FOREWORD

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In 1999, when I first saw the illustration of the watercolor *Snowy Owl* by John James Audubon on the cover of Christoph Irmscher's book *The Poetics of Natural History*, I felt a wave of sympathy—and relief. For the previous twelve years or so, I had been working, often struggling, to infiltrate natural history collections, mostly on my own and with a camera. I was on a personal mission to study the old specimens from an artistic rather than from an academic point of view. Here, finally, on a book about the early founders of such collections, an artist's vision of owls appears on a scholarly book and the word “poetics” is linked to natural history.

For the Rutgers University Press reprint of this mesmerizing book, I was invited to offer a small group of photographs taken in natural history museums. I have shuffled through my archives in search of images that might echo, however tangentially, the vividness of Christoph Irmscher's style as exemplified in his gallery of besotted collectors as he describes their particular passions. He holds them all in an empathetic embrace.

Past events, as he describes them, seem immediate, while the sense of time itself advances and retreats—without ellipses. The length of time it takes to shoot one hundred birds is much shorter than the length of time it takes to mount a single dead bird on wires and paint its likeness before it rots and must be discarded. The time it takes to find a rare plant in the wilderness, to propagate that plant, the months to send it live across the ocean, the hours or days to paint a portrait of a President, the years or lifetime to make a museum, the eternity to overcome a fear of serpents.

In re-reading this book written twenty years ago, the collectors seem as three-dimensional as ever and not like wax replicas. But knowing, as I do now, the effects of long, uninterrupted tracking shots and other cinematic devices, I can sense a similar intensity of focus in each of Christoph Irmscher's biographical sketches. The first edition of *The Poetics of Natural History* appeared some years before the technique of virtual reality became a fact of modern life. Perhaps back in the late 1990s, a sophisticated pair of magic glasses would have been found in this passionate writer's arsenal: virtual reality glancing backwards.