a. kendra greene

A. Kendra Greene is an essayist, printer, and maker of artist's books. Her work as an essayist started during a Fulbright to teach English in South Korea, and she earned an MFA in Nonfiction Writing from the University of Iowa and a Graduate Certificate from the University of Iowa Center for the Book. She is Associate Editor of prose at the *Southwest Review* and is a Fellow at Harvard University's Library Innovation Lab. Kendra's writing is more broadly available in print publications like *The Normal School* and *The Common* (out April 27th!).

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"A Bucket of Bear Noses," an interview with A. Kendra Greene

This interview was conducted via e-mail by Interview Editor Devyn Carmen. Of the process he says, "*The Museum of Whales You Will Never See* was a joy to read." A. Kendra Greene has found a fascinating mode of storytelling—meticulously compiling the experiences of museum curators, their families, and their Icelandic culture. I am honored to have her participate in this interview where she discusses her process of weaving together her essays, the role of different forms of narrative in her work, and how Iceland's most beloved stories do not always lie in museums.

Superstition Review: *The Museum of Whales You Will Never See* is an engaging collection that was undoubtedly more interesting than any museum I have ever been to—it is like a museum of museums. Can you describe your interest in and experience with museums to our SR readers?

Kendra Greene: I do love how "collection" is both part of a museum and a species of book. The short answer is that I'm deeply interested in museums as storytelling institutions, and I'm continuously amazed at how little they do to preserve their own stories. Before it ever occurred to me to go to Iceland, I'd interned at the Chicago History Museum (where they say only interns are sent to retrieve the spontaneously combustible nitrate negatives from roof storage), managed the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Photography (where I started my career adhering vinyl text to the wall with the tip of a bonefolder), and volunteered at the University of Iowa Museum of Natural History (where I costumed a giant ground sloth). Indeed, I was interested in museums, these storehouses of our material and intellectual history, these institutions with heartbreakingly human cores, before I had any definable interest in writing.

SR: This body of essays is far more than just descriptions of specimens at Icelandic museums, it also tells a varied and diverse history of the museum's curators and the Icelandic people. Can you elaborate on the process of how you gathered all of the information in the text, especially regarding the people in it?

KG: Fundamentally it's a lot of sitting in museum cafes, a lot of sticking around until something happens, a lot of waiting out the

uncomfortable part where maybe you're not sure anything is going to pan out, but then someone's noticed you're invested and there's something they think you should know. A certain amount of biology and geology and history I can read up on and supplement from other sources, but the heart of the book is rooted in oral history and interview and being present in the place. The first research trip was one month in the summer of 2011, and I've been going back for a couple weeks or a couple months most years since then, over time revisiting almost every place mentioned in the book—not to mention dozens more that shaped my thinking but don't appear in the text directly. I've come to appreciate the invitation to sit at someone's kitchen table and hear their story as an almost holy act.

SR: Which writers shaped your writing process in this collection, either in your literary community or someone you look up to?

KG: I think about how Susan Orlean describes a bucket of bear noses at a taxidermist's convention, how I've held onto that image and that language since before I knew I wanted to write. Likewise, Sarah Vowell's humor and research and unabashed geekiness has long been in my ear. Lawrence Weschler's *Mr. Wilson's Cabinet of Wonders* is such a touchstone for the story beyond "the thing", as well as sustained attention to a place that isn't necessarily taken seriously. Naomi Shihab Nye's "Museum" speaks to me. Svetlana Alexievich's honoring of oral history knocks me flat. I feel very lucky to run in circles with essayists grounded in journalism backgrounds, especially Inara Verzemnieks, Kerry Howley, Stephanie Elizondo Griest, and Anna Badkhen. Environmental writers including Barry Lopez and Clint Crockett Peters and Kurt Caswell gave me a new lens to think about what I was doing. It's not lost on me that one of my first guides to Icelandic museums was the novelist and playwright Lilja Sigurðardóttir. Óddny Eir also worked in museums (including one I was writing about), Rúnar Helgi Vignisson provided insight and made introductions, Alda Sigmunds' informative charm and delight left an impression, and I don't know that I would think about connections between Texas and Iceland if it weren't for Jón Gnarr and Ófeigur Sigardsson. Quentin Bates literally made sure I had shelter to edit. Fowzia Karimi and Annie Nilsson interpreted the text into images years before I started drawing for the book myself. The way I approach writing across and about languages is so informed by translators Andrea Rosenberg, Erica Mena, and Russell Valentino. Elena Passarello's structuring of essay and interview in *Let Me Clear My Throat* gave me a way to imagine coordinating different components in a collection. Amanda Dambrink and Sarah Viren articulated the function of what they call Kendra-on-a-bike moments. Jenny Davis brought to my attention the very salient point, "But isn't digression the point?"

SR: *The Museum of Whales You Will Never See* speaks like a love letter to the Icelandic culture, and the fleeting nature of its many stories. Can you elaborate on what drives this interest within Iceland?

KG: I'm tempted to say that most stories are fleeting, most experience ephemeral—and that used to make me a lot more anxious than it does now. But in a place that's so acquainted with loss (through famine, through illness, through natural disaster, through short growing seasons, through volcanic eruptions, through being a colony…), the sheer staying power of stories seems notable. And not just stories, but maybe especially stories about what is fleeting, stories that explain something about transience and limitations and endings, stories that help us grapple with what we can't hold onto even as the stories themselves, some of them, survive.

SR: The essays in the book are anything but linear. How did you negotiate when to alternate from storytelling, describing the museum, and personal experience?

KG: It happened a lot in writing these essays, maybe all of them, that I'd have not exactly a crisis, but this intense grappling with the fundamental fiction which is linear narrative. It's a really useful tool for the kind of creatures we are, but it's kind of constructed in hindsight. And I kept finding myself in a place where it's not like there was an inherent chronology or causality, that what I needed to talk about was relationships between things and I kind of needed you to know twelve things all at once, because each part was richer if you saw it in relation to the others, made more sense, had more meaning. Or there would be six equally valid ways to begin, each of which was necessary but only one of which could actually start the essay.

For a while I thought of it sort of like mosaic making: how a sensible whole is built out of discrete units. Then I thought it was more like the loaves of cinnamon pull-apart bread we used to get from the bakery when I was a kid: no hierarchy to the components, but together an essential structure to making the thing what it was. It feels to me now more like music, a kind of sympathetic resonance. This metaphor hits its limits pretty quickly, but it puts me in mind of plate spinning: something about vibration and attention and sequence and what

happens when everything is activated at once.

SR: You mention at various times in the text that the stories of the old Icelandic culture may eventually fall off the map. How did this affect your research and writing process going through the collection?

KG: In many ways, I think what's remarkable about Iceland is the degree to which it prioritizes its stories. There wasn't the stuff of material culture we see in other parts of the world (not much workable clay or metal deposits, and anyway not enough wood left to burn to heat them up), and maybe that helps divert a certain amount of creative energy into the oral and later written traditions? This is, and has been, a tremendously literate place. If you think about how early Icelandic is codified as a language, how early in European history a bishop sends for a printing press and makes sure the whole island has the bible in Icelandic, the legislated right to a tutor to visit your farm for a month each year—well, it makes sense that this kind of emphasis on language and education eventually lands us at a country today that boasts a 100% literacy rate and the most books published per capita of any nation on the planet.

SR: The book includes descriptions of how other scholars and societies describe what qualifies as a museum in these essays. Could you describe what qualifies as a museum for you personally?

KG: Part of what draws me to the essay as a form is that it's such a big tent. I really love that it is inclusive and experimental and more an approach than a product. I take a broad view of the museum, too. As a general principle, I find a lot more virtue in descriptivism than prescriptivism, so perhaps the point is that I'm less interested in proposing or defending some set of qualifications than I am in understanding our urge to use the word, what we're pointing to when we say "museum," and what this class of things might become next.

SR: What was your process for organizing these essays into a collection?

KG: For a long time I thought of what was becoming the seven long essays (the seven galleries as they're called in the book) as pillars. I wanted them to work as stand alone essays, but be arranged to support something bigger. Visually, I imagine them very much like columns in a Greek temple, with a pediment sculpture contributing a grander narrative on top. They're ordered to move from the individual to the collective, from the collector to the museum, from the thing to the story—from how collections become museums to how museums skip collecting physical things in the first place.

And once those were more or less written and in place, there were still all these moments and places and ideas that didn't need big essays but were still important, so I wrote a mess of bitsy little essays, and I liked the idea of little palette cleansers between these sustained pieces, I liked that variation of texture.

The writer Lina Ferreira has the most rigorous, nested structures of any writer I know, and when it was time to order my book and decide on which little essays and where to put them, she very generously cleared one side of a corkboard and wrote out the titles on color coded index cards and we moved them around and talked about what connections and tensions and contrasts happened if we put one here or there. And only once we got that settled did I see that these little essays, which I had always thought of as kind of light, maybe fun or weird but definitely a chance to relax and catch your breath, were kind of like introducing a minor chord: a through line of loss in this book about what we hold onto.

SR: What projects are you working on now?

KG: Converting three creative writing workshops into humane and compassionate tools to live in a world of isolation. An artist's book about unicorns in the library. An essay collection meditating on the German notion of *giftschrank* as a way of approaching all the dangers we make a point to keep. Plus a new year-long collaboration that we're calling "a taxonomic seed bank."

SR: What does your writing space look like?

KG: My writing desk is one of the first pieces of furniture I ever owned as an adult person, which says more about my aversion to owning things than about anything else, but I got it while I was working at that first museum in Chicago, and ever since I've centered it to look out my favorite window wherever I live. It is anchored, among other things, by rocks from Iceland, a scrap-wood sheep from my favorite Icelandic sculptor, a knit sea monster, a felted portrait of me as a Victorian pumpkin, a synonym finder altered by a book artist friend, a lamp in the shape of a tyrannosaurus assembled by a writer friend, a glass coaster made by a family friend who has known my family longer than I have, and a book stand given by my thesis advisor in her confidence I would someday have a book to put in it, but which so far holds paintings by my nieces, letters and postcards from most excellent correspondents, and a mini-broadside of Jim Moore's writing hand-printed by Regula Russelle and C.B. Sherlock at the Minnesota Center for Book Arts which reads:

In the café, a woman cries and immediately
her friend reaches out, takes her hand.
I could watch forever
just how efficiently love works.