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## Vulturine

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**VULTURINE**

A Thesis Presented

by

**ANDY NICOLE BOWERS**

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

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May 2018

English  
M.F.A. Program for Poets and Writers

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**ABSTRACT**

**VULTURINE**

MAY 2018

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M.F.A., UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AMHERST

Directed by: Professor Dara Wier

A collection of poems.

## ANATOMIST: A PROLOGUE

When as a child I found a mule deer strung up in an orchard, I did not run home to bury my face in the folds of my mother's apron. No, I did not wince or gag but stayed beside the dead thing. I saw the tongue outripening the mouth. I made a study. And even as a fly dripped from the nostril, I would not hide from what the body meant to teach me. I leaned closer, as a monk at his devotions—and felt it recognize me for the instrument I was.

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I.



Dedication  
*for Berlinde De Bruyckere*

There is the cool of the sunken room, its earthen calm. Thin broth of sun which swims through three high windows. There is the far wall, lime-washed, against which waits the day's weird salvage: fortress of the dappled dray horse felled by a single nail—the swollen hock, the scorched breach of the bullet one named mercy. Two browns—one bay, one seal. One's head so overgrown as to seem boneless, a carpetbag zipped sloppily, some soft pink lining trapped between the teeth. The stag they found near the vineyard's edge, its halter of barbed wire. The neighbor's goat with stomach full of foxglove.

And now, too, the veterinarian's gift of a perfect mule, still lashed to the sledge his students pulled across a field ragged with snow. Frost gathered at the black eyes' liquid *Vs.*

There is the woman who will not abide by such finalities.

She is entering with ash-scrubbed hands and tying on her apron. Her palms, her fingers callous-caked, imprinted by her tools. Her tools worn smooth in places so they beckon to her grip. Intimacy in the old austerities. Burlap. Iron. Clay. The smell that follows fire. A file. A gluepot.

He had made her dress his bounty. Obedience outstretched her arms; he loaded them with what the woods refused their shelter. Rabbits, pheasants, foxes. Unimaginable beauties.

And here in the larder of her father's house, how she'd managed those rote gestures—all that opening and draining, plucking, snipping, rinsing clean—was by repeating, low enough so no one heard her, *You are not dead. I won't let you. You are not dead*—until no other words could find her and give shape to her despair. How expertly she'd starved them of the air: No, *rot*. No, *fear*. No, *twitch*. No, *whimper, bleed, forgive me*.

*I won't let you.*

But she is entering the space her work has made her. There is room here. Room to speak the sculptor's words, the seamstress's. Room for *crucible* and *flux*, *temper* and *torch*, *flint*, *quench*, *cast*, *luster*. For *rivet*, *weft*, and *ravel*. *Heather*. *Raw edge*. *Lockstitch*. *Awl*.

Room to say *chased silver* of the pour of burnished hide, and also for the language of the midwife. She is in *travail*. She is thinking them suspended, safe, as in a *bag of waters*. She calls the cord by which she closes them *umbilical*.

And she remembers *martyr* means—or once meant—witness.

Don't turn away from what she's bringing forth! They are blind, yes. Some are hoofless, limbless even. They are stricken at their suffering's extreme.

Touch the bay, the hollowed torso offering its shelter, the coat lushly unquiet, river-lit and shivery. Or kneel before the rubble of the carthorse, a monument distilled of servitude. Such stony mass sings sacrifice more lucid and more noble than any tame, consoling Pietà.

She has made of them something to humiliate our pity.

—And what was it you imagined love to be?

## Tulipomania

Electrified, inoperable, this outbreak knows no limits: colors of the smothered field tattooed behind the eyelids, a humming in the very teeth like seizure's premonition. Now even in my dreams they're going viral, blooms with names like truck stop drugs—Aladdin, Jumbo Candy, Anaconda, Pink Champagne—though I had sworn off all such teenage grandiosity. Tonight, Kingdoms are opening mechanically as choke pears & rapture's the sensation of clenched tears bruising my throat. Pressured flight: Bright Parrots squall & flicker. Hotpants unzip themselves, begging the moon. What if I told you passion could be captured in its passing & made to live forever in a resin paperweight? What if I said *I bet my neck I'll break you down with just one image: me, naked, a vase of Texas Fire before a window, out of which Black Horses climb the hills, gallop away?*

Tulipomania: Redux

That quickening, the old known itch  
you'd split the skull to silence

& in the dark the minor shift  
that means the safety's off. Still, a shock

to wake among these waves of Red Alert,  
hostage to Burning Heart & Déjà Vu,

DayGlo bordello—to find yourself  
all rictus & an oubliette of throat, hot promise

made in primal pain of yielding.  
Moonwalker, Lilac Cup, Pink Dwarf—

*They flash upon that inward eye—*  
a migrainous barrage & then the sudden birth-

wound shrieking—Jackpot, Blackout,  
Apocalypse with Fire Tongues extruding:

*It is as a Vesuvian Face*  
*Had let its pleasure through—*

Tulipomania: Relapse

This time I will be profligate & unapologetic, a Fontainebleau  
of gold-flecked mirrors & lunar Bacchuses—& for you  
I will unbury all my tawdry souvenirs: my swap meet trinkets,  
pilfered lingerie, the butcher's valentines, my debutante's corsage  
shrunk to a twist of crispy sugar. This time I'll wear the auras  
of extinct selves like a trove of furs, serve my heartmeat  
thinly sliced, on ice, a red chameleon. Call me Golden Hind.  
Now take it back & call me Tulsa. Here's a pill named Cherry Orchard  
& a drink called Parrot City: take them & perfect me to a pastel  
Emmaline, then burn that velvet painting & scatter the blackened  
scraps. This time I will bloom back implacable & incandescent,  
a field of shrill unshuttings burning off the fog of sleep.

To a Coyote, Found Shot; Winter, Corn Hill Beach

Master trickster,  
vesper-loper, skittish  
as quicksilver,

you would elude me  
even in your final fixity—  
a residue alluvial,

a stippling of salt grass,  
rictus of some black-lipped  
mollusk riven by a gull.

Umber on dull umber,  
then my boot—  
the bullet's crater—

your body finding shape  
around a shriek  
of canna lily.

## Of Shell

Of thunderous churn, of spume  
    & surge, of brine-skirts, gull-strewn  
midden. Of shuckings, scalpings,  
    stavings in. Of wrecked harp, jewel-  
box sprung. Of agonies unshuttered,  
    burning turrets, siege of sun. Of ruin  
& relic, spiral staircase, spindle,  
    tunic, tusk. Of fossil-trinket, Venus  
comb, of blood-flecked cameo.  
    Of gristle-tassel, nacre-flash. Of cup-  
&-saucer shattered. Of still life  
    havocked, motley altar: slipper, tulip,  
turban. Of jangling cache by lamp-  
    light sorted, bell jars stacked with tide-  
loot: fevered Baroques, bearded  
    goliaths, cloistered oracles. Of calculus,  
of labyrinth. Of marrow, mineral.

## Of Orchid

Of velvet swelter, hothouse fetor, smack  
of dead horse, tidewrack. Of black-  
tongued bells, clamshells unwelding,  
seedpearls scraped, frog's skin pinned  
back. Of tangleroot & green squid, mythic  
aphrodisiacs. Of tropic fetish, crooked  
spur, bog candle dribbling wax. Of cloak-  
&-dagger cradlefire, of operatic climax.  
Of adder's mouth, of centipede laying  
its poisoned tracks. Of crucifix hallucinated,  
quicksand, viscid trap. Of ghost strobing  
in mossdark: grail of monomaniacs.



## Of Cactus

Of fever-totems, drunkard's dreams, spellbound  
geographies. Of jungly tangles, wind-sucked wastes,  
badlands, extremities. Of bristled sentries, toothy  
broods & vexing prohibitions. Of devil's claw  
& dragon fruit, pates diademed in barbed-wire.

Of twisted ribs & dotard's beards, fire barrels,  
organ pipes. Of lizard catchers, spry harpooners, horse-  
crippling inveiglers. Of brainy furrows, swollen  
rain-drums, nettlesome eccentrics. Of urchins, prostrate  
hedgehogs, gaunt ascetics, anchorites. Of tortoise  
tactics, stringent pinchfists, thronged untouchables. Of hitch—  
of wince, of flesh-sown spines, flares of cochineal.

II.

Notes on the Rear Feet of a Langur Monkey/*Presbytis chrysomeles*  
for Rosamond Purcell

1.

Here is an image fixed but not inert—swimming up from a shadowy drawer, the creature's folded hide, its paws—a portrait of the way it touched the earth.

2.

I could write them into safety.

I could call them driftwood, tidewrack. Scraps the sea casts back, subtracted masses worried blunt. Twisted gists of fallen branches water gorges and then starves, now sun-shrunken, salt-scumbled on a pallet of sargassum.

Tokens you might pocket for their quaint affinities—as if the notions tumbling in a cloud were rendered fossil.

Or bundle with their like to use for kindling.

3.

Or else the mind could pull a trick of distance, assume an altitude from which they turn terrain. Their surface, etched with forks and whorls, a vast desert outspread, its scoured contours photographed from space.

Here a river was repealed, leaving a scar the wind retraces, and here lava cooled in terraces, its sheets of black glass stacking.

4.

But I can't unstitch from them the shadow of the human: hands with digits overlong and anguished, a shriek of hands as in a fever by El Greco.

5.

I have visited the Gallery of Torture, seen the breaking wheel, the rack, the neck viola—with what opulence power inflicts its brute efficiencies.

I know a body stretched that far will crack like fire.

6.

And once I stood an hour before a man dredged from a bog, a body pressed in a tome of moss, steeped black as iron gall. I read the facts: disemboweled, struck with an axe; an execution or a hostage of extinct divinities.

I kept falling into the flooded coalmine of him, struggling to right myself, my chest constricting.

I pressed my hand to the glass between us, wishing to trade panic for something kinder. I tried to read in that ravaged leather a fledgling fallen from its nest.

All my life, I had thought pity noble. When I found the contours of his face they disabused me.

7.

See the way they seem to reach forth from the pelt with palms outturned? A gesture one might make to shield, to hold at bay—I think of bomb-light.

8.

What Rilke knew: there is a way of staring without eyes. A way to be beheld and called by name by what we see.

Who will say “specimen” of such a presence?

Portrait of a Woman at Her Work as Rendered in the Mind of a Second Woman at Her Work  
*for Berlinde De Bruyckere*

Her hands—start there. But how to write their undertaking?

Write: Her hands travel the body of the horse. (And here, note *body*—this woman will not suffer “carcass,” abject word which turns the form a slagheap.)

Write: Her hands like the hands of a blacksmith, seasoned, galled. Gestures stripped back to the tendony riggings. Skin finely crazed: indelible pathways ramify in rust and ink and soot.

—Yet not this, quite. Absent is her kinship to the surgeon. For though no scalding tap debrides, forcing a shine livid and sterile, these hands transmit the aura of the operating theater, their every movement crystallized out of some inhuman calm.

Write: Her hands travel the body of the horse, divining. Body of the horse posed as a question, hands reckoning the answer of the work her life must do.

And now, in the shapes her hands think, something animal asserting. Hands like birds over the water of the body, winnowing. Hands compelled in this as in the Earth’s magnetic thrall.

And silently the body’s ocean parting, and her mind in her hands and her hands are entering.

Write: Her hands like the hands of a monk scribing the vellums of his psalter—which is to say raising God’s shadow from the cold integuments.

## Meditation in the Crystal Gallery

Say it is a church, for here the voice turns inward  
and the stillness that surrounds you glistens liminal

and charged, the walls of glassed-in specimens commanding  
your regard, listening as from a lunar distance. Say the rain

striking the white vault is the call of fractured bells.  
Say the words you didn't know still dwell inside you,

lodged in bone: *Et in hora mortis nostrae. In pulverem  
reverteris.* Say the language of disease is also holy. Say

*febris, pestis, dolor.* Say the ravaged heart is a rose window.  
Say the hydrocephalitics are the figures in a crèche. Now say

that you have made a space for beauty where there was none,  
though beauty has not waited on your reason—light humming

through cross sections of the flesh: jade, jasper, agate.  
Hair billowing in liquid. Dark eyes beckoning like fruit.

## Taxidermy

To repeat the child's misunderstanding of beauty:  
beauty as adorning object, beauty as possession—

as if it were the dress that drove the light  
to fawn about your mother's form.

As if she could unfasten it and exit, you could step into  
that blue silk and be wooed. To hunt inside the forest,

not in hunger, not for sport, but because you covet  
what you know can't leave the body, still—the way a fox

in flight becomes the memory of brushfire, the winter  
a lynx enters when she moves, her glacial shadows,

black vigil in a crow's eye, stark adagios of deer.  
To kill but not to damage. To take the body from its skin,

to soak the skin, to sculpt, to suture. To carry  
what you make across the threshold, heavily as if you swam

in silk, moth-eaten blue. Beauty as inheritance  
withheld. Beauty as a ghost that will not touch you.

## Behind a Racetrack

All night the ill-bred horses twitch  
and whicker in their paddock. Waifs  
of horses, slow-eyed, matted,  
called by the fault that ruined  
them: *Swayback, Ewe's Neck, Sickled  
Hock*. Their hooves repeat a circle  
in the snow, their world of mud  
and straw beyond the floodlights.  
Their black lips brush the steel  
rails and the old paint lifts in shards  
so that at dawn their muzzles itch  
and bleed. So that at dawn the gunman  
with the sugar in his palm does not think  
of velvet as he leads them through the gate.



## Mercy

You must not focus on the chestnut neck outstretched  
at your approach. Not on the cautious muzzle, frost-chapped,  
tender as a skinned knee, quizzical with whiskers  
at your breast pocket, your shoulder.

Not on nostrils trilling pinkly as the horse catches your scent  
and holds it for a second at the center of its breathing,  
its breathing thin and ragged, visible against the cold—  
and knows you. Not on the wild eyes gentling,  
the black lids easing closer so the white rims disappear,  
blonde lashes quieting into thatch eaves.

No, you must not focus on the mind behind the star, but on the ribs,  
the shadows cast by ribs, the hide hung loose and dull, the pelvis jutting.

You must focus on the deadweight of the rifle in your hands.

You must see yourself the way the horse has always seen you:  
an answer to the question hunger asks.

## Academy Students Dissecting a Horse

*No one dissects to quicken his eye for beauty—*  
but I watch beauty disobey, dissolve its limits

as an ink stroke overtakes a page brushed wet,  
involving with its shadow every aspect of the task:

men aproned like butchers kneeling at the brink  
of light, poised breathless in the cellar's chill,

steeling themselves to enter; kits of needles,  
hooks & blades that even in this stillness can't stop

glinting on & off—& then, beneath the oil lamp's glare,  
bedded in sawdust, cedar, body of a horse dreamed

galloping across a field, black hide molten with sun  
annealed, nostrils withered, lids ajar, eyes opaque

as milk glass—& yes, I watch it trespass even here,  
as flesh becomes a curtain their bare hands push back & back,

where veins cling in a tangle to the long neck & they sketch this—  
beauty, which is strange to speak but keeps forcing my tongue.

On Painting Horses  
*for George Stubbs*

To learn to render beauty with precision, you must forget  
you love the life that animates the form you study,

find the soft crook of the throat, the tender path  
the bridle chafes, and here exchange that life for stillness,

for permission: a space your gaze can enter, leave, return to  
at your pleasure, in which—as long as winter lets

the dead cling to their shapes—yours is the only will  
to alter, excavate, illumine. You must remove the hide, reveal

the tracery of veins, examine every muscle,  
the direction of its grain, and afterward, unlash

each one in order, leaving nothing but the bald syntax  
of bone. And you must record—which is to say lay claim to—

the countless stations of the body's slow unmaking, hold captive  
in the tendons of your hand the memories of contours, shadows

drawn, erased, redrawn, and now must give back  
what you took, repay the bodies of the living—

your scene of mares and foals under a tree beside the water,  
so real I smell their warmth, all milk and grain, sawdust and clover,

and feel how light and air shift to receive them,  
which is the way the mind recovers love.

## Before Dawn

Before the muffled thud of shovels  
in the ash heap, before the smell of fire and flesh  
travels downwind, before the silver pools of horseshoes  
melting from the stilled hooves, before the tarblack roar  
of throats collapsing drowning out the moon,  
before the frenzy of the horses spurred by fire into  
the fire, before the bridles made of shrieks,  
before the night goes up in shrieks,  
before the flames lengthen their tongues  
to lick the horses' eyes, before red shivers quicken  
down the hayloft's wooden ladder, before the clattering awake  
of bodies folded into dark, before the nostrils startle  
at the whiff of burning hair, before the hiss, the spark,  
the stall doors latched, the horses quelled  
as cellos in their caskets, there is the barn ticking  
through winter, shifting toward its bright unmaking:  
an itch in the splintered timbers, the stutter of a failing lamp,  
between frayed wires, cold patience, an intent.

Aphasic Searching for the Word *Wolf*

To reach toward a lover  
with numb hands—

O echo fled in winters  
of American silvered glass,

O starving body trespassing  
the afterlife of wheat:

Where is your name?  
Among the hinter drifts,

shifting lacunae of my trauma?  
Along the miles I've traced

puzzling the barbed wire  
cicatrix? And always that alarming

musk, an urging in my nostrils—  
recovering these acrid clues

in *blood* and *whorl* and *scowl*.

Around *Moth*

True to your root in *maggot* you riddle & taint,  
making no accident of the shadow

strung through *mouth*, indelible, the rustlings  
under *moss & myth*, how even *earth*

could be pulled into orbit, whole planet  
at the work of misconstrual like a false eye.

III.

## What I Found in the Field

Skein of body, palimpsest,  
vaguely mammalian—  
some name for hunger half-recalled  
in the jaw's frail arch, the scattered teeth—  
some riddle about winter left unanswered  
in the draggled flux—peninsula of tail  
becoming tongue I wished to speak with—  
what tundra notes I'd wring from it—  
what cinder, lichen, stone.



Dear Ornamental Ungulates, Escape is not an option.

I wake again in the trophy room, your tame fumes settled in my lungs, as sunlight scatters moths from your blonde flanks. Your cloven hooves I polished yesterday the solid black of Japanese brick tea. Today, your semiprecious eyes must gleam. What am I entering your glassed-in desert like a nurse, my step muffled by sterile sands and exile's plastic aloes? The rivers I have painted you are peeling. Cobwebs like a spinster's stitchwork conquer your low skies. So this is what it means to be an object of desire: your stiff hide creaks, your face reconstitutes in vacant morning. You have been kissed arsenically, and saved.

Röttgen Pietà  
*after Monica Youn*

Michelangelo had it wrong—his figures chilled,  
embalmed as in a cloche of their own milk-light:  
her face a blank, a frozen moon the eye skates  
without hitching—and he is sleeping, merely,  
safe, a child carried to bed. No, grief does not buff  
the flesh to gentle resignation, but is this savage  
chisel in a primitive's cramped hand. How else  
explain what reaches out to grip me by the throat  
so that I stand arrested and accused by what I see—  
Christ's body wrenched beyond repair, a botch  
of teeming wounds, all ribcage, and such a Mary—  
snarling like a fox caught in a leg-hold—whose gaze  
extracts a nauseous prayer and never will forgive me.

## Still Life with Dead Game

Larder disgorging scree of pelts & plumage—  
ferment of tongues extruded, eyes congealed:

damage irrevocable but not inert. This image  
dispossesses you of power, strips you of the armor

of disgust. Pursuit inverts. Now hunger  
is a force that stands outside you, hunter

glassing you from some far hill. How dizzying  
the stacked feast drawing you against your will,

palette slickening as you lean closer; how rank  
& yet how beckoning this opulence of oils, drunk colors

rigged for you like lures—peacock, canary, buckskin,  
dove—the wound, the shock, the headlong pitch,

your mouth flooding metallic. & now you write  
the stag's flank *undulant with candlelight, autumnal,*

*wheat field oceanic in its burning; the swan poured out  
as cream from butcher's slab to earthen floor; hushed*

*velvet of strung rabbits; pheasants' necks tremulous  
with jewels.* What is left but to submit—mind

seized in birdlime, outmaneuvered—to offer up  
the word you tried to hold back, which is *beauty,*

which is to make a hymn to greed,  
to feed a master you would starve?

## Color as the Cause

See in the defilement of wild bodies—stag sagging  
from its hook with heart unshuttered; skewered throats

of songbirds, whole mute chorus, warblers, larks, half-  
plucked pheasant, legs outthrust as if in sparring,

crag of boar's head rising from its platter, rabbits wrung—  
not their panic, not their deaths inside the forest, not knives

crusted with fur, not veil of flies, that constant settling  
(which must have lasted weeks among the cavings of their forms

as he worked to get it all down, painting fine hairs, minor shadows)  
but occasions for the most ecstatic pigments—amber-black

of eye-globes, ash-blond pelts, bone-flash snow-blue—  
so that to see is to repeat decomposition—pain fractured

into planes of pure delight—& to speak blood's names aloud  
is to complete your own seduction: *Alizarin. Cochineal. Cerise.*  
*Incarnadine.*

## Vulturine

All morning I have watched them strip the carcass  
of a doe, this black-frosted rabble gathered  
at the first inkling of spoil, crews of shuffling roughnecks  
taking shifts at her unrigging, heads red-slathered  
hooking into windpipe, cheek & tongue—  
then wings cuffing the fly-thick air as several take  
to blasted scrub oaks, striking attitudes horaltic,  
bodies wide-flung to the sun—archaic instruments of clay  
fired chaste in noon's white kiln. What kind of hunger  
drives a mind to ply this dire tableau? What eyes  
have I been given that I scavenge charnel ground—  
at home among the rifling wake, impenitent, unshriven—  
for tatters I might piece into a self-consoling song?

Of Moth

Of crepuscule, of demimonde,  
dark spectacles unfolding. Of umbral  
inklings, blink of false eyes, shivery  
mosaics. Of ash & fawn, of glassine,  
tinsel, flamelicked underwings.

Of crinkle-veined translucencies,  
chatoyant quickenings. Of pickpockets  
& poplar kittens, smuggled daggers,  
sphinxes—of riddling hieroglyphics, kohl-  
traced sigils, pulse & flare. Of pearl,  
of mink, of oracles in quicksilver unscribing:  
a plot of smoke reshuffled in midair.

## Of Mushroom

Of rankling thatch & sopping moss.  
Of woodrot. Barndamp. Leafslick.  
Of crowded parchment, scurf & pulp,  
birthpangs, earthstars unhiving.  
Of ferment: cavings, swellings, strivings  
of occulted sugars. Of cloud ears, twang  
of sweetbreads, sulfur shelves cresting  
in mulchblack. Of vanitas. Of knuckle-  
bone. Of goblet, candlestump. Of half-  
shed cauls & plosive mouthings, mournful  
strains of musk. Of blade passing through  
milkcord, toppled moon facedown in loam.  
Of monkish flies, of drone threading cool  
gillsilks, sooted rafters. Of bellflesh tolling  
vespers, waxen pores exhaling dusk.

## Of Lichen

Of verdigris & tundra-blue, yellowy  
fleeces, rust-flakes. Of storm-plumped  
trumpets, olive-smirch, pillowy radiums.  
Of silvershingle, stipple-scale, birch  
barnacled in jade-junk. Of blistered  
navels, poxes, grumes, bullseyes, rock  
tripes erupting. Of tonsured outcrops,  
horsehair thickets, snarled umbilicals.  
Of nebulae of spectral heathers, featherings  
of hoarfrost. Of paisleys & vermiculars,  
of leprosid patinas. Of scribbled rubbles,  
dappled flanks, plush straddlings, scabbing  
saddles. Of frazzled wigs & ruffled hems,  
tarnished daguerreotypes. Of suedey  
stealths & muffled detonations, glacial  
growths. Of powder-black accruals,  
prodigal colonials. Of felted fractals  
overtaking—ancient, patient, slow.



## Mind of Winter

I want to hollow out my skull with an alabaster spoon  
and ask the rigors of the leanest month to enter.  
To wake there in a light so clean it scalds you  
when you touch me. Feed the horses blades  
of snow. Feed myself to hunger. To feel  
the river groan and twist under its brittle skin  
as veins of ground ice dilate, unsettling the foundation.  
I want to give up thought for something sharper,  
leave mercy as an offering for crows.  
I'll endure subtraction like the Himalayan birch—  
bald sentinel posted before this window—  
I'll be refined by pain until I'm irreducible: a saint,  
a cage of whittled bone set out to sift the moon—no,  
the moon, the light itself, a violence without passion.

Apologia in Shambles

What I wanted was to founder  
in the slough, the moil of bones

& trembling jellies, sinews, hideoscraps, lax jaws, tripe,  
the scrim of caul, the seep of curdled marrow.

To go down hard. To be broken so entirely  
as to be unmovable, incapable of bearing beauty

onward. To lie heaving & insensate—  
meaning safe. What I wished was not to answer

to the goad, not to be woken, not to admit  
the light now tabernacling in the carcass

of the ox, now fathoming the ghosted eyes,  
shivering the heartpanes. What drove me

out of innocence: these words I can't stop  
thinking & having thought must carry

into violence:

*How blameless is the hand*

*that throws the switch of exaltation—  
what voltage in these throes of titian, wine, coral, carnation—*

*all the fall of flesh a benison & invitation,  
ecstatic as the raiment of some cinquecento saint—*

Berlinde De Bruyckere

I am thinking of your mind sculpting  
the carcass as raw matter, slumped heap  
from which meaning must be freed—  
of your hands inside the wreckage  
of a black horse: tang of blood & spoil,  
thrumming of the hide scraped clean—  
of the primitive efficiencies of fire:  
hooves, head, bones, gut, tail reduced  
to cinder-glare & nidor, then shards  
of tooth & femur strewn through ash—  
of iron, wood & glass, the tortured  
armature you fashion; coastlines  
of the cured skin reunited, punctured,  
clamped—of filament & needleflash  
repeating; varnishes & resins, swirl  
of fumes & curling scraps—of what remains  
after the work of disarticulation: the torso,  
scoured, hollowed & suspended  
from the rafters, the animal recast  
as emblem of its pain & stress.

## Afterword

Plate 106 of *The Birds of America* depicts, in Audubon's language, "a pair of Carrion Crows or Black Vultures in full plumage, engaged with the head of our Common Deer, the *Cervus virginianus*." This image has fascinated me since I first encountered it as a teenager, and over the past four years, while composing the pages collected here, I've kept a print posted in view of wherever I'm working. Each time I look, I'm struck anew by how Audubon stages the dramatic yet dispassionate transaction between scavengers and carcass to convey both violence and intimacy. Especially compelling to me is the suggestive geometry at the center of the composition, where the beak of the more active vulture is poised to pierce the deer's glazed eye. I'm drawn to the paradox incipient in this moment: an action that will simultaneously initiate the dismantling of a body and mark the completion of a circle, ushering in the connotations of unification, regeneration, and eternity inevitably tied to such a gesture. I'm drawn, too, to Audubon's word *engaged* for the myriad associations it sparks—with risk and struggle, entanglement and bondage, inquiry and negotiation, reciprocal constraints and interlocking parts—and for how it invites me to consider my position as viewer, particularly in light of my attraction to images and objects in which I perceive beauty against my will.

While the obsessions that haunt this manuscript—injury, disease, and death; anatomy and dissection; painting and sculpture; still life, taxidermy, and scientific illustration—are by no means new to me, I'm optimistic that the work in *Vulturine* reflects a new capacity to articulate the dilemma that drives me to create poetry. I arrived at UMass in 2014 committed to a familiar approach on which I'd learned to rely in my college workshops. Each poem began with a word or constellation of words that appealed

to me as visual objects and my (vague) aim in writing was to create an atmosphere. The more tightly I clung to this approach, however, the more I sensed myself circling something unsaid in a manner that was becoming increasingly passive and unsatisfying. As I learned to venture beyond the safety of my habits during my second year in the MFA, I began to see new connections among the subjects that most intrigue me as both a viewer and a reader. Eventually, my observations coalesced into the question that stands at the heart of *Vulturine*: What happens when my sense of beauty fails to align with my sense of ethics? This question and the many related questions it has engendered have not only enabled me to write *toward*—rather than *around*—that which attracts and frightens me but have also empowered me to centralize and render explicit my ongoing engagement with a thought-provoking anxiety voiced by several trusted readers of my past work—that is, a concern that attempting to deploy “beautiful” language in the illumination of ugly realities runs the risk of erasing, apologizing for, or even reinforcing toxic ideas and structures.

In calling this manuscript *Vulturine*, my intention is not to offer the poem that shares this title as a key to the collection or a summary of its concerns; rather, I hope to honor the inspiration I’ve taken from Audubon’s Plate 106 and to foreground what remains unresolved—and probably unresolvable—for me as a writer: the ambivalence I feel regarding my own capacity to access aesthetic appreciation in the aftermath of violence or suffering, and the ease of compartmentalization that such a capacity implies. As I suggest in the poem “Vulturine,” I feel a profound sense of kinship with vultures and other scavengers, especially when occupying the roles of viewer (or consumer) and elegist. I recognize with some alarm my inclination to romanticize the vulture by reading

elegance into its grim efficiency and by celebrating the ecological necessity of its work as a form of nobility. In preparing to write this afterword, I revisited not only Audubon's Plate 106 but also the volumes of poetry I kept near throughout my time in the MFA, chief among them Lisa Russ Spaar's *Vanitas, Rough*. Her poem *Cathartes aura* delivers a sobering check to my lyrical conceptualization of the vulture in its description of vultures gathered in the frenzy of consuming—what else?—a deer: “Masters of this task, // yet unconscious of any wish to help, / to partake in the dimension that makes one // transform” (29). When—if ever—does my own work proceed from or encompass a wish to help, conscious or otherwise? Is there solace—or even utility—to those who directly experience or survive suffering in poetry that seeks to assert the beauty of that which has suffered? Does the elegist partake in the dimension of transformation—and if so, whom do her alchemies serve? These questions both acknowledge the unfinished nature of the project that has fed this manuscript and circle back to that project's original impulse, offering a temporary point of closure even as they reveal the vexed terrain ahead.