When I was a kid, there was an aquarium thirty minutes by bicycle from where I lived. A chill aquarium-like silence always pervaded the place, with only an occasional splash to be heard. I could almost feel the Creature from the Black Lagoon breathing in some dim corner.

Schools of tuna circled ’round and ’round the enormous pool. Sturgeon plied their own narrow watercourse, piranha set their razor-sharp teeth into chunks of meat, and electric eels sputtered and sparked like shorted-out lightbulbs.

The aquarium was filled with countless other fish as well, all with different names and scales and fins. I couldn’t figure out why on earth there had to be so many kinds of fish.

There were, of course, no whales in the aquarium. One whale would have been too big, even if you knocked out all the walls and made the entire aquarium into one tank. Instead, the aquarium kept a whale penis on display. As a token, if you will.

So it was that my most impressionable years of boyhood were spent gazing at not a whale but a whale’s penis. Whenever I tired of strolling through the chill aisles of the aquarium, I’d steal off to my place on the bench in the hushed, high-ceilinged stillness of the exhibition room and spend hours on end there contemplating this whale’s penis.

At times it would remind me of a tiny shriveled palm tree; at other times, a giant ear of corn. In fact, if not for the plaque—WHALE GENITAL: MALE—no one would have taken it to be a whale’s penis. More likely an artifact unearthed from the Central Asian desert than a product of the Antarctic Ocean. It bore no resemblance to my penis, nor to any penis I’d ever seen. What was worse, the severed penis exuded a singular, somehow unspeakable aura of sadness.

It came back to me, that giant whale’s penis, after having intercourse with a girl for the very first time. What twists of fate, what tortuous circumnavigations, had brought it to that cavernous exhibition room? My heart ached, thinking about it. I felt as if I didn’t have a hope in the world. But I was only seventeen and clearly too young to give up on everything. It was then and there I came to the realization I have borne in mind ever since.

Which is, that I am not a whale.