

A close-up photograph of blue feathers, likely from a parrot, filling the top half of the cover. The feathers are layered and have a fine, ribbed texture. The color is a vibrant, slightly iridescent blue.

**MAYDAY** POETRY PRIZE WINNER

# Little Divinities

Sophie Hoss

# LITTLE DIVINITIES

Published by M3 Books

An imprint of New American Press

[www.newamericanpress.com](http://www.newamericanpress.com)

Finalist for the 2023 MAYDAY Poetry Micro Chapbook Contest

[www.maydaymagazine.com](http://www.maydaymagazine.com)

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ISBN 9781941561379

Cover design by David Bowen

Cover image by manfredrichter via Pixabay

The poems in this collection were first published in the following journals:  
“The Ballad of Lilith” in *The Decadent Review* and “Summer Again” in *BarBar*.

For media and event inquiries, please visit:

[www.newamericanpress.com](http://www.newamericanpress.com)

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*For my mother*

# The Ballad of Lilith

We were splinters, cracked from the flesh of dark Elysium  
in a fell holy stroke. I am no rib-molded thing, second always.  
I never hated Adam, but he was simple, pliable. His heavy eyelids spasmed  
as our bodies heaved in and on each other, warm. God is not a man.

*Have you been told not to eat of the fruit?*

Leaves swollen with shade. Apricot skins melting my teeth, sweet and  
stringy. God waiting in my throat.  
A place cannot be paradise if one has never been anywhere else.

*Have you been told not to eat of the fruit?*

When Adam asked me to carry his child, I said no.  
Wings grew from the insect of my spine.

*Have you been told not to eat of the fruit?*

The garden sank and the sky reached down.  
I swallowed cold air and flew.  
The angels clawed at my legs, but they couldn't drag me back  
and I had never felt closer to my Maker.

*Have you been told not to eat of the fruit?*

*Oh, but I have already tasted it.*

## The Experimental Archaeologist as a Small Child

I piled horseshoe crab skeletons in the birdbath  
and plucked flailing worms from their earthen burrows  
arranged them in a makeshift playhouse  
of leaf scraps and twigs—

the worms had to be replaced often  
[ blubber  
dries out overnight ]—

I splayed belly-down on the carpet to become the taxidermized sea turtle  
in the Museum of Natural History,  
tilling the sand with leathery flippers—

if I willed it hard enough, maybe a shell would sprout  
from my pebbled spine  
and I could lay an egg  
from which a smaller me would emerge—

the baby ducklings my dad brought home one spring—  
squeezed lemon fluff—

were plopped into the bath with me  
so they could learn to swim.  
I looked intently into the flat-billed faces,  
the beaded eyes—

they blinked  
and pedaled their spindly  
webbed feet in aimless zigzags,  
bumping into the tub's chipped plaster edges.

*Imprint on me. Please, I wished—*

## Summer Again

Lightless hallways open and close like birth canals or whatever is their opposite.  
I can trace the scar on my knuckle with my eyes closed, but I only  
recognize myself in the mirror every fifth morning. I'm becoming  
something I don't fit into anymore, and what is a body if  
not a vessel for itself? More to the point—what does  
a vessel become when it has nothing to carry?

I don't want to know the answer. No—I don't want to know  
the answer.

## I'll Find Atlantis Myself

In the gullet of the ocean, I think  
about impossibility—the lack thereof—  
how the violence of light  
moves right on through us after it hits the eye.  
How salt still burns the same after all these  
years—the way I forget everything,  
except what I remember.  
Again I surface—again, I breathe—again  
again am gasped under  
by screaming current—that colossus of hunger—  
lungs who never learn to drown with dignity.  
If you want me so badly,  
just take me.

## Papers in the Wind

Sometimes I feel like I'm living my life in the shape of a triangle. This usually happens on Wednesdays. I want everything, but not all of it.

I have a reoccurring dream that I'm on a spaceship and I've left my glasses back on earth. I am trying to find the most polite, non-obtrusive way possible to explain this to the captain and ask him to turn the ship around. We have just left the blurry eye of Pluto in the rearview mirror. It must be a trick of the light—surely nothing can be that lonely.

If I could choose my own circle of hell, I'd pick the second one. I wouldn't mind the winds if it's true they'd let me fly. I wonder if a damned soul erodes away like a tiny star, feeding and bleeding until it's nothing but a burning empty, a fingerprint of heat in a frozen cosmos. I think the laws of nature hint affirmative. Everything ends, even hell.

I ask Cassandra why she bothered speaking her prophecies if she knew no one would believe her. "Apollo cursed me," she says. "He didn't strike me mute." I ask Mary if she regrets mothering Jesus. She looks confused. "It would have happened either way," she says. I ask Ophelia if she really meant to drown herself. She rings her dripping hair out over the kitchen sink, and the water hits the rim like a splatter of paint. "One question," she says, "and that's what you pick?"

In the least macabre way possible, I think about what will happen to my body after I die. It's more comforting than thinking about what will happen to it while I'm alive. I write a message in a bottle and toss it out into the churning, impossible night. I'm here, it reads. I was here, too.

Dad tells me that when he was sixteen, a boy in his church died of an overdose. On the way back from the funeral, my grandmother said, "It's better this way. He was no good. Now the mother won't have to suffer so much."

Wanting is its own kind of fever, and I sweat it out the best I can. It's the not-wanting that feels most corrosive.

If hell can't be eternal, then neither can heaven. Maybe at the very end of everything, it evens out and we all go to limbo. Maybe we play tennis.

I find my message in a bottle stuffed between my pillow and mattress. The paper is blank.

I ask Eve what the fruit tasted like. "An apricot," she says. "And salt." I ask if she would do it again,

given the choice. “The garden wasn’t paradise,” she says. “It was a trap.” She strokes the head of the serpent wound about her shoulders, and its forked tongue makes a noise like the purr of a cat. Adam is nowhere to be found.

## A Few Days after St. Patrick's Day

A strange thing  
to watch your father bury  
his own father.

Afterwards,  
I laid with my ear  
on his pulse.

Meanwhile,  
my stony grandmother—  
newly widowed—  
wandered the graves

through light snow  
looking for the bones  
of her mother.

## **Intrepid Wanderer in the Maze of Light**

I find her where I left her, in the place where she still believes the flowers bloom for her alone. I don't tell her differently, but I think she can see it on my face. We make a potion of dirt and hose water and wild onion roots, pour it into matching teacups and toast the last thing that made us smile. Hers is the cloud shaped like a horse. Mine—always—is the moon. She wants to follow me back, and because she still pretends she can talk to birds, I let her. It's almost her birthday again, anyway. She skips ahead even though she doesn't know the way, bumping into dead end hedges, peeking around corners and scheming out loud, long shadow blooming behind her like a cape that never fit until I draped it over her. It's not enough, I think, watching us, it's not enough, it never is.

## Underwood

These keys stagnated by rust and negligence  
yield one stingy letter at a time, then lock and jam  
to stifle my 1930s reporter fantasy—

*Yeah, I'll have that in by five*, I say with an adrenalined drag of my cigarette, pencil  
behind my ear—

the beast of cogs and ribbons  
trembles in stalemate and  
paper sticks to my ink-slick fingers like a chef preparing squid.

Handling antiques is a thankless resurrection: always an outsider,  
always the captor of a  
mournful time travel-mishap.

They creak with nonbelonging and ache quietly  
for a hand too kind or old to be mine.

I wish I could slip down the lever and  
polish your bones till the rust drips  
off like melted chicken fat.

I think I could be in love with you if you let me.

I think I could make you sing.

# Miasma

It's the same sun, but I think someone is lying.

When I say "home"    I mean "bed."

When I say "you"    I mean "me."

My house is only haunted when I'm alone / The seasons only change when no one is looking.

# The Tempest

Baptism by storm is my only kind—  
exaltation is only true in a gale

In a gale—clarity is sporadic  
and stunning

I need to maximize these limbs    this heart

Can this body ever do    in a lifetime—  
What a splint of  
                         lightning can  
—in half a blink?

Splintered snatches of thunder  
heave

                 humpback whale clouds breach  
in waves

stranded—un-sparked—in simmering fire.

## Culaccino

A ghost just cold enough to leave a puddle:  
How do you—personally—define evaporation?

I ring my finger over the little dripping halo,  
smear it until it could be a spill or a leak  
and no longer a shrine to the lifted cup, to  
the hand that lifts it.

When it's my turn, I'll leave everything but this.

## Premonition

Snow whirls under streetlights.

We drive over dark roads,  
thump over ice, gravel, potholes  
in no particular order.

Our little midnight world holds its breath, and there you are,  
aching blue with beauty in the passenger seat.

I don't see you as much as feel you, breathing and beating your heart; I want  
to lift your palm to my mouth  
and kiss it right in the center,  
the place where I imagine your veins  
spark together like live wires.

You're playing a new song  
for me, one of your favorites, and  
I am here,  
in the car, the dark, the snow,  
and I am in every moment of my life yet to come,  
wishing I was where I am now,  
living and remembering  
and living again.

It will be snowing on the day that I die.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to the editors of the following journals in which these poems first appeared, sometimes in slightly different forms:

*The Decadent Review*: “The Ballad of Lilith”

*BarBar*: “Summer Again”

My deepest gratitude—always—to my mom, dad, and brother for their endless love and support. A special thanks to Frederic Tuten for always believing in me.

## AUTHOR BIO

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