

Dear so-and-so, let me tell you, the woods / are like love. The most beautiful place / you'll ever be. And terrifying. On the brink of climate catastrophe, a mother grappling with her choice to bring children into an apocalyptic world sends her daughters into the woods of fairy tale as a rite of initiation. The woods carry her fears of extinction—devastating fires, rising seas, and the predatory dangers of girlhood—but also contain the transformative magic of love, interdependence, and renewal. And If the Woods Carry You roots into the wild heart of motherhood, where worry and wonder intertwine.

"This is a book where myth, motherhood, and nature spin together into one affecting voice—*And If the Woods Carry You* is a wondrous read!"

—Marilyn Chin

"Thick with the intrinsic music of the woods, Erin Rodoni's *And If the Woods Carry You* offers us a lyrical journey through a world 'heavy with ghosts and dead bees,' enchantment, and grit. With language that is both tender and incisive, Rodoni gives voice to the wonder and uncertainty of childhood and motherhood, illuminating a land of illness and loss, but also of 'everyday magic' and exquisite beauty."

—Vandana Khanna

"Like all great fairy tales, Erin Rodoni's poems are a glorious marriage of the domestic and the dangerous. There are tests and transformations, solitudes and sacrifices, births and burials. Everything is changing into something else, something energized, erotic, and enchanted. But it is the poet's attention to craft that lifts these poems from the beguiling world of mere narrative into the more magical realm of art. In language that feels both ancient and current, Rodoni manages to craft lyrics that seem to come from some other world while speaking truths to this one. This is a marvelous book with a poetic voice to enliven even the wildest woods."

—Dean Rader

"'Oh, it is dangerous / to love a child,' writes Erin Rodoni as both lamentation and warning in this book of woods and gardens less bucolic than roiled with the underlying darkness of fairy tales. Her journeying through such sensuous landscapes uncovers implicit desires for herself and her daughters, as well as explicit desire for her craft: 'I want the poem to hold everything the way my body holds / the whole and holy of me.' If these poems, their 'vision exquisite / with detail,' bring to mind Donatello's wooden sculpture of Mary Magdalene, that striking embodiment of suffering, they also insist that healing is another constant in our lives and remind us that 'Whatever we mother, it is tenderly / vicious, this language we speak.'"

—Michael Waters



\$16.95



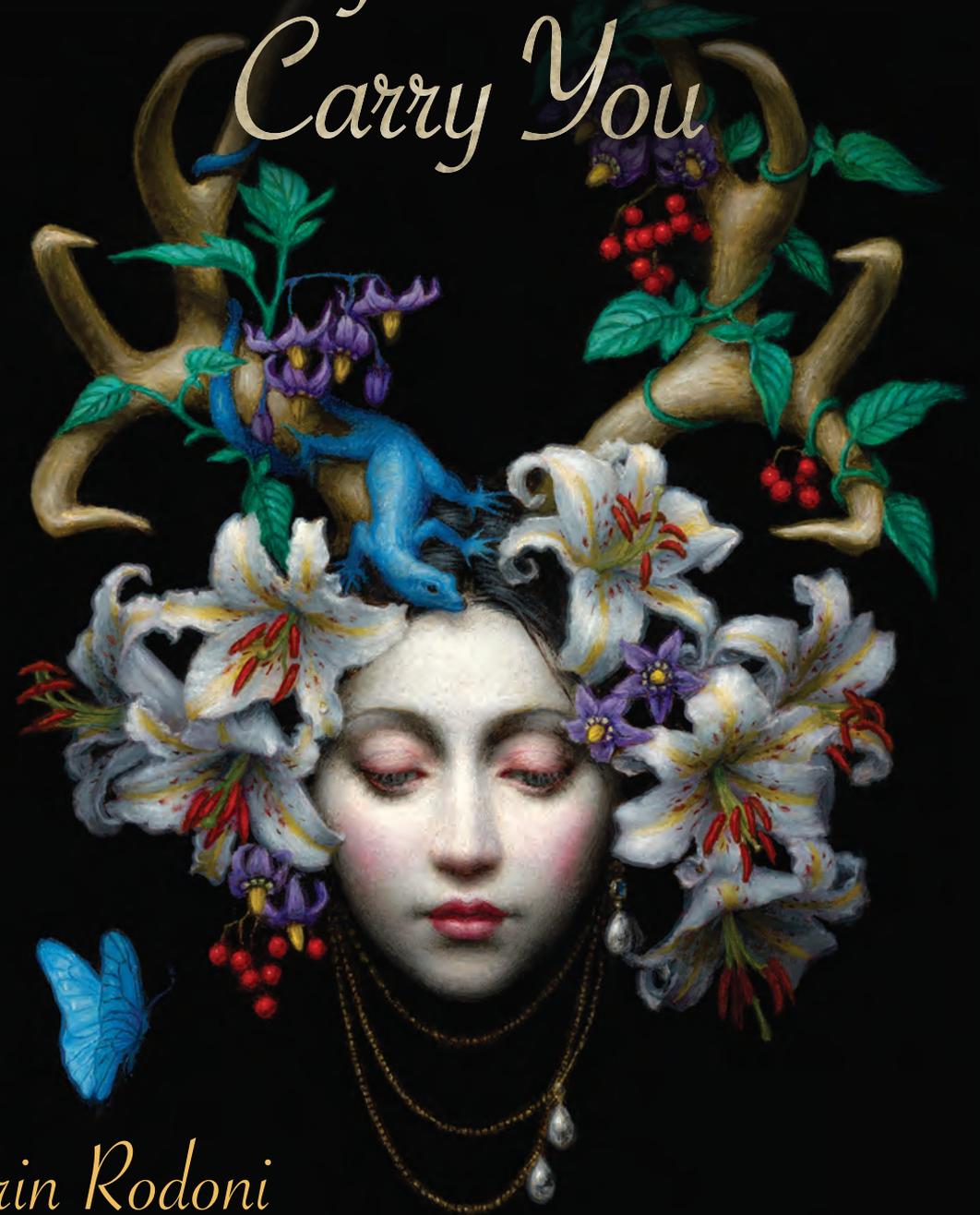
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Erin Rodoni

And If the Woods Carry You

SIR Press

And If the Woods Carry You



Erin Rodoni

Michael Waters Poetry Prize

LULLABY WITH FIREFLIES AND RISING SEAS

And if the woods carry you into their deep
and tangled. If the woods claim you

elf or sprite and spirit you
from me. Tell me your first fireflies

were enough, the lawn they candled
to enchantment. Because the dark

of childhood is mythed
and monstereed, but my dark

mind glints off every surface
sharp enough to slit. Tonight,

ice sheets slide like seals
into the sea and in Nice,

parents hurl their children out
of the truck's path. Their only

prayer, a heartbeat's worth
of *please*. Maybe, like me,

the only god you can conceive
is a kind of wakefulness.

Feel the stream of night
tugging your ankles? See

the seams of night
torn with those brief lights?

Sometimes I ring
the fine bones of your wrist

with my forefinger and thumb
and wonder at the monstrous

love that flung you into this.
In every fairy tale, the mother dies
and is replaced by someone wicked. It's true,
I want to keep you safe, but I want
to keep you mine. I never meant to fly
you like a kite. I never meant to stay
behind. But the mother is a cottage
the daughter flutters from, the mother
more cage than bird, and the parting clean
as a licked sword. The future, a castle that can't be
childproofed. And the fairy tale, still
open on my lap, is not a map.

GROWING UP WILD

Look how tall the pines loom,
how deep glacial streams gash
fields of lupine. It is dangerous
to be a child. The starcut wilds spark
with rhythms and nothing rhymes
when her griefcry cracks
the Precambrian sky, a blue so ancient
I almost believe humans will never
touch it. But we are worming
up there too, parasites grazing
the mind of God. There is so little left
untouched and god knows we can't stop
touching. I hurry my babies along
wellmarked trails in wellmapped
woods, through a camouflaged dazzle
of song. A doe stills us with her side-
eye while her fawns fleet into the trees.
So many creatures slide from
our gaze, little flames of meeting.
No matter how much I wish this
swordsheen green for us, the *Timber!*
shadows laying down the planks
of coming night, no matter how much
I want those arctic stars, swarmed thick
against a black that seems somehow plush
and vacant at once, sometimes I fear there
is nowhere safer to keep the wild
than outside. Any territory, I'm told,
once claimed, must be defended. So we kill
even with our desire to live
gently. But there is no gentleness
between hunger and what feeds
it. Oh, it is dangerous
to love a child.

TIME CAPSULE: THE FALLOW DEER

Reader, they have slaughtered the white deer of my childhood.
My father enchanted them into unicorns as they drifted in with the fog
that filled our valleys. They were imports, ornamental. Shipped in
by some rich eccentric for his pleasure. Reader, it's true: they outgrew
their pen, outlived their keeper. Up close they were not white, really, more day-
old snow, their fur matted with ticks and burrs. Their horns not spiral,
but branched. Reader, they were nothing like unicorns, but I loved
to spot them from my father's truck as we drove the sinuous
road to the coast. How they came out like stars in the scrub oak.
My father kept a gun in the back seat. He kept a season for killing,
the other three for wonder. I woke once to headlights
slashed across my bedroom window, a buck strung
by his hind legs in the pear tree, belly split sternum to pelvis,
my father cutting him down into pieces we could swallow.
Those evenings though, my father never fired, only whistled
to startle them up from their grazing so I could call them
by their horns: button buck, spike, doe. They called them invasive
and shot them from helicopters. Who were they, Reader, to draw
the line of belonging? The white deer were my fireflies,
my everyday magic. But who am I? In the crackle of starlight,
above dry leaves soaked silent, the dead buck shone, nothing
like a unicorn. Up close it is harder to stomach what we do
with this awe, with these hands.

HUNTRESS

The stag's heart spoke (as it passed
through my throat) of desire.

I've held the strangest of strangers.
To swallow, the quickest way to close

that distance. I'm still so hungry for
the tribe of shadows that rubs

its fur against my nighttime
and there are no bars, but bars

of trees. Yes, the forest speaks
with many voices.

All of them say *Lie down,*
die here. Yes, stomachs split

and organs fall from
ordained order. A liver jewels

at me through the murk
of dream. All beings fall

through each other, through topsoil,
into deep cradles of rain.

I'm afraid I'll never know another
body, only the bloom

of impact. And in the dark
we're all moonblind, heat-

seeking. I've seen the cavity-
colored tracks in antlers,

ticks balloon with blood,
and fleas rise like ghosts from drying

hides. How deep I've looked
with my gleaming knives.

Their eyes are open,
but their gaze is closed.

Like them, I've learned to veil
my face in breath, white as vapor-

bone. Behind it, my teeth
press my tongue until I can taste

my own blood, the tang of steel
bars in the rain.

OH ARTEMIS,

I did all the things you wouldn't. My heart beat
to be snared. And it was, and it was. Oh capture
of glances. Hot stammer of graces

against my neck, my breasts. Oh love, that trap.
I am heavy with it. My hips laden with daughters.
Settled, domestic. Artemis, my girls are all sinew

and shine. And heathen still. Your dystopian
disciples, they crest the ridge of the future,
mooncaged and clad in what they have killed.

Flintstrike of foot against forest floor. See
how they sharpen, laureled with breath? I whisper
such myth into their skin while they sleep

beneath tree limbs. In the shadow-
lace of leaves, wilds dart beneath their eyelids.
Still, they run screaming from spiders,

even as the cellar stocks with canned goods
and the age of play swings toward its end.
Still, bloodshed remains

something that happens on the moon-
bleached highway while they dream.
On the way to school, I see their eyes

in the rearview mirror, follow a stain
to the side of the road, where some poor
nocturnal creature spills her guts

in brutish sun. Day after day she decays
like an omen of what is to come. Oh Artemis,
you were my favorite. I should have run.

ON BEING OUT OF THE WOODS

They don't tell you the woods are like the universe:
infinite, and expanding. There is no getting out.
You can only weave between the trees. Outrun
the cones exploding into growth. The compass spins,
dear so-and-so. Branches blacker than night
smack the guiding star about, an errant firefly.
They don't tell you the woods are like the past:
haunted, and evergreen. There is no forgetting.
To forgive is to move. Away or toward? Memory,
eyes in the dark. Memory, a clearing. Dear so-and-so,
as you may have guessed, to be woodbound is to be
bound to every risk. May the wolf howl only
in the distance, the rustling be but the waking
of owls in the gables of dusk. Born to hunt,
reared on luck. They don't say the woods
will make you prey. May the wings slapping above
be but fruit bats, sugarseekers with no lust for blood.
It's okay to pray. Defenseless, you fill with reverence:
these wedded roots, the leafstrung lute, the wind
that strums the same damned seasons, cyclic
and scything. To breathe is to feel the dead inside you
rising. Dear so-and-so, let me tell you, the woods
are like love. The most beautiful place
you'll ever be. And terrifying.