

BIRDS
of the
Sherborne Missal

SAMPLER

Also by Elisabeth Bletsoe

The Regardians: a book of angels

Portraits of the Artist's Sister

Pharmacopœia & Selected Early Works *

Landscape from a Dream *

An asterisk denotes a Shearsman title.

SAMPLER

Elisabeth Bletsoe

BIRDS
of the
Sherborne Missal

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PREFACE

A missal contains the text and often the music to conduct the Christian Mass throughout the year and the one at Sherborne was created c. 1400 for the monks of the Benedictine Abbey there. It is unique for its remarkable marginal series of naturalistic birds, most of which are native to the area and often given their dialect names. These are mainly to be found in the central pages, appropriately where there is also inscribed musical notation. The missal's lavish scale and decoration served to emphasise the town's spiritual pre-eminence in Wessex.

In this poem-cycle, each bird was observed in its native habitat within the boundaries of the Sherborne diocese and then linked back to the missal by means of religious iconography, imagery relating to books, pigments or methods of illumination as well as bird mythology, the latter often subverting the original Christian intention. The Japanese haibun was loosely employed as its form is well suited to nature-notes and the similar sized blocks of text were visually pleasing, echoing the blocks of heavy Gothic script. The accompanying haiku allowed for a brief word-sketch of the bird or its surroundings, which literally illuminated the whole.

These poems are a celebration of a unique Dorset landscape, made famous by its portrayal in Thomas Hardy's *The Woodlanders*. However, even during the two decades I have lived here, its fragility has become more apparent, with increasing loss of biodiversity and habitat due to unsympathetic developments and industrial-scale farming methods.

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Further Reading:

Janet Backhouse, *The Sherborne Missal*, London: The British Library, 1999.

Janet Backhouse, *Medieval Birds in the Sherborne Missal*, London: The British Library, 2001.

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I.
Unnamed, identified as Goldfinch
(*Carduelis carduelis*)

for Suzanne

Days of brief transparency, viewed through a window of ice, lifted. Powdered across the lane. Having a porous cuttle texture as if drawn “using a thin & rather scratchy nib”. A stricter regimen being currently observed, blood temporarily withdraws. Lenthay copse smokily obscure. Brittle scrapiness of reeds, bones packed tight with air. Fish-spine delicate. A tenebrous rustle, like the breathing of books. Fields growing nothing but stones, bone white, buff white, ivory white, carved by the river Yeo, formerly the Gifle or forked one. Abounding in small flocks among the alders; a *c’irm* or charm indicating a tinnitus of small bells, blended, a continual weaving of waters. Angel speaks with a multitudinous voice. “Thistle-tweaker”, a conflation of thorns with the scarlet forehead becomes the iconography of crucifixion myth, dusting earlier fertile goddess affinities. Its nest a vaginal metaphor; a labyrinth of tender intricacies. *Lucina*, caged by the fingers of holy infants.

sparkling up from
the dried burdock heads, “a shrill
piping of plenty”