

*Pharmacopœia*  
&  
*Early Selected Works*

*Also by Elisabeth Bletsoe*

The Regardians: a book of angels

Portraits of the Artist's Sister

Pharmacopœia

Landscape from a Dream

ELISABETH BLETSOE

**Pharmacopœia**  
&  
*Early Selected Works*

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*For Ian  
with my love*



## PORTRAITS OF THE ARTIST'S SISTER

*Based on the paintings, lithographs,  
letters and diaries of Edvard Munch.*



## ALPHA AND OMEGA

*“seriously and jokingly tells the eternally recurring story”*

when you pulled me  
from the mud,  
Omega,  
and woke me  
touched me  
with a fern frond  
a green interrogation mark:  
I could smell disaster,  
the gunpowder between us

I must admit  
I was really rather taken  
with your eyes  
which on ordinary days  
were hyacinth  
but when the serpent of desire  
unwound your spine,  
stormed black  
in which red planets swam

we drank different coloured milk-shakes  
walked by the sea for hours  
brightness fell from the air  
and the golden pillar of the moon  
simmered on the water

I was happy, too happy  
to write poetry  
and so were you  
(but that didn't matter  
quite so much)

we made love in the woods  
fell among the galaxies of  
ramson flowers, dog's mercury;  
our flesh bruised garlic

but then I caught you  
talking with a SNAKE  
you said that he was interesting  
that there was nothing in it  
no matter—  
I squashed his head under my foot  
while you were busy  
among your many orchards

I know you said  
you had to be creative  
but for God's sake, Omega  
you did it with a DONKEY  
I thought you only meant  
knitting  
or macramé, something harmless  
and just who was that BEAR  
I came across—  
he'd been fighting  
with a heart-sick TIGER  
for want of your body;  
flesh hung in strips from the trees  
and the ground was red  
. . . and as for that PIG  
I never would have thought  
you'd have fallen for  
someone with a curly tail  
and such disgusting manners

in February you met  
a poet-HYENA  
with a shabby coat;  
too concerned with the image  
of being a poet  
than with your true vision  
your words of love left him  
unmoved—  
life could not touch him—  
you made him a garland of flowers  
while he drooped his head  
disconsolate

it would have been easier  
to take  
if you hadn't had children  
all those little monsters running round  
with human heads  
and furry limbs—  
I wouldn't mind so much  
if they didn't call me "father"

there wasn't a medical profession then  
to create the concept of PMT  
so I couldn't even blame it  
on your hormones  
when you wouldn't see the sense  
of being ruled by me—  
but when you eloped with that DEER  
it was the last straw, so to speak  
that broke the camel's back

Nature screamed.  
The sunset bled across the sea,  
ran howling up the beach.

I wrote bitter things about you  
in bad verse  
and left them scratched on leaves  
and under stones  
for worms and birds to read

I found you sleeping by the lake  
I took you  
and kissed you  
under the glass coffin-lid of the water  
until your lips sang bubbles  
your face that was death-in-life  
appalled me;  
it wore the same look  
as when I met you first

and now your beauty ringing out  
a great drowned bell  
telling my deed  
and, Omega, the animals  
your children and your friends—  
their eyes burn red holes in the shadows  
the ground shakes with their tread.  
I love you now, Omega,  
now you are safe and dead  
but it was when you said  
it was when you said  
you loved me—  
then I feared you most

## THE VOICE

*dream of a Summer night*

Never when eyes are looking at you  
can you find them beautiful,  
remark their colour;  
they are hidden by the other's look.

Silent regardian,  
your gaze is Possession, since at once  
you cause my being and steal it from me;  
fashioning my body in its nakedness,  
sculpting that which I shall never see,  
holding the secret of what I am.

My longing had no shape; flexuous,  
warping, it was the shoreline's milk-dust path,  
at times a wooden boat, white-hulled,  
a lake of azuline.

What is desire but this revelation of your eyes,  
the fact of my own flesh? My touch,  
in turn, invites you to yourself; reciprocal,  
we are doubly incarnate.

Nothing between us  
but the burning wires of the afternoon;  
rapture, to hear oneself say "now", to brush together  
our lips' dry tinder, ignite the moment  
with our single spark and torch to ashes round us  
the melting, breathless trees.

## THE SOLITARY ONE

not lonely, but alone  
in the grisaille of evening  
the light-haired woman of spring  
dreaming towards life

day and night commingled:  
    a moment of balance  
    and impending change  
        sways the magic mirror

suspended

by a ripple  
her image lies beyond where  
fabulous stones birth at the surface  
        with their white laughter

way, way out there  
the soft line where ocean  
                                blends with air  
incomprehensible as existence  
eternally longing:

a grey attenuation of cloud

                                darkling,  
the sea becomes more vast  
                                with possibility:  
        amethystine of her pleasure

oh and up there, the moon  
barely perceptible

later to emerge  
a discreet pollen  
on a blue hour

# Pharmacopœia

*“we cannot emotionally separate a flower  
from the place or conditions we find it in”  
(Grigson)*

*for Derrick and Tilla*

**Stinking Iris (*Iris foetidissima*)**

**Kilve**

sea-cliffs &  
a green confluence of  
waters

daggered leaves  
    of flower-de-luce  
cut your smile  
in slices of salt light

under a fossil  
triturate, I conceal  
charred letters  
for you to dis-  
    cover

these stones are shaped by  
desire, though you  
will not believe it;

it is a country where you are,  
a delicate  
recurve of tepals

a “pencilling” of purple-gray/  
    blue-gray  
on tombs at Carnac:

Iris who leads a woman’s soul  
to the fields of Elysium

“growing more grateful & aromatic  
as it dries”

**Cow-wheat (*Melampyrum pratense*)**  
**Five Lords' Wood, Quantocks**

visions of finding  
the source  
among                    these juicy  
   sluices

*sweat dries*  
*& cools as we ascend*

by leaf   by moss   by fern

fleck

in aqua-  
shadow

acts of rapine  
on the grass, a  
contamination  
ground down  
to poverty bread

*the strong grip of your hand*  
*as you pull me*  
*over a dream threshold*

making a *moue*  
in the darkness

(petal-tube)

“hold me  
or I will escape you”

**Dog's Mercury (*Mercurialis perennis*)**  
**Quaker cemetery, Milverton**

bane

of all herbs the most furious

a tendency to  
uncultivated land

dark-tongued  
the guardians of Acheron

in sidereal  
cadence  
beyond possession

snailtrack      birdtrack      spidertrack

spark

a moment's telegnosis

root-deep  
in the genesis of silence

**Elder (*Sambucus nigra*)**  
**Culbone**

voltage  
accrued  
since before  
Atlantis

leprous crystals  
irrupt  
each atom, the woods  
become hyaline;

incandescent  
in shadows of  
narcolepsy

Eldrun  
or Hyllan-tree

wherein a witch  
embarks herself, will

bleed  
at midsummer,  
reverse  
lightning

where  
vortices  
of 5-petalled flowers  
brush lips  
skin  
hair

by yeast  
& muscatel

we are both now

*forspoken*

**Monkey-flower (*Mimulus guttatus*)**  
**Lime Street, Stowey**

blood-drop  
emlets  
in chained water  
at our feet

*(smiley face)*

the “little actor” from  
Unalaska  
working miles & miles of  
new canals

wild musk  
there is none  
purer

the clearest  
of chrome yellow &

most buoyant companion  
I could wish for

**Foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*)**  
**Beech hanger, Longstone Hill**

“glistening with excitement”

I eat up your  
delight

in the consummate mathematics of  
this many-flowered raceme

*purgeth the body both  
upwards & down*

invaginated by  
“soft felt-like hairs”

trigger

pin-drop pollenfall &  
dazzling cryptographs  
of ultra-violet

explode

the pyriform  
leaving that trace  
of digitoxin

palebuff

micro-  
crystalline

**Stinging Nettle (*Urtica dioica*)  
Castle Hill, Stowey**

infesting the  
perimeter of the  
incendiary field we