *ask* him what he wanted, that we didn't have to pick his gifts on our mild hunches. So we asked him what he liked, and he said, after some reflection, "Deposing doctors." We fantasized about putting a doctor with a big red bow under the tree. Instead we bought him another book. Which is to say, if Sigurður weren't a curator, who would know what to give him for his birthday? Honestly, it's going to be a problem.

I had been thinking about the artist Thorgerdur Sigurðardóttir because of her sculpture *Our Silver Boys*, installed on the museum's north wall. It is elegant in its austerity: 15 silver casts rep-

representing the Icelandic National Handball Team collected in a vitrine twice the size of a shoe box. You have to understand that the handball team is famous here, famous like a boy band, with Icelanders able to name each and every member. When they took silver at the 2008 Olympic Games, it was a very big deal for this one-phonebook nation. And it gave Sigurður an idea. One of the Olympians was a former student of Sigurður's, as well as the son of a colleague. One phone call to the player's mom and Sigurður had the phone number to call the team in Beijing. It was loud in Beijing. The player answered, but it was hard to hear over a room in jubilation. And though everyone seemed agreeable in these initial talks, the actual logistics of organizing fifteen superstars to sit (stand?) for a mold to be made of each of their penises proved problematic.

I should say it is a lovely installation. Pithy, even. How simply does it point out issues of masculinity, and competition, and the intersection of personal and national pride. It's a witty observation on penis-as-trophy, not to mention a subtler reference to issues of gender identity and sex-segregation in athletic arenas. It's more than just a novel commemoration of a small country medaling on the world stage—but even at that, it's really pretty great.

One day, after I've been hanging around long enough, Sigurður suggests I pull up a seat. He clears away some stacks of info sheets, makes a spot on the desk for us to enjoy afternoon cookies and apple juice. Over three days we work through the box of *Haust Grahamskex* whole wheat biscuits, breaking each thin waffle-patterned cookie in half, eating them slowly. When I ask him about *Our Silver Boys*, he tells me a few one-liners. "No, they aren't in the same order as the picture," he says. And, "I won't say which one is which, but I think their wives could tell you!"

And then he tells me what also sounds true. When he couldn't get all the medalists together to make the molds, Sigurður asked

his daughter to make fifteen ceramic models of various heights and hilts, and after much searching they discovered a silver car paint that approximated a convincing silver finish, made the ceramic shine like metal.

If you ask Sigurður, his favorite part of the museum is the Folkloric Collection. It's certainly among the museum's oldest collections, has roots that go back to the bar. By the numbers, it's the most modest of the Phallogological collections: a single case of twenty-one specimens. The Folkloric Collection fits in a corner in an alcove dominated by foreign phalluses, by the American black bear and tammar wallaby, and pigmy shrew.

But though it's a small collection, it's also a kind of alternative primer of Icelandic mythology. In the glass case you'll find the phallic specimens of Beach Murmurers and Sea-Howlers and Shadow Hounds. An Icelandic Christmas lad, "found deceased at the foot of Mt. Esja near Reykjavík on January 6<sup>th</sup> 1985. Presented to RIS-HIR by a former mayor of Reykjavík on January 6, 2000." There's also a Beach-walker, "found in SE Iceland in 1848 by Jón Magnússon, who was said to be 'truthful, respectable, restrained, and acceptably intelligent.'" What's more, there's a Merman, a Sea Bull, a Water-horse. A Whirler, a Changeling, a Foxacat—plus The Nasty Ghost of Snæfjall and The Corpse-eating Cat of Thingmull. All of it, if you didn't know better, represented in stones and bones and gourds and wood. The specimen of Huldu-madur, or hidden man, is suggested only by a jar filled with fluid and nothing else. It's the gift of a member of parliament. Sigurður promises me it's there.

A friend tells me that when she was a little girl and all her friends were boys, she once dreamed that their penises started to rise and swell, grew bigger and bigger, enveloped their legs until they were

mermen and, flipping their penis-tails, they swam away in the dirty ditch water. What she remembers is how lonely it was when they left. If this is not folklore, if this is not myth, then I want some new collection, some cabinet for tails and dreams and awe and dread.

Lilja says some feminists like the museum because it takes the phallus off its pedestal: shows it as just another thing in the world, stripped of its mystique. Which is fascinating, given that the specimens quite literally are on pedestals—some of them, anyway, that's if they aren't mounted to the wall like trophies or set up in monumental prisms too big to be raised off the floor.

But of course they're right. What's interesting about the Icelandic Phallogical Museum is this: It's a museum about a word. A word charged and freighted in ways that so very often have nothing to do with the biology of the thing it names. Touring the museum, every physical specimen is a reminder of the distance between the thing a word like *penis* describes and all the other things the word connotes. It's sort of an embarrassing disconnect. How shabby of us, in the bluster of association and innuendo, to have constantly invoked the word while stubbornly neglecting to consider the plain bald fact of its fat and flesh and skin.

More broadly, it is a museum of language, of expectations, of what one imagines a phallogical museum to be, and the dry joke of what it turns out to be. The joke: it is exactly what it claims to be. Wall to wall penises. Maybe the odd testicle, here and there, some art and some artifacts, but mostly it really is just a big old room full of penises.

It's a neat trick, the double inversion of expectations. You go to the museum, I think, because you hear "phallogical museum" and you can't believe that what you imagine actually exists. And, sure enough, it doesn't. You know as soon as you walk in

the door that you had it all wrong. But if the museum is not what you'd imagined could exist, it is something better. It is something it would never had occurred to you to consider. It is the gift of something you could not have imagined on your own.

And here's the kicker: you wouldn't want it to be what you were imagining. You are glad to find it so sober. This is a museum of substance. Its gift shop is small and mild: 40 postcards, t-shirts in two designs, a few books, and the scrotum skin lamps. Until recently you could get birch keychains sculpted by the curator's own hands. Yes, whatever you were expecting, it is more surprising and fulfilling to discover something charmingly stranger yet. Lo and behold: comparative morphology really *is* kind of illuminating—you weren't expecting that.

You arrive prepared to be shocked, but it turns out what's startling is that someone has dared dedicate a museum to something so very common—the penis presented not as vulgar, but as ordinary. Indeed, how easy to forget there are any other penises in the world. If you don't happen to wear a raccoon's penis bone for luck or buy a souvenir oosik in Alaska, you've probably never conceived of a baculum. And even then, with one slipped in your pocket or packed on the diagonal in your checked luggage, you probably don't know the word, much less the plain fact that most mammal males have these penis bones, including every primate but us.

Last summer it had to be Baroque. Now it's Beethoven's piano concertos and string quartets, two disks traded in and out of the machine all summer until they break. The CD player is tucked away next to the desk. Above it, there are two calendars on the wall—one of Greek red-figure pottery, the other of Che Guevara—but nothing marked on them to distinguish one blank square day from the next. Sigurður stands next to the blank calendars drawing tally marks in a notebook as each visitor arrives.

“800 Krona,” he says. “800 Krona,” he says a hundred times a day, then always adds, “cash only.” One statement and then the next, repeated like a chant, a hundred times a day.

“Haven’t you got anything smaller?” he asks visitor after visitor trying to tender a 5000 Krona note, and I wonder every time he asks if that’s a penis joke. But no one ever laughs. It used to cost half as much, the price of admission rising slowly over time until the museum finally broke even in 2008, and Sigurður figured, as long as he’s not losing money, there’s no reason to go higher. You can tell from the tally marks that every year the museum gets busier, though the start and the close of the season is always slow. But, it adds up. Over the course of the summer, Sigurður will mark down 13,000 visitors, one tally at a time.

There wouldn’t be a museum without a few chance events and some whimsy. So it’s a curious reward for so much originality and spontaneity and language play, to build a museum and then stand there entombed in the endless repetition of basic administration.

I have a friend who says the difference between a collection and a museum is interpretation. We were discussing this in another Icelandic museum, a place I love because it is variously translated as “The Museum of Small Things” and “The Sundry Museum”—and because a few dozen thick and rustic antique nails arranged bristling from an ancient white-washed board is both deliciously odd and uncommonly beautiful. That museum displays not just nails but keys, so many keys, and telephones, and every pencil the collector owned since he started school. My friend, an historian, was also impressed, and we were both very fond of a text panel quoting the collector as saying, “If it’s not old now, it will be.”

But my historian friend wasn’t quite willing to grant the sundry collection museum status, whatever it wanted to call itself. Hoarding is not curating, she said. Sheer mass does not make

a museum. Museums, she suggested, are collections sorted and arranged into stories. Museums are collections given narratives, given order and explanation and sense. Collections are just groups of things.

It's a useful distinction, I think. And I wonder, as a practical matter, if we wouldn't have more museums but for the dearth of people who can embrace the ecstasy of acquisition, only to then sit around cataloguing, taking tickets, sweeping up, explaining over and over again what it all means.

The summer I visit the Phallogological, Sigurður is turning 70. It's 2011 and his last summer with the museum. "Will there be a big closing party?" I ask.

"No," the curator says. "No, there will be a big opening party."

When the Chilean periodical *Las Últimas Noticias* asked Sigurður in 2007 what he would do with the museum in the advent of his death, he said he didn't know. "Posiblemente lo donaré a la Iglesia Luterana de Islandia." *Possibly I'll donate it to the Lutheran Church of Iceland.* The Lutheran Church has yet to express interest, but Sigurður has had plenty of other offers over the years. Just in 2010, some Icelanders wanted to buy the museum and modernize it, do a redesign with some museum architects in Reykjavík. But it's not for sale. Too dicey. Too much risk it would change into something pornographic, something it wasn't meant to be. So instead, when Sigurður retires this summer, the curator's only son will inherit the museum, will move it all back to Reykjavík and make a go of it there. Mostly it will be the same, but we can, at least, expect a more developed gift shop under the son. "He has a better head for business," Sigurður says, and it's not just a father's humble-bragging.

"My father, he can't be bothered," Lilja says of the bookcase that passes for a gift shop. "Unlocking the case, giving people change..." He just doesn't attach much importance to it. Time was

he had the interest to sculpt phallic door handles and coat trees and gavels. In 2000 you could buy a skipping rope with wooden phallus handles for just \$26, but Sigurður stopped carving two or three years ago. The keychains he can outsource to Indonesia, but the salt and pepper shakers are now only a collector's item. If you want so much as a backscratcher, I'm sorry to say, they're out.

I ask Lilja if there was any dissent in the family on the decision to give Hjörtur the museum, but she assures me she and her sisters were of one mind. Yes, the sisters have all been donors, they all love the place—heck, the eldest had a lovely pagan wedding in the museum's galleries back in 2003—but the women agreed: this was a museum that could only be handed from father to son.

The collecting will go on. Of course it will. Poised to retire, the curator still has a wish list: polar bear (better), blue whale (more complete), pure Icelandic dog (any). One can always upgrade the specimens for species already represented in the collection, and the scope of the collection can always expand to include new species. If only there were some Ahab to bring them in, Sigurður says some sea animals have phalluses that are meters long. A complete foreign collection could be the life's work of another man—or, ahem, men. After all, the domestic mammal collection was only completed in April.

In the most polite terms, Pall Arason was what Sigurður calls, "a famous guy." A pioneer in Icelandic tourism, Arason was "the first or second person" to take tour groups to the highlands, the island's beautiful and capricious interior. An old hippy once rapturously described to me glimpses of the highland's rocks shaped like petrified trolls, and I hear it's an exceptional place to travel by horse, though the rain and the sleet will come at you without warning and there will be nothing to do but soldier on until it stops. In fact, when I pick up my rental car there is a cardboard

map of the country covering the steering wheel, illustrating in two colors where I may and may not take this tiny white vehicle with its manual transmission and its nominal backseat. A thin blue perimeter rings the island, the permitted paths ignoring the whole of the highlands and their bad roads and bad weather. The map does not specifically indicate that there be dragons, but still I leave the highlands to the discretion of drivers with, if not more adventurous souls, then certainly more rugged means of transport.

But if Arason was appreciated as an adventurer, he had other reputations. He was also known as a political fascist and a famous womanizer. The press sometimes prefers the word *Nazi*, as in the headline: “Se Cortó el Pene del Nazi!” *This curator cut off the penis of a Nazi*. Whatever else Pall Arason may have been, however, he was well-documented as the first person to pledge the museum a human specimen. Arason was 80 at the time. Sigurður was then two species shy of collecting every mammal in Iceland. The collection wasn't even a museum yet, would open later that year, but Arason's intent to be a posthumous donor was signed and witnessed.

And then, Arason didn't die. He had been old when he made the agreement, but he lived longer still, long enough to notice a decline in his nineties, long enough to note that, as a specimen, his penis was no longer the legacy he had intended to leave behind. He hadn't anticipated that eventuality. He lived long enough to reconsider. In the meantime, the museum had nothing to show but the legal paperwork of a promised gift. In truth, the museum had a human foreskin on display, plus the testicles of a separate donor, but without a phallic specimen from *Homo sapien*, the curator considered the collection incomplete.

As time went by, three more men volunteered, younger men: an American, a German, and a Brit. Their deeds of gift went up on the gallery wall, too. The curator did not think too hard about

whether they represented a domestic species, or a foreign one. And then at the start of 2011, after fifteen years of waiting, Arason passed away.

You might think that in those fifteen years, there was time to prepare, ample time, an excess of time, time abundant and time runneth over. The legal work, after all, was so tidily done. Everyone knew his wishes. The museum had prepared 275 specimens before this one. And yet, when Dr. Peters called late on the winter night of Arason's death, what he asked was: what should he do? What indeed. What a sober Sigurður would have said is, "Get it here fresh!" A sober Sigurður would have advised, "Use two to three teaspoons of vinegar to draw out the blood." It's the blood that leaks out and stains the preserving fluid, but if you siphon it off in the first place, there's nothing to do but preserve the specimen, posture it, dip it into its formalin bath. But in the middle of the night, there was some confusion. Mistakes, as they say, were made. Sigurður calls it the Tragedy of Mr. Arason. "Terrible, terrible." He vows to make amends.

I myself hate to look at it. The museum's smallest specimen is less than 2cm, a hamster's penis bone, and I will happily stare at that with the provided magnifying glass, noting as I do that the specimens of the house mouse and the black rat are all but imperceptibly bigger. But contemplating the human specimen in the same case is viscerally unpleasant, in a way that only unrecognizable things can be.

Fortunately, the human donation, Specimen D-15-b, is easily missed. Toured clockwise, the main gallery ends at the grid of cubbies you pass coming in. There are three human contributions together in a cubby, underneath the mink specimens and between the dog cubby and red fox cubby. The human phallus is flanked by a jam jar of foreskin, specimen 15-a, and a bell jar of testicles, specimen 15-c. A young boy standing with the famous specimen

no more than six inches from his chin turns to ask his mother, "Which one is it?" She checks the catalog and points to the appropriate vessel and the boy jerks away in shock.

"That's not really what it looks like," his mother agrees.

As they walk away, the young boy's younger sister adds matter-of-factly, "It's probably the *inside*." She is wearing pigtails, and she looks so confident in this consolation, so very assured that everything is right after all, that I dare not say what strikes me as the obvious thing: nothing on the inside would be so hairy.

Another day, a different small boy sees the scrotum skin lamps and declares: "I want to eat one."

It's a day Lilja's at the museum, and she leans over to me and whispers, "He's out of luck—wrong season." If it were January or February, she tells me, I could pop out and pick up pickled ram's testicles at any old supermarket, but here in July we'll just have to wait, dining instead on brown bread ice cream from her mother's recipe, and pungent cubes of decomposing shark.

Her father, on my last day at the museum, had reminded me to try whale before heading home. An acquired taste, perhaps, the curator said, but an essential one. Were I an Icelander, it would be my generation that grew up without the taste of whale, without the ritual of eating it, the ones who are having trouble finding their way back. Even now, when I drive past the old whaling station near Akranes, it's hard to tell it's still in business, that the gray buildings and the chains on the fences are anything more than a dead industry clotted against the fjord. But perhaps it's always looked this way, perhaps it was just the same when Sigurður brought his daughter here years ago, the same striking impish woman who now watches me lift a bit of rotted flesh to my lips with a toothpick, watches eagerly as the tender pale meat blooms foul with ammonia and I must throw it back or spit it out.

You would think the old traditions are strange because they're old. You can easily imagine that they made sense once but have hung around too long, have outlived their purpose and grown anachronistic, vestigial. And surely, sometimes, that's true. But if traditions are often strange, perhaps those acts and objects are traditional precisely *because* they are strange. It is the strangeness, the unique curiosity of a thing, that makes it worth sharing and repeating and passing along. Museums, I have said, are born of novelty. Indeed, they are borne upon it. They have no finer tradition. You eat the corpse of a poisonous shark buried six months ago because you're starving. But you keep eating it, in a nation of plenty, because it is so eye-open stunning that such a thing can be done.





*Photo by Gavin Greene*

A. Kendra Greene vaccinated wild boars in Chile, taught English in Korea, and started her museum career adhering text to the wall: one vinyl letter at a time. Then the University of Iowa gave her an MFA and the opportunity to costume a giant ground sloth. Now she is Writer in Residence at the Dallas Museum of Art, and current Art Director of *Defunct* magazine. She's writing a collection about museums, and Iceland keeps calling her back.

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5. *Mystérieuse* by Éric Suchère, translated by Sandra Doller  
selected by Christian Hawkey
6. *The Everyday Maths* by Liat Berdugo  
selected by Cole Swensen
7. *Smedley's Secret Guide to World Literature by Jonathan Levy Wainwright, IV, age 15* by Askold Melnyczuk
8. *His Days Go By The Way Her Years*  
by Ye Mimi, translated by Steve Bradbury
9. *Mimi and Xavier Star In A Musem That Fits  
Entirely In One's Pocket* by Becca Barniskis
10. *Outer Pradesh* by Nathaniel Mackey
11. *The Occitan Goliard Songs of Clamanc Llansana followed by a French  
prose poem of Marcel de l'Aveugle* translated and introduced by Kit Schluter
12. *Third Person Singular* by Rosmarie Waldrop
13. *Anatomy of a Museum* by A. Kendra Greene
14. *Drown/Sever/Sing* by Lina Maria Ferreira Cabeza-Vanegas
15. *The All-New* by Ian Hatcher

Like a dream both feverish and freezing, *Anatomy of a Museum* works on the reader elementally. As the sentences unspool their disarming lyricism, carrying with them the flotsam and jetsam of strange fact and stranger interpretation, Greene allows delight to converse with revulsion, incantation with nightmare, tradition with oddity. This is the essay as mad scientist and beachcomber, building such a wonderful monster with the most unexpected, delicious, and human of found objects. It's at turns hilarious and horrifying, nonchalant and twitchily interrogative. It's as much about the ways in which we draw borders—both physically and ethically—as it is about an Icelandic penis museum. All of this adds up to the oddest, and most fun engagement of environmental consciousness I've read in some time.

—**Matthew Gavin Frank**

author of *Preparing the Ghost: An Essay Concerning the Giant Squid and Its First Photographer*

In the great tradition of Lawrence Weschler, Kendra Greene has written an essay about a hidden wonder of our world with the kind of ardent vim that makes us ponder why said wonder isn't a household name. Greene's voice is probing and hilarious; her sentences are vivacious and wild. This is the gold standard by which all future essays about Icelandic penis museums will be measured.

—**Elena Passarello**

author of *Let Me Clear My Throat*

An interesting story about one of the strangest museums in the world.

—**Jón Gnarr**

punk rocker, comedian, taxi driver, and 20<sup>th</sup> mayor of Reykjavík

