Upright Members in Good Standing

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04.27.2020

By A. KENDRA GREENE

My boyfriend does not come with me to the penis museum. While I pay the eight hundred Icelandic krona to visit 276 specimens of pickled, salted, or mounted manhood, Dustin is at home packing boxes. His home. He is sweating there in the triple-digit heat of a Texas summer, sweating as he arranges his life into banker's boxes and carries them out in bulky white waves to stack against the blank walls of the new place, the place we picked out together, the first apartment we will ever share. And while all this packing and inventory and heavy lifting has everything to do with me, with us, with bringing an end to the long-distance phase of our relationship and making a life together, it does not yet occur to him that what he's doing has anything whatsoever to do with an Icelandic penis museum. He has no idea that by the time he picks me up from the airport a few weeks later, I'll want him to make a donation. Indeed, at first, I do not know it myself.

The Icelandic Phallological Museum, to quote its website, is “probably the only museum in the world to contain a collection of phallic specimens belonging to all the various types of mammal found in a single country.” It says so, on the website, in seven languages, including Esperanto. By “phallic specimen” it might mean the full furry red skin and organs of a male reindeer or the mere two-meter tip of a sperm whale’s penis or the utterly fleshless penis bone of a walrus, long and smooth as an ivory walking stick. For all the ways a culture may put a phallus on a pedestal, it’s worth noting this may be the only spot on the globe to even attempt such a collection. And there’s little to envy in how hard it is to prepare a specimen for exhibition. It might mean flesh floating in deathly formalin, or an organ folded in half to fit in a canning jar.

Yet it is, in fact, a rather modest collecting mission. If you count not only the volcanic land but also the arctic and subarctic waters surrounding Iceland, and keep adding species that come to call it home given the fluctuations of global warming, there is a maximum of forty-five mammal species to collect. And yet, even so, the museum is almost an embarrassment of riches.

In the thirty-seven years it took Sigurður Hjartarson to complete the domestic mammal collection, the museum’s endowment also grew by twenty-seven foreign mammal species—plus one redfish, one ocean perch, another twenty-three specimens in the folkloric collection, and 207 of what the curator calls “Works of Art and Other Artistic Oddments.” The oddments include a seated figure carved from wood by Sigurður’s youngest daughter, made twenty-five years ago in a junior-high art class, and a Happy Meal toy his grandson brought back from McDonald’s, back when there was still a McDonald’s on the island. There is also The Christmas Soap, The Vulgar Plastic Monster, and The Desirable Marzipan Man. Each of the ten score works is listed in the museum catalog with a faux Latinate name.

I have never liked the rabbit. Not an actual specimen of *Oryctolagus cuniculus*; something far worse. I will concede that the rabbit is harmless enough: a gag gift to my boyfriend from one of his college friends ages before we met; a birthday present given at that particular stage of life when *inappropriate* is synonym to *hilarious*, and given in that particular cultural moment when Beanie Babies were a thing. Ten years later, though, the rabbit has followed my boyfriend from undergrad to postdoc, in the process surviving six moves, crossing multiple state lines, and somehow reemerging from the moving boxes every time, unscathed.

Dustin and I have always referred to it as “the purple phallus rabbit,” though it is actually lavender, with a pristine white tummy and clear fishing-line whiskers and looped wire inside each ear so it may effect an expression of particular alertness. It sits on a powder puff tail, and its overstuffed lavender phallus, a six-inch erection on an eight-inch plush toy, is

wreathed around the base with curly purple pubic hair. That it is a human-shaped sex organ on a cunicular body is obviously grotesque, but it's these shiny corkscrew curls that repulse me, instinctively, make me flinch and turn my head.

And it has a name. It took me two years to get close enough to the Ty-esque paper swing tag clipped to its ear to know that the rabbit has a name. It is Quickie, from the Erection Collection, pieces of information imparted along with a brief poem about its preferred pastime.

In my kinder moments, I can imagine it as a kind of tawdry velveteen rabbit, only not the least bit shabby from love. I mean, what is it if not a childish thing yet to be put away?

When I first saw it, eight years after acquisition in my then-new-boyfriend's bedroom, it made a kind of sense, given its place on a dusty high shelf with one of those pin impression toys and a shrink-wrapped starter kit to grow carnivorous plants, all the little pots and seeds still in the box.

Because Sigurður Hjartarson spent his boyhood summers in the countryside, he sometimes used a pizzle, a whip made from a dried bull's penis. Because someone knew that tiny fact, knew there had once been a pizzle in his hand, a student's parent gifted an adult Sigurður another one, as a novelty, a bit of tender nostalgia.

He was a headmaster at the time, and because he kept that pizzle where he received it—in his office at the school—his teaching staff knew about it. And because they knew about the pizzle, they returned from their summers spent working at a whaling station with a big blubbery whale penis for the headmaster: a joke, they thought, and so did he, and so did his friends and drinking buddies, who thought the gag was great. They joked about a whole collection, a whole museum. And from their seats at the bar, the whale's figurative bris begat a collection's speculative christening as they named an institution and its field of study and every level of membership for a museum that didn't exist. The collection grew and the men drank and they worked out the details for twenty years, these professors and parliament members maybe even donating a specimen or two now and then—to the folkloric section especially—until, one day, the collection was a museum.

Once, when I lived in Chicago, in a moment of hope and desperation, I made myself a promise: I thought that, should it happen that the temperature could not climb above zero degrees Fahrenheit, I would take the principled stand of not leaving home. I would choose to live that way, and I would be better for it. It was comforting, to feel that I had standards, limits, that I had set boundaries and they would keep me safe and happy. The very next day it was five below. And I still had to go to work.

Which is to say, I never declared, "Either this rabbit goes or I do!" But Dustin says I didn't have to. He says he could see it on my face.

Everything the museum owns is on display. There is no vault or cold storage or back room of any kind. There is nothing out for conservation or on loan to another institution. What you see is what you get, with the possible exception of The Erotic Collection, which these days is plainly labeled but shielded from view by a square of black velvet the size of a handkerchief. You can freely wander the loop of cases and cubbies and things tacked to the wall, but here you have to opt in.

This is because, several years ago, two elderly German women paid the admission, toured the museum with keen attention, and returned to the front desk with great praise for the curator and his collection. “Thank you,” the curator said. *Except*, the old women interrupted. *Except* for the erotic items.

Distasteful, they said. *Unnecessary*, they said.

“Which items do you object to?” the curator asked, and the two women presented him with a running list. The list included maybe a dozen items, mostly copulating figurines, some in metal, some in wood, and none of them, to my eye, all that interesting. Which makes me think the old women did not object to the sexual acts depicted or to the depictions themselves so much as to the curation of these objects.

There is no shortage of sex and erotica museums throughout Europe, North America, or Asia, but unless you count the occasional acquisition of a celebrity human penis as a form of mammal specimen collecting (it’s a very long story about Rasputin’s alleged anatomy at Russia’s Museum of Erotica, and rather a short story about Napoleon’s supposed specimen in a private collection), there’s really no overlapping ambition between sex museums and the Icelandic Phallological Museum. Nothing against sex and erotica museums, but the Icelandic Phallological Museum is trying to be something else. It is, much to its credit, rather single-minded. It is not concerned with urination, and it is not concerned with reproduction. It is, shall we say, all form and no function. It is a noun without a verb. It is not a cultural history of genitalia, but a natural history. And so the curator knew as soon as they gave him the list: the German ladies were right.

If it were house paint or hypodermic needles, there would be a place to dispose of it. And while the purple phallus rabbit is perhaps not so toxic as all that, neither is it an old shirt you can drop in the box for Goodwill. My boyfriend says he has never seen me like this, in the very throes of revulsion, except with the rabbit. It is an abomination. But in my boyfriend’s taxonomy it is a gift, albeit an ironic one, and he takes as an axiom that a gift can’t be thrown away. There is, he feels, a Code about these things.

Dustin is still friends with the woman who gifted the rabbit, the same woman who introduced us in the first place and has asked me to be the godmother of her firstborn child. She has personally given him permission to chuck it. But her direct absolution has no bearing on the Code. Alternatively, she has offered to take it back. Dustin, to my surprise, is

willing to entertain such a return. I should take the win. But when he tells me about it, I can't shake the feeling that the rabbit will just come back to us as a wedding present, or at some distant baby shower. My sister-in-law's family has a white elephant tradition at Christmas, and the charcoal portrait of her father she did early on in art school has been circulating the extended family's households so long that giving it to the unsuspecting has become a tradition in itself. I could see this rabbit making its own set of rounds, and I would rather maintain possession than be taken by surprise.

Two sculptures on the sidewalk announce the museum, one made from three enormous stones and one carved from the long trunk of a tree; both, you might well imagine, phallically arranged. The building has been there a century, facing the road, its back to the harbor. Now that it's a museum, the old, peaked-roofed house has an alcove for the foreign specimens and folkloric collection, with the art and oddments sprinkled throughout the big main gallery. It's nice to step in from the chill sea breeze. The museum is warmly lit under scrotum-skin lamps. The walls are painted taupe or white, and lined by specimen jars shoulder to shoulder like a crowded picket fence, a phalanx of cylinders with pastel specimens spiraling, tapering, thrusting upward as if to point at the ceiling, at the phalluses mounted like trophies higher up. There are magnifying glasses available. Every specimen in the room is marked by a green dot, the kind of paper sticker that makes me think of yard sales. Families and couples and tourists find their way here. The curator sits at a desk making change, listening to classical music and filing away currency in a phallus-shaped cashbox he carved himself from birch.

It's the kind of place we should see more of, frankly, given that comparative anatomy has been a science since the classical age and should come to mind whenever we say Cuvier or Huxley or Darwin—it is the very inquiry that showed whales to be mammals, enabling the phallological collecting mission in the first place. But we don't. It's an inversion of the medical museum that starts in earnest and seems so odd after a time; it is instead a study of anatomy begun accidentally, in laughter, that becomes more serious as you think about it, starts to shed the prurient or sophomoric and shows itself concerned precisely with the distance between association and the object itself, between connotation and denotation, between how we talk and how it is.

In the anteroom as you first come through the door, there is, among other things, a ceramic pitcher from Spain in the shape of a man, stark naked save for the little clay hat which identifies him as some certain kind of police. The curator had glimpsed this subversive oddment while traveling and asked the lady of the house about it. She looked around suspiciously, told him in a whisper about the police during the war, even after the war, the things they *did* and the things people feared they would do. She told Sigurður no one was supposed to see the vessel. I assume she meant she mustn't be caught with something so vengeful or belittling. I assume she meant there are ways we rebel, private acts that keep us

alive, necessary expressions that nonetheless endanger us—or bring us together—if they are witnessed. He said he understood. And then, for reasons of her own, she let him take it back to the museum, to be on display forever.

When Dustin offers to bury the purple phallus rabbit deep in boxes shoved to the back of the closet and forgotten, I can't go along with it. I find the metaphoric implications of closeting the rabbit disturbing in their own right, but really the point isn't to get the rabbit out of my sight; I want it out of my home.

Fortunately, the Code has a loophole. By his own estimation, Dustin may in fact *regift* the rabbit, provided it goes to a good home.

One day Dustin announces that an old labmate is about to get married. "Maybe I could give it to him at the bachelor party," he suggests, his face flush with inspiration.

"Is that really the kind of relationship you have with Rudesh?" I ask. "Is this actually something you want to do?"

It's not, of course. It's a last-ditch effort, a Hail Mary. His brow furrows a little.

"Maybe we could make it better," he posits. "Maybe there's something we could do."

I try to imagine what possible intervention could make this rabbit anything more or anything other than what it has always been.

"Maybe," he says, "we could make it pants."

I used to work in a museum. I've worked in a few of them, actually. History and natural history and art. I used to give print viewings and look in on specimens and call the appraiser so we could finish the paperwork on a deed of gift. I've kept multiple pairs of white gloves in the top drawer of my desk, and I've cared for all-but-forgotten parts of the collection. Sometimes those were objects just slipped from mind, of course. But mostly they were things worth forgetting, things that started with some small value that only waned over time, ever less relevant. But their inclusion in the collection was no mistake. Some were artifacts from the rush to start a collection. Many were gifts from donors who we hoped would get in the habit of donating and someday give us a marvel we knew was theirs to give. Which is to say I've seen the politics of what you will accept in order to get what you want, the thing that matters in the face of all the things that don't.

We don't make it pants. We swaddle the rabbit in bubble wrap and try desperately to orient it inside a cardboard box so the recipient won't unwrap the phallus first, but the appendage is too prominent. There's no other way to make it fit. We tuck a letter of donation over the rabbit like a modesty panel, and in the letter we call the rabbit *Lagomorpha distendae*. We call it a full and unrestricted gift. *Regift*, it should probably say, but it's already printed and

signed. We seal the box and buy stamps enough to send it to Iceland, a month before the museum itself will pack up everything and move from its little whaling village on the north coast to start anew in the capital.

The museum originally opened in Reykjavík, actually, then moved north to Húsavík. So this third iteration is a kind of coming full circle, a return, only now (for the first time) under the stewardship of the curator's only son. So it's goodbye to the cozy house in the little whale-watching village, and hello to a boxy grey storefront downtown in the city, plate-glass windows facing a bus terminal, the new location just confirmed and renovations to start immediately. It's the noise that tires him most, the children and their high voices, the crowds. Sigurður says, "I'm getting old, you see." It is the end of one era and the dawn of another.

Or it's just another cycle. The curator once retired from being a headmaster. Now he's retiring from the museum. And in one of his last acts that summer, the curator accepts our donation. Dustin balked when I first suggested it, when I counted the time zones and called to say I had figured out the answer. Or rather, he was fine until I told him that, yes, there are in this world things in such bad taste that the curator will not accept them. There have been donations the curator has had to throw away. Dustin was not entirely sure, in the abstract, to which category we belonged.

Sigurður, however, was all clarity and acceptance. He was, as I left him standing at the museum's threshold when it was time for me to go, unsentimental about things changing, about ceding control, about giving the museum to someone else. He was just happy to have someone to give it to. It was time, he said. The way he put it was like this: "Even the good things you have to pass along."

Sigurður has never said a word to me about the rabbit. It is a thing we've never discussed. But the museum acknowledged receipt with an envelope, stiffened with cardboard, safekeeping two certificates decorated with an array of official stamps, decreeing our new status as Upright Members in Good Standing.

I spent the whole time I was in the Icelandic Phallological Museum trying to make sense of what on earth it was. And what it had been. I was there grappling with its existence a month before it would all end. Or not end exactly, but I suppose renew, somehow manage to become itself once more.

A season later I would pack up myself, drive from Iowa City to Dallas, from the snow to a different dark, and settle my writing desk before a new window, from which I write to you now. But late that summer, there was a day when I asked Sigurður if the museum had ever lost a specimen. I can't imagine why I asked, except there was at once so much time and only so many days. There was that fixed and forever amount of time to ask him whatever it was I thought I was going to need to know.

The curator was silent so long I realized this must be a ridiculous question. Surely no one steals these things. Surely they don't slip through the cracks. Really—what could happen to a specimen? And who would want to admit it if it did?

Indeed, I recognized this silence, had heard it once on a school field trip to a mortuary when someone asked if the mortuary had ever received a body that was still alive. The mortician had then laughed and laughed, laughed so long we all began to laugh, too, suddenly aware how obvious and ridiculous and sublime it all was. Only then the mortician stopped suddenly and said, "Except that one time." And while I struggled in the museum to change the topic to anything a sensible person might say, the curator spoke instead.

"Once," he said.

A mouse.

It was a tiny little jar, he said. Such a very small thing. Not that it didn't matter. It was by no means trivial or trifling—it meant something—but by any objective measure, what a truly small thing.

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