

Segue

online literary journal

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It Is All Getting Away From Us

You can't worship under water. That's what Shirley says.

The sound keeps coming at me, through the wall, pouring continuously. They're releasing all the water, from all the planet, just pouring out the tap, the neighborhood water, the state water, the oceans. All of it back to God.

∴

I remember the day those two moved over here.

Neville and I were putting up chicken wire along the base of the fence to keep the cats out of the yard. We were fools, really. Down on our hands and knees in the dirt, in the cat turds, sweat pouring off us. And all the while those cats purring and weaving and rubbing against us like we were their best friends. Neville threatened one of them, threw the wire cutters at it, but it just blinked its ice blue eyes at him and curled up next to his knee in the dirt, flicking a black tipped tail.

After we got done, Neville stood up, crossed his arms over his chest, and said, "That-a does it." He was just imitating what men do, you see. "What about the cats?" I asked, because they were still frisking around the yard, taking dumps under the porch, and half climbing the tree before falling off. Neville picked them up, one by one, getting all clawed up, and dropped them over the other side of the fence.

We were the stupid ones, though. Those cats just climbed over the top of the fence, jumped into our dogwoods, and landed right back in the yard.

We were putting up that chicken wire when two guys walked right in. They acted like it was the most normal thing in the world to come into our yard. For a moment, I wondered if it was going to be one of those things like you read about, where someone is robbed and it's not at all like in the movies—no guns, no masks, no threats. Just two well-dressed young men who calmly walk up to you, in no hurry at all, and tell you your life is about to change forever.

I looked at Neville, but he was just staring at them too, his mouth hanging open like a screen door. Aren't men supposed to be vigilant about these things? That's what I asked him later that night in bed. He grunted and threw his pants on the floor. "Baby, you worry too much." That's what he said to me, like there's just the right amount of worrying, or a scale to measure it, and I'm weighing everything down with my big, fat head. That's Neville for you.

They said something like "good day" or "good morning," something normal like that, but then they walked on by, ignoring our stunned silence, walking in that way that they do, kind of loping-like. The cats, tangled up in the unrolled chicken wire on the ground, got up and followed them like zombies. "Neville, aren't you, I mean, shouldn't we do something?" I asked. Neville just went back to building our already futile fence as if they were from the UPS. "What are we going to do?" he asked with a shrug.

At that moment, I remembered where I had seen them before. Neville and I had gone for lunch in town at the diner, and I had a milkshake. I was slurping it down to the last drop, I guess

maybe making a little too much noise because Neville sunk down in his chair a bit, when there was a tap on my shoulder. I turned around and found myself facing two whitebread-looking guys in dress shirts and black ties. “Excuse me, ma’am,” they said. “Would you like to hear about the prophets?”

This took me off guard. Usually when someone taps you on the shoulder like that at a restaurant, they are from outta town and want directions, or they think what you ordered looks delicious and wonder what exactly it is. I just stood there looking at them all bug-eyed, still holding my empty milkshake glass in my hand like a torch, when I heard Neville clear his throat. “No thanks,” he said. The guy who didn’t say anything looked kind of sheepish, and both of them put some money on the table and left.

They can’t go anywhere by themselves, except maybe the bathroom. Did you know that? It’s some kind of Mormon law. Shirley told me about it. They have to be together all the time. I don’t know if it’s so one of them doesn’t accidentally go have sex or drink caffeine or what, but they can’t be separated. I used to think that was kind of weird. Then for a while I thought it was beautiful, like a marriage. Better even.

∴

The Mormons came and lived on the opposite side of our duplex, and they never asked us about prophets again.

We were the stupid ones, alright. We had been living here six months, and we never even realized there was another half of the house, empty, waiting to be filled.

Neville never had a problem with them. When they came for the mail, he just threw his hand up like they were old friends. How he even recognized them individually I don’t know; there were two of them, but they changed every few weeks. They all looked similar, as if they were frozen in perpetual youth, as if their features had yet to catch up to their lanky bodies. When I talked to them once or twice, there was something not quite right, and I found myself staring at them as if they were being broadcast via satellite and there was a two minute delay. Their faces looked like a four-year-old’s, I swear. Once a Chinese one came around Christmas time. When he walked through our yard, he always stopped and stared at the Christmas tree as if transfixed.

I don’t think the Mormons had anything to do with Neville abandoning me, but I can’t be sure. He used to talk to them sometimes. Who knows what they said?

He left around the time that I got my diagnosis. Neville wouldn’t go to the hospital with me; he’s afraid of them. He thinks you go in there well and then you don’t come out. This is because his uncle went in after coughing up blood into his handkerchief, and then he died two weeks later in the same hospital bed. This is silly, you know. Neville just thinks this because he was a child at the time, and the uncle looked alright on the outside, but inside he had tumors as big as potatoes. Plus he had probably been coughing up blood for weeks and didn’t even tell anyone. I don’t understand why Neville can’t step outside of his childhood point-of-view.

Anyway, the doctor pushed on my stomach, asked me about the pain, and then sent me into one of those cave-like machines where they can see your insides. The nurse told me before I went in that it might be overwhelming if I was claustrophobic or if I had trouble staying still. She had

music piped in, a man's smooth, high-pitched voice that sounded as if he was singing with the last air available to him, as if he was trapped inside a glass case. He sang about how he was all out of love. I asked for Luther Vandross, but they didn't have him.

I was scared, but when I got in, I realized that it was like when I was a child and used to go in my closet and lie on the floor, just to feel the small of my back go flat. I almost fell asleep. "Shoot," I told that nurse when I got out, "that was like a vacation." She laughed at that one, but I could tell her laugh was fake because she was doing something funny with the corners of her mouth.

Afterward, I sat on the table to wait for the doctor to come and talk to me. I hate those tables. I always feel like I'm wrecking everything because my ass is too big and I can't lift myself up, so I end up ripping that white paper they have under you. Damn it, Neville, I thought. At least I'd have someone to talk to instead of sitting here staring at a glass jar of cotton balls. He was probably shooting the breeze with those Mormons, talking about prophets or whatever.

"Well, Mrs. Mather, I've got some good news and some bad news," the doctor said, talking to me out in the hall, even before he came in the room. "Which do you want to hear first?" He seemed cheerful and carefully pulled out his white doctor jacket before sitting down, so I assumed nothing was too bad-wrong. He'd at least try to look sad, wouldn't he, if I was dying?

"Go ahead with the bad, I guess," I said, trying to get myself comfortable but ripping more of the paper.

"You have a growth on your ovary. A cyst, actually. That's why you've been having cramps in your abdomen."

"Okay," I said. I wasn't going to say anything or cry or whatever until I got the complete picture.

"The good news is that, in a post-menopausal woman such as yourself, a cyst isn't much of a problem. It's not cancerous, and unless you were trying to have a baby, it's not going to interfere with your life in any way. I'll give you some medication for the cramping."

"Medication? You mean you don't want to cut it out?" The paper crinkled under my thighs.

"Well, I really don't see any good reason to. I like to avoid surgery when possible." I saw him sneak a peek at the clock on the wall.

"But it's not *supposed* to be there, right?"

"No, but it's not dangerous. Just a dermoid cyst, made of extra skin and tissue." He got up and pulled a book down from the shelf. "Here, you can see for yourself. It's just a cluster of cells that got the wrong idea and started growing. See?" He pointed to a black and white photograph.

"That ugly thing? That's *inside* of me?" I stared down at a white, greasy glob with wiry hair sticking out on the surface.

"That's a dermoid cyst, dermoid coming from 'derma,' the skin. Those are follicular elements on the outer shell, and these are dental extrusions." The doctor placed his thin white finger on the picture where two tiny deformed teeth-like things were. His wedding band reflected a golden light upon the cyst.

"Dental? You mean teeth? Good Lord!" I jumped down off the table.

"Now, Mrs. Mather, don't get too upset. It's not pretty to look at, but I promise you, it's harmless. Let me go write you a prescription for your medicine."

After he left, I just stood there with his book of atrocities in my hands. I stared at this cyst

with its gray-looking hairs and three little teeth. Finally a nurse came in the room and frowned at me, leading a nervous woman behind her in a paper gown. She took the book away and closed it with a soft snap.

Driving home, I couldn't stop thinking about it. Growing hair and teeth inside me. It was like the ugliest baby you ever saw. And for some reason, the more I thought of it, the more I envisioned it hanging desperately off my ovaries, destined never to be born, smiling a half smile but with no eyes, the more I got used to it. The more I liked it even, just being there.

Those Mormons were showering when I got home. They had gotten where they were showering three and four times a day, sometimes more. I couldn't stand it. Sometimes when I was putting my makeup on or brushing my teeth, I would pound on the wall with my fist until Neville came in and yelled at me. "You wanna make enemies with our neighbors?" he'd ask, puffing his chest out. "They ain't even our neighbors — they're on the *other side of the wall!*" I would shout back.

When I came in, Neville was on his back watching the T.V. He didn't even look my way when I came in or ask how it went.

"Neville, I gotta tell you something. Something the doctor told me." I came and sat at the foot of the couch. He didn't make room for me, so I ended up sitting on his shins.

I could hear the Mormons turning off the faucet on the other side of the house, and the pipes were suddenly quiet.

"I told you no good would come out of it. I told you to take the damn Tylenol and forget about it," he said, looking past me to the television.

"Tylenol doesn't do anything for cysts on your ovaries." I made my voice all dramatic-like, hoping to make him feel guilty.

"What'd he say then?" Neville met my eyes.

"So you wanna know? You *are* interested?" I leaned forward and blocked the T.V.

"Stop playin' around. Just tell me."

So I did. I told him there was a dermoid cyst living inside me, and that it was kinda like a child in a way, an ugly child, but still something almost human-like, with teeth and hair. He made a face while I was telling him, and I guess I didn't do a very good job telling it either, but the thing was, right in the middle of my story those damn Mormons started showering for the fifth time that day.

"Goddamn Mormons!" I said, getting up.

"What are you doin'? Finish what you were saying."

"How can anyone concentrate or hear themselves think when those guys are showering every five minutes?" I went toward the bathroom.

"Mona, wait—" Neville jumped up and followed me. I was already in there, banging away on the wall.

"Stop running that water!" I shouted, pounding. Neville grabbed my wrist and held it.

"Are you crazy? Forget about the water!" At that moment, the water stopped, and we could hear the sound of the metal rings on their shower curtain as the Mormon drew the plastic fabric back. I imagined one of them standing there on the other side of the wall, dripping and naked, his little wet penis dangling down, a wet bar of soap covered with pubic hair on the shelf, a few tiles separating us from his damp nudity. It made me want to throw up.

“Neville, wake up. You ignore every problem and pretend it’s going to go away. I can’t do that. I’m a doer. And I’m sick and tired of living across from those guys. Don’t you even care about my mental well-being?” On the other side, the shower curtain screeched closed again.

“That ship has sailed,” Neville said, turning his back.

“Where do you think you’re going? I can’t believe you’re talking to your wife like that. Your wife *with a tumor!*” I followed him into the bedroom.

“You said the doctor said it wasn’t anything serious. If you want to know the truth, I think you like having it! You think you’re going to use it against me, don’t you?” He stood there in the doorway looking like a giant robot, all squared-off. “But I ain’t gonna let you.”

“Tell *you* what. I do like it. It’s mine, half a person even, and none of *you*, thank God. I think I’m gonna name it. She’s Shirley, that’s who she is. And she’s all mine, how do you like *that*.”

Neville went into the closet and pulled out his suitcase.

“Oh, nice,” I said. “Real nice.” I stood there with my arms folded. He was bluffing; he had to be. I could feel some tears coming, but I swallowed them back.

He threw his stuff in randomly, as if he were going to a garage sale. A razor, a notebook, a few belts, a pair of pants, and a sweater and his bowling trophies.

“That’s real nice, Neville. You’re abandoning your wife.” My insides felt like they were being shaken loose as he struggled to zip the suitcase closed. It kept getting stuck, so he had to put his finger in it and guide the zipper along. If only he had ever shown that kind of patience with me.

Then he picked it up as if it were an extension of his arm and pushed past me out of the bedroom, down the hall, and toward the front door.

“Neville, for God’s sake —” I started.

“Tell Jason and Philip I said goodbye,” he said, motioning toward the wall and opening the front door.

“I can’t believe this...” My voice was small, like when I was in the cave-thing at the hospital and they asked me if I was okay.

He stopped and turned around to look at me.

“I ain’t abandoning you. You got your new friend, right? Your little tumor religion that will sustain you. You and Shirley.” He turned and shut the door behind him.

I haven’t seen him since.

∴

It’s been three weeks. I haven’t talked to anyone and no one’s talked to me. I don’t see anyone except those damn Mormons, walking through my yard to get the mail. Loping, you know the way they do. Completely at ease with themselves, just swinging their arms and legs around like monkeys.

The only time I go out is to get my groceries, and I don’t even bother washing my hair anymore. People watch me in the aisles as I pick up boxes of macaroni and mashed potatoes, whatever it is that Shirley wants for the week. Then I hurry home, but it takes me forever to struggle up the stairs with all the heavy bags. Sometimes I just bring them as far as the first step and leave them.

I could move, I guess. But it feels strange, the thought of leaving, like I'm a bookmark holding a place in some great big book. What if Neville comes back? And even if he doesn't, what else is out there? This side of the house is all I have, for me and Shirley. I'm like a single mother now. Besides, I can't stand the thought of Mormons taking over this side too, cats everywhere.

Sometimes I stand in the window and watch them. They're regular, like clockwork, about everything. They'll come to get their mail at three sharp, even though sometimes the mail guy is late and doesn't show until four. That makes me laugh, but in a kind of scary way that shakes up my insides. I like to watch them standing out there like fools after noticing the box is empty.

They're like that about everything. Shirley knows, she sees, even though she has to intuit it all from her muffled spot deep inside. At ten in the morning, they put their letters in the box. Then they put the little red flag up, and for some reason, like idiots, they open the box back up to check to see if their mail is still inside. Like it might have disappeared magically. That sure cracks Shirley up.

And the showers. Shirley and I have a bet about whether they'll be one minute late or early, or if they'll be on time. Ten at night for the first Mormon. Then at quarter to eleven, the second Mormon climbs in the tomb still wet from the first one. And in the mornings, showers at seven. And at nine. There is no end to their showering.

I have begun to hate them. Reverend Littlejohn always told me I hold too much hate in my heart, and he was right. Neville used to say that too, but he wasn't worth a damn, so I never took it coming from him. Shirley likes to hear the sounds they make. She smiles and shows her little teeth, and she listens until her curly hairs stand on end, but I can't stand it. Shirley can laugh at the world in a way I can't. I stand at the window, days dripping by, as new Mormons come to take the place of the old, new letters in the mailbox, more water to pour.

. . .

The water has been running all night.

The sound keeps coming at me, through the wall, pouring continuously. Those Mormons are finally gonna flood the place. Gonna drown me with them. See how it doesn't stop? All night. It won't stop. They must be *crazy*. It's gonna stop soon, isn't it? They're releasing all the water, from all the planet, just pouring out the tap, the neighborhood water, the state water, the oceans.

Shirley makes a little sound inside me. Glub, glub, she says. I stare at the clock so I don't lose track of the hours. They can't be showering; the hot water must have stopped hours ago.

Don't they know the water is running? Perhaps it is a pipe in the wall, ruptured, leaking. But they *have* to call a plumber. They must do something before the water drowns us all.

If Neville was here, he'd know if it was a pipe. Not that he'd do anything about it.

The city will notice. There must be a gauge, some device which measures water output. Surely it has registered by now that enough water for the entire city has been drained by 240 West Elm. Men in hard hats with lights attached will be coming in the yard any moment now, ready with crowbars to turn off the water to the street.

It must be that one of them has died. Slipped in the soapy shower, cracked open his head. The water must have run out of the tub by now, submerging the linoleum and soaking the carpet.

Or one of them has slit his wrists. He has had enough of living with the other one, their sad marriage, being attached to each other day and night, unable to go and lie down alone in a closet for even a minute, and he has severed the flesh covering his veins. He is floating there, on the other side, with the water pouring as if to take him back where he belongs.

Finally, at four in the morning, I sit up. Shirley says to forget about it, to be quiet and still, like it is inside my body, but I leap out of bed and run into the yard. There is a distant light coming from a section of the sky; I can see the day approaching. As I scurry to their side of the house, I expect there to be an ocean, to have to swim. What I see instead is a small sprinkler spinning, spraying water in tiny beads across their lawn, turning continuously all night.

∴

My friend Barbra calls me the next morning. She is the first person I have talked to since Neville.

“Mona, something wrong with you?” I can hear her bird screeching in the background.

“No. Who told you that?” As I hold the phone to my ear, I can hear the water running through the wall.

“Well, no one. Nothing. Never mind.” That bird keeps screaming like someone’s putting it in a pillowcase. I told Barbra where I read that a bird screeching is a sign of sickness, but she won’t listen.

“Oh, spit it out. What are you calling about?”

“Well, it’s just that everyone knows that you and Neville...” Her voice wanders off like it’s looking for a new mouth.

“You mean that Neville left me. Is that what you mean?” Just at that moment, a bird flies toward the glass window. “Sweet Jesus!”

“What happened? Are you okay?” Barbra is breathless.

“Yes, I’m fine. Relax, for heaven’s sake. A bird just about flew into my window. Probably heard your bird crying for help through the phone.”

“Well, Mona, the thing is, Neville told Sandra he’s worried about you.”

“Nice of him to tell her and not me.” There is no sound for a minute. Barbra makes a frustrated little whiffing noise with her lips.

“So, are you?” Barbra asks.

“Am I what?”

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Shirley and I are just fine.” As I go to hang up the phone, I hear the bird, and then Barbra’s strangled voice.

“Who’s Shirley?”

∴

Okay, I confess. Sometimes I wish it was Neville here instead of Shirley. Not that he wasn't pure selfishness for abandoning me the way he did. But he did fit just right on the other side of the bed. Sometimes I have nightmares about Shirley trying to get out of me, and I nearly toss and turn myself out of the bed. At least Neville was always something soft I could roll into.

I have no idea where he is. I could probably ask someone, Barbra or Sandra or somebody, but I feel like a fool. I feel like those Mormons standing outside when the mail guy hasn't yet come. How do you go about looking for your husband?

I wonder if he is somewhere, standing with his chest all puffy, the way that he does. I wonder if he is looking at all his old bowling trophies, polishing them with the edge of his undershirt and holding them up to the light.

I go outside and get on my hands and knees down by the chicken wire at the base of the fence. The wire is cool to the touch. I try to remember when it was still warm from his fingers, and Shirley makes a rushing noise inside, like it is all getting away from us. *Whoosh*.

∴

On Sunday, two months after Neville left, I am out in the yard checking my mailbox when I feel something wet and soft under my foot. I nearly scream when I lean over and look at it, all red and bloody. It is a piece of raw meat, a dripping chunk of beef. I don't do anything about it, just leave it sit there. As I walk up the porch, though, I notice a flicker of movement, and then I see them. Four of the cats are on it, tearing off pieces of the meat.

I stand at the top of the stairs, my mouth open. Their tails flick and twitch, and their whiskers drip blood onto their paws.

They start doing it at night. The Mormons come out and throw raw meat into my yard, leaving it for the cats. They stand there in their white shirts and skinny black ties in the dark and toss the meat about in the grass, sending a spray of blood from their fingers. I am careful that they don't see me standing in the window. My body shakes in horror and turns cold, and I pull my robe tight around me.

I can't sleep all night, just thinking about it. In bed, Shirley whispers *listen, listen*, and if I concentrate, I think I can hear the cats chewing in the darkness. I can hear the Mormons praying under water. I can see Neville fitting himself inside his suitcase, and peering his head up out if it. Mona, zip me up, please.

I am up just before ten, full of anger. If Reverend Littlejohn could see me, he would shake his head slow from side to side, the way he does, and his glasses would slip down to the end of his nose. Inside me, Shirley just shrugs, as if to say, don't worry about it. Live and let live. But I can't.

In the yard, the grass is just a little pink in places, and the cats have eaten well overnight, so there is nothing left for me to step on. I pull my robe tighter and follow the sidewalk around to the other side of the house. I know they are there because the first one just stopped showering.

I follow the chicken wire as if it will lead me to my destiny. Above my head, one of the upstairs windows is open, and I can hear their dumb laughter echoing, falling in sharp pieces down against my scalp. I clench my fists, and two cats approach me from the opposite direction, as if they are sentinels.

As I come around, I find myself facing their living room window. I do not see them standing there, watching me. Instead, directly at eye level is an illustration of Jesus Christ, blood trickling down from his crown of thorns. Their Jesus has wet eyes, as if it were slowly dying from stomach cancer, like Neville's uncle. It just looks poisoned, as if you took all the hate in the world and ground it into rock and threw it as hard as you could at it. I am paralyzed, staring at it, seeing those eyes, feeling the silky rubbing of the cats against my ankles under my robe.

For the first time today, the pipes are silent. There is no water.

The door snaps open, and though I know it will be the two Mormons, letters in hand, I half expect to see Neville standing there, his suitcase still hanging off him.

He will tell me that he's been secretly living over there all these weeks, showering, praying and weeping lukewarm tears. He will tell me he is ready for me to be his wife again, to accept our new daughter Shirley into his heart, to build things with me on our hands and knees, if only I can make room in my own heart for the prophets. If only I can release it all back to God.

Author Notes

Iranian-American author Elizabeth Eslami holds a B.A. from Sarah Lawrence College and an M.F.A. from the Warren Wilson College MFA Program for Writers. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in numerous literary journals, including G.W. Review, Bat City Review, Minnesota Review, Neon, and Natural Bridge, among others. Her novel, Bone Worship, will be released by Pegasus Books in January.

About the Work

When I begin a short story, I am usually spurred by a single image—something striking and often something bizarre. The seed for “It Is All Getting Away From Us” was a photograph from Arthur C. Aufderheide’s textbook on mummification, *The Scientific Study of Mummies*. In examining the cause of death of one mummy, Aufderheide includes a disturbing (yet fascinating) photograph and description of a dermoid cyst—a benign growth with hair and teeth. I was captivated by the notion of something utterly grotesque also functioning as a symbol of life. This ugly cyst was not merely an aberration of nature; it was also beautiful evidence of the unstoppable urge of cells to grow. (This of course can be equally horrifying, as unchecked cell growth is the cause of cancer.) My focal point then became the meeting place between the grotesque and the beautiful. I wanted to blur the two in the same way that, stylistically, I enjoy blending comic elements with darkly tragic ones.

In Aimee Bender’s “Ironhead” (from *Willful Creatures*) and Raymond Carver’s “Put Yourself in My Shoes” (*Where I’m Calling From*), the comic and the tragic butt up against each other incessantly until they become nearly indistinguishable. On the surface, a story like “Ironhead” seems like it can only be comical; it features a family with pumpkins for heads, with an anomalous iron-headed son. Yet this story is so emotionally resonant, it’s clear that Bender doesn’t need human-headed people to tell a “human” story. Consider this sentence, after the ironhead (who emitted steam instead of tears) son’s demise: “The pumpkinhead family sat together at the cemetery and the mother kept uncovering dishes of warm food so she could release steam on his grave, because she wanted to give him voice, to give him breath again”(p137). With “Put Yourself in My Shoes,” the reader experiences a comic/tragic tightrope of stories folded within stories, all treated with grave seriousness. Someone dies from a soup can to the head, a fight breaks out because a cat was brought into the Morgans’ home, a woman drops dead. Carver epitomizes this dichotomy by having Myers laugh hysterically at Mr. Morgan’s fury. Emotions clash, and in the end, we aren’t sure whose side we’re on, or what those sides really were. Indeed, Carver writes of Myers, “He was at the very end of a story” (112), but we don’t know *which* of these stories he’s come to the end of or what it means for him.

In a similar way, I wanted to discombobulate the reader with my story. I began with a paragraph out of place (and time). A disembodied narratorial voice tells us about water, about an unidentified character named Shirley. There’s a reference to God. (This paragraph reappears later when the momentum of the story shifts into high gear—in fact at an emotional peak for Mona Mather—but at this point, the reader is adrift in terms of what’s going on.) One is then also discombobulated tonally because the narrative moves into the comical first-person narration of

Mona telling us about cat turds; this is an abrupt shift from the opening paragraph solemnly invoking God.

This kind of jagged back-and-forth of tone is tricky to pull off, as is having an unreliable narrator. The risk is that your reader develops literary vertigo from bouncing between tones. An unreliable narrator may also become too unlikable for the reader to follow. I wanted to pull off a sleight-of-hand with Mona, for you to question her decisions—for they are poor decisions—but for you to become immersed enough in her point-of-view to be able to sympathize with her. She's so isolated that her cyst has become her closest connection with any "living" thing. The easiest part of this story was finding Mona's voice. She thinks she's a realist; she looks at the world in a pragmatic way. This matter-of-factness was easy to juxtapose with the extreme elements, the grotesqueness of the cyst or the harsh way she sees the missionaries.

The Mormons are perfectly friendly, yet because they are linked (in Mona's mind) to the cats, they are invaders. Indeed the cats invading (and desecrating) the yard occurs at the same time as her realization of the Mormons' presence in the duplex. As the story progresses, the line is blurred between what's grotesque and what isn't, what's real and what's only imagined. "He was just imitating what men do," Mona says of Neville, already making a distinction between life and the imitation of it. Ultimately everything unravels for Mona—the positive becomes nightmarish, and the repugnant (Shirley) is child-like. (It's no accident that the cyst is on her ovary, the birthplace of eggs.) One by one, peripheral characters disappear, until we are left with only Mona, whose point-of-view is fraught with fear and suspicion. Mona even begins to disappear, talking through Shirley: "Shirley can laugh at the world in a way I can't." In the end, what does it mean that Mona and Neville's relationship has come undone and yet the bond of the missionaries is stronger than ever? What does it mean for it to all get "away from us," when it is our own doing?

Writing, for me, is about creating something beautiful. That seems hokey, but it's true. I must have read Sherwood Anderson's "Death in the Woods," a dozen times, yet each time I think, "How did he do that?" The image of a circle of dogs running around the old woman in the woods is a perfect image. I intend to spend the rest of my life trying to write a story as perfect as that, or at least get as close as I possibly can.

Elizabeth Eslami on the Web

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