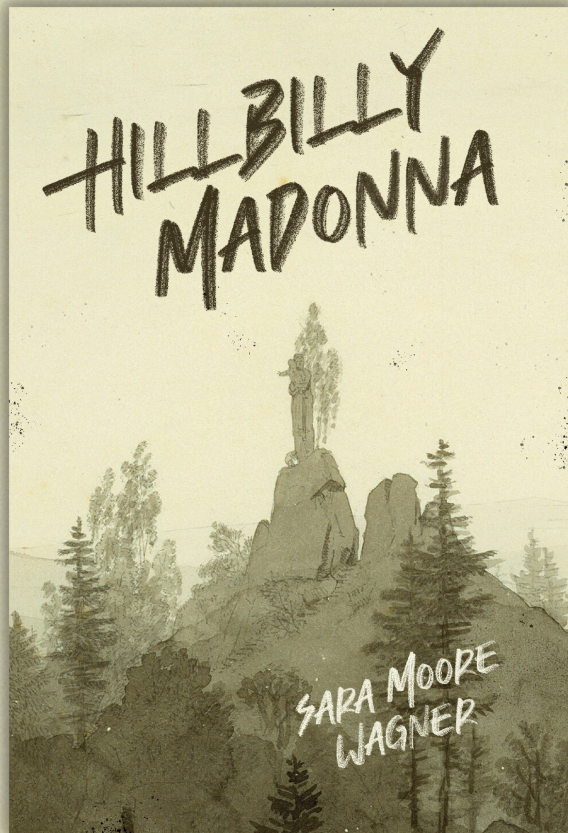


DRIFTWOOD PRESS
PRESENTS A NEW
POETRY COLLECTION



Sara Moore Wagner's *Hillbilly Madonna* is a harrowing and ultimately hopeful lens into rural life and the opioid crisis. Rendered with crucial honesty, these poems center women's experiences in Appalachia and reveal their often-overlooked stories and perspectives. Simultaneously tender and biting, *Hillbilly Madonna* ushers in a vital new voice in poetics, one that will stick with readers far beyond the wooded foothills of Ohio.



Release Date: Nov 15th 2022

Publisher: Driftwood Press

ISBN: 978-1-949065-22-0

Format: paperback

Price: \$14.99 USD

Genre: poetry, Appalachia

Contact: editor@driftwoodpress.net

Distributor: INGRAMSpark

**"I AM WHOLLY ENCHANTED BY
HILLBILLY MADONNA."**

**- DIANE SEUSS, WINNER OF THE
PULITZER PRIZE FOR FRANK:
SONNETS**

"This collection emerges from the intersection of the vernacular world and the empire of divine myth. Father, mother, sister, baby, self—each holds a space in a rough-hewn narrative of abuse, addiction, and survival—and also exists as a looming shadow of its antecedent in the realm of archetype. The canopy over Wagner's creation, and the terrain that buttresses it, is the Appalachian landscape itself, and its synonym, the body. 'When the doctor opens me up, / my bones are gold— / There is some enchantment in them,' she writes. I am wholly enchanted by *Hillbilly Madonna*."

— DIANE SEUSS,
WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE FOR FRANK: SONNETS

"Sara Moore Wagner's *Hillbilly Madonna* is a book I have been waiting for. Wagner's family was part of the great diaspora of Appalachian people from the mountains to the cities, and the voice of one raised in that borderland, not quite urban, not quite country, has been long missing from our poetry. No more. And what a voice! *Hillbilly Madonna* offers an unflinching yet tender look at a largely untended girlhood where 'No one told us/how to live as a girl would,/... shave / the holler from our limbs like scraping /paint off an old truck.' These poems are an intoxicating mix of story, myth, image and truth-telling. They compel us 'to really look at it, to see it blinking/through the blackness' – a life, in all its fierce and complicated beauty. Wagner tells us, 'I pick an orange tiger lily with my messy orange fingers, / because I want to remember blooming. / Because I think I could just bloom.' And on these pages, she has.

— PAULETTA HANSEL,
AUTHOR OF *HEARTBREAK TREE*

LETTER TO THE READER

DEAR READER,

Where to begin with a book about decay, about both childhood and loss of childhood—about hope for the next generation, and despair for what's been stolen from this generation.

I write this letter sitting next to my father's urn. My father recently died suddenly of COVID-19, after a long period of our estrangement. There wasn't any closure or peace, and now I have been left to clear his house, the deer heads, the guns, paraphernalia, the memorabilia of my childhood that's etched across the pages of *Hillbilly Madonna*. He is alive in this book in all the ways he was, both weak and strong, chained to his upbringing, his landscape, his vices, his ideology.

On the day he died, I rushed to his house where friends of his were already fighting over his various belongings. My aunt and grandmother were there in a panic, my brother. Everyone held a gun in their hand, and I had to go outside, take a breath in the scrap metal wasteland of his yard. My aunt laughed at me—said I couldn't be a real hillbilly.

Yes. Maybe not.

When I say hillbilly, it's because it's what my family calls themselves—born in the foothills of Ohio's Appalachia, they relocated to Columbus for a better life. My father, though, idealized the hills, and I spent so much of my childhood tramping through the woods and rolling through the mud in his dune buggy. When he wasn't in the woods, he was stripping the deer he'd shot, making deer jerky and turkey feather wreaths. He even camouflaged his lawnmower. He carried Appalachia, the good and bad, in his veins.

I am left with the central question of this book—how much of his landscape is left in me? What of it will I carry and pass on to my own children? How much of it is my landscape?

This book is also about who I would have been without my mother. My parents split when I was very young, and she fought to make my life better than hers. My mother was born in West Virginia and witnessed the murder of her mother and grandmother. Her time with my dad was another dark period for her. For a lot of my life, I fought against her—refused to understand her. I wanted to be part of my father's story only. I rebelled. I made horrible choices, but she was always there to pull me back to the road.

This book is about my mother, too.

Even though I'm caught in a cycle of reflection about my family—I think this book is bigger than us. I titled this collection *Hillbilly Madonna* being keenly aware of the way the opioid epidemic has affected mothers and women. Ohio is the epicenter of this crisis. I have seen so many of my friends and family members lose almost everything to addiction—their children, their lives. Though there is a lot being written about addiction and Appalachia now, this book is distinctive because it explores the problem from a woman's perspective, one who started as a girl like any other. It's a voice of someone who has lost children, who is trying to rise above the lineage of addiction, neglect, and abuse. Women's voices often do get buried in the opioid epidemic. As always, women are judged more harshly, seen as monsters for any weakness. This book gives a voice and a face to the addict mother, one who is struggling to find a way out.

In this way, I and so many of the women I know, so many "sisters" I have had in my life, are hillbilly Madonnas, forced to birth something we don't know or understand, even though society would never see us, unclean and flawed, as Madonna figures. The Madonna is expected to be holy and pure. We're cast out when we don't quite fit or measure up. But, like something holy, so many of us rise above what we've been left with to create something lasting and beautiful. It's possible to be purified, to be clean, to rise out, to leave behind that lineage of trauma and abuse to create a lovely place for our children to rest, unaware of it all.

It may be a long time before I make any peace with the memory of my father and what he's left me and my siblings. For now, this book is a small gesture towards presenting the truth to my children about where we all come from, a reminder they aren't chained to anything. It's also an attempt to show you, reader, yet another unravelling of that strict dichotomy between the Madonna and whore. The Hillbilly Madonna is both and neither, just a person trying to escape what's been handed down to her, to understand that and the landscape, and to pass on only beauty to the next generation.

**SINCERELY,
SARA MOORE WAGNER**

PRE-HEROIN

My sister and I follow the wood planks of the railroad tracks downtown. We bought a box of crimson Manic Panic, split two ways, bright red like Tori Amos; shirts tied up, tan bellies—It's a scorcher. The woods mirage. Dirt beneath sweat, unrinsed dye rivulets our faces. I say how much this means to me, to be here with her, walking this path alone to the fair, where I won't have any money but I'll bat my done-up eyelashes at boys until they buy me all the different colors of licorice and enough tickets to ride the Ferris wheel with each one, my backseat sticking to the vinyl.

Every boy has wet hands that soak the baby hairs on my thigh. I'm sunburnt. It hurts to be touched, but I keep going, around and around until night comes and they turn on all those green lights. The rides look like their own city: incandescent. I could be under the sea or on the moon—full of sugar and sun—The breeze just feels so good. My sister doesn't want to ever go home. *No one is looking for us yet. It ain't time.*

We squeeze into a little photobooth with the last of our change. Later, I think that picture was so beautiful, how everything matched then, our sweaty white tees, red faces, splotchy orange-ing hair. How much power we had that night. Just enough to be taken away.

Sara Moore Wagner is the author of *Swan Wife* (winner of the 2021 *Cider Press Review Editor's Prize*), a recipient of a 2022 *Individual Excellence Award* from the Ohio Arts Council, a 2021 *National Poetry Series* Finalist, and the recipient of a 2019 *Sustainable Arts Foundation* award. She is the author of the chapbooks *Tumbling After* (Redbird, 2022) and *Hooked Through* (Five Oaks Press, 2017). Her poetry has appeared in many journals and anthologies including *Sixth Finch*, *Waxwing*, *Nimrod*, *Western Humanities Review*, *Tar River Poetry*, and *The Cincinnati Review*, among others. She lives in West Chester, OH with her filmmaker husband Jon and their children, Daisy, Vivienne, and Cohen.

