

Disappearing

MONICA WOOD (b. 1953)

Born in Maine, the American writer Monica Wood grew up listening to her mother and father tell wonderful stories in the tradition of their homeland, Prince Edward Island, Canada. Wood lives in Portland, Maine, and writes almost daily in a special cabin adjoining her house. Her short stories, which have appeared in numerous publications, have been nominated for the National Magazine Awards, and in 1991 she received a special mention from the Pushcart Prize. *Ernie's Ark*, her collection of linked short stories set in a fictional paper-mill town in Maine, was published in 2002 to critical acclaim.

Wood is the author of *Secret Language* (1993), *My Only Story* (2000), and *Any Bitter Thing* (2005). She has edited *Short Takes: 15 Contemporary Stories*, and has written a fiction-writing handbook, *The Pocket Muse: Ideas and Inspirations for Writing* (2002). A recurring theme in her work is the sense of loss and retrieval felt by her characters.

DISAPPEARING

Her obsession with swimming radically changes the life of a severely overweight woman.

When he starts in, I don't look anymore, I know what it looks like, what he looks like, tobacco on his teeth. I just lie in the deep sheets and shut my eyes. I make noises that make it go faster and when he's done he's as far from me as he gets. He could be dead he's so far away.

Lettie says leave then stupid but who would want me. Three hundred pounds anyway but I never check. Skin like tapioca pudding,¹ I wouldn't show anyone. A man.

So we go to the pool at the junior high, swimming lessons. First it's blow bubbles and breathe, blow and breathe. Awful, hot nosefuls of chlorine.² My eyes stinging red and patches on my skin. I look worse. We'll get caps and goggles³ and earplugs and body cream Lettie says. It's better.

There are girls there, what bodies. Looking at me and Lettie out the side of their eyes. Gold hair, skin like milk, chlorine or no.

They thought when I first lowered into the pool, that fat one parting the Red Sea.⁴ I didn't care. Something happened when I floated. Good said the little instructor. A little redhead in an emerald suit, no stomach, a depression almost, and white wet skin. Good she said you float just great. Now we're getting somewhere. The whistle around her neck blinded my eyes. And the water under the fluorescent lights. I got scared and couldn't float again. The bottom of the pool was scarred, drops of gray shadow rippling.⁵ Without the water I would crack open my head, my dry flesh would sound like a splash on the tiles.

At home I ate a cake and a bottle of milk. No wonder you look like that he said. How can you stand yourself. You're no Cary Grant⁶ I told him and he laughed and laughed until I threw up.

When this happens I want to throw up again and again until my heart flops⁷ out wet and writhing⁸ on the kitchen floor. Then he would know I have one and it moves.

So I went back. And floated again. My arms came around and the groan of the water made the tight blondes smirk⁹ but I heard Good that's

1 **tapioca pudding** a dessert made from a grainy starch (has a lumpy look)
2 **chlorine** a chemical used to purify swimming pool water
3 **goggles** protective glasses for underwater swimming
4 **parting the Red Sea** a Biblical reference to the parting of the Red Sea by God to enable the Israelites to flee from Egypt

5 **rippling** flowing in small waves
6 **Cary Grant** a movie star famous for his good looks and charm
7 **flops** drops down in a heavy or clumsy way
8 **writhing** twisting in pain
9 **smirk** smile in an unpleasant way

the crawl that's it in fragments¹⁰ from the redhead when I lifted my face. Through the earplugs I heard her skinny¹¹ voice. She was happy that I was floating and moving too.

Lettie stopped the lessons and read to me things out of magazines. You have to swim a lot to lose weight. You have to stop eating too. 35 Forget cake and ice cream. Doritos¹² are out. ¹³ I'm not doing it for that I told her but she wouldn't believe me. She couldn't imagine.

Looking down that shaft¹⁴ of water I know I won't fall. The water shimmers and eases up and down, the heft¹⁵ of me doesn't matter I float anyway. 40

He says it makes no difference I look the same. But I'm not the same. I can hold myself up in deep water. I can move my arms and feet and the water goes behind me, the wall comes closer. I can look down twelve feet to a cold slab of tile and not be afraid. It makes a difference I tell him. Better believe it mister. 45

Then this other part happens. Other men interest me. I look at them, real ones, not the ones on TV that's something else entirely. These are real. The one with the white milkweed¹⁶ hair who delivers the mail. The meter man from the light company, heavy thick feet in boots. A smile. Teeth. I drop something out of the cart in the supermarket to see who 50 will pick it up. Sometimes a man. One had yellow short hair and called me ma'am. Young. Thin legs and an accent. One was older. Looked me in the eyes. Heavy, but not like me. My eyes are nice. I color the lids. In the pool it runs off in blue tears. When I come out my face is naked.

The lessons are over, I'm certified. A little certificate signed by the 55 redhead. She says I can swim and I can. I'd do better with her body, thin calves hard as granite.¹⁷

I get a lane to myself, no one shares. The blondes ignore me now that I don't splash the water, know how to lower myself silently. And when I swim I cut the water cleanly. 60

For one hour every day I am thin, thin as water, transparent, invisible, steam or smoke.

The redhead is gone, they put her at a different pool and I miss the glare of the whistle dangling¹⁸ between her emerald breasts. Lettie won't come over at all now that she is fatter than me. You're so uppity¹⁹ she 65 says. All this talk about water and who do you think you are.

He says I'm looking all right, so at night it is worse but sometimes now when he starts in I say no. On Sundays the pool is closed I can't say no. I haven't been invisible. Even on days when I don't say no it's all right, he's better. 70

10 **fragments** little pieces

11 **skinny** very thin

12 **Doritos** a brand of spicy corn chips

13 **are out** are not allowed

14 **shaft** a column

15 **heft** weight

16 **milkweed** a plant with milky sap and seeds with fine white hairs

17 **granite** hard rock

18 **dangling** hanging loosely

19 **uppity** snobbish

One night he says it won't last, what about the freezer full of low-cal dinners²⁰ and that machine in the basement. I'm not doing it for that and he doesn't believe me either. But this time there is another part. There are other men in the water I tell him. Fish he says. Fish in the sea. Good luck.

Ma you've lost says my daughter-in-law, the one who didn't want me in the wedding pictures. One with the whole family, she couldn't help that. I learned how to swim I tell her. You should try it, it might help your ugly disposition.²¹

They closed the pool for two weeks and I went crazy. Repairing the tiles. I went there anyway, drove by in the car. I drank water all day.

Then they opened again and I went every day, sometimes four times until the green paint and new stripes looked familiar as a face. At first the water was heavy as blood but I kept on until it was thinner and thinner, just enough to hold me up. That was when I stopped with the goggles and cap and plugs, things that kept the water out of me.

There was a time I went the day before a holiday and no one was there. It was echoey silence just me and the soundless empty pool and a lifeguard behind the glass. I lowered myself so slow it hurt every muscle but not a blip²² of water not a ripple not one sound and I was under in that other quiet, so quiet some tears got out, I saw their blue trail swirling.

The redhead is back and nods, she has seen me somewhere. I tell her I took lessons and she still doesn't remember.

This has gone too far he says I'm putting you in the hospital. He calls them at the pool and they pay no attention. He doesn't touch me and I smile into my pillow, a secret smile in my own square of the dark.

Oh my God Lettie says what the hell are you doing what the hell do you think you're doing. I'm disappearing I tell her and what can you do about it not a blessed thing.

For a long time in the middle of it people looked at me. Men. And I thought about it. Believe it, I thought. And now they don't look at me again. And it's better.

I'm almost there. Almost water.

The redhead taught me how to dive, how to tuck my head²³ and vanish like a needle into skin, and every time it happens, my feet leaving the board, I think, this will be the time.

20 **low-cal dinners** low-calorie dinners

21 **disposition** temper, personality

22 **blip** an interruption

23 **tuck my head** bend my neck, drawing my head to my chest

PART 1 First Reading

A Thinking About the Story

Did your attitude toward the narrator change as the story progressed? Did you feel optimistic or pessimistic at the end of the story? Explain your answer.

B Understanding the Plot

1. Who is the man referred to in the first paragraph?
2. What activity is being described in the opening paragraph? How do the participants feel about it?
3. Who is Lettie? What advice does she give the narrator regarding her marriage?
4. Why is the narrator's entry into the pool compared with the parting of the Red Sea? (lines 14–15) Is this description still accurate at the end of the story? Explain your answer.
5. What details give you an idea about the quantity of food the narrator consumes?
6. Why did Lettie stop swimming?
7. What does "that" in line 36 refer to?
8. What do the men in lines 46–53 have in common?
9. What day of the week is the most difficult for the narrator? Explain why.
10. What does the narrator's husband predict about her weight loss? What is the basis for his prediction?
11. What is the relationship between the narrator and her daughter-in-law? Why is it like this?
12. How does the narrator react when the pool is closed?
13. Why does the narrator's husband threaten to put her in the hospital? (line 93)
14. What does "in the middle of it" (line 99) refer to? What did the narrator consider doing then?
15. What word in the conclusion is a synonym for *disappear*?

PART 2 Second Reading

Before starting the second reading, do the first exercise on ellipsis in Analyzing the Author's Style (pages 194–195).

A Exploring Themes

You are now ready to reread “Disappearing.” Try to decide what the connection is between the nature of the narrator’s personal relationships and her obsession with swimming.

1. How does swimming change the narrator’s relationship with her husband? Give examples from the story.
2. Why is the narrator unable to follow through on the new interest in her shown by other men? Give some psychological reasons that you can infer from the story.
3. What do you think the ending means? What imagery in the story reinforces your answer?
4. What are the probable roots of the narrator’s obsession with disappearing?
5. Discuss the symbolic nature of water in the story.

Note: For information on symbolism, see page 308.

B Analyzing the Author's Style

For more information on the literary terms in this section, turn to the explanations of *ellipsis* (page 301) and *imagery* (page 303).

ELLIPSIS

In “Disappearing,” Monica Wood uses a narrative style in which the language is for the most part informal and crisp. She relies on **ellipsis**, in which parts of sentences—in particular, verbs—are left out but are nevertheless easily understood or inferred. For example, when the narrator compares herself unfavorably with the thin swimmers around her, she describes them as *Gold hair, skin like milk, chlorine or no*. (line 13) Here the absence of verbs makes the visual impact stronger and reminds us of her less flattering description of herself as *skin like tapioca pudding*. (line 6)

1. Supply what has been left out but implied in these sentences and phrases from the story. Refer to the text before answering.
 - a. When he starts in (line 1)
 - b. Three hundred pounds anyway (lines 5–6)

- c. A man. (line 7)
 - d. Awful, hot nosefuls of chlorine. (lines 9–10)
 - e. And the water under the fluorescent lights. (line 19)
 - f. You're no Cary Grant (line 24)
 - g. She couldn't imagine. (line 37)
 - h. A smile. Teeth. (lines 49–50)
 - i. Fish in the sea. (line 74)
 - j. Ma you've lost (line 75)
 - k. Believe it, I thought. (line 100)
2. Explain how the elliptical style of writing helps convey the narrator's thoughts and feelings.

IMAGERY

There are moments when the narrator's voice in "Disappearing" becomes less colloquial and more poetic, and we feel keenly the pathos underlying her situation. This change is accomplished through the employment of powerful **imagery**, or pictures that appeal to our visual (sight), auditory (hearing), and tactile (touch) senses. For example, *the groan of the water* (lines 29–30) encourages one to hear the water's strained sounds as the very fat woman labors through it.

Look at the following images from the story. Say whether they are visual, auditory, or tactile. Explain the effect of each image as fully as possible.

- 1. my dry flesh would sound like a splash on the tiles (line 22)
- 2. my heart flops out wet and writhing on the kitchen floor (lines 26–27)
- 3. tight blondes (line 30)
- 4. skinny voice (line 32)
- 5. a cold slab of tile (line 44)
- 6. it runs off in blue tears (line 54)
- 7. thin calves hard as granite (lines 56–57)
- 8. thin as water (line 61)
- 9. emerald breasts (line 64)
- 10. the water was heavy as blood (line 83)
- 11. my own square of the dark (line 95)
- 12. vanish like a needle into skin (line 104)

C Judging for Yourself

Express yourself as personally as you like in your answers to the following questions.

1. In your view, was Lettie a good friend?
2. Is it fair to blame the husband for his wife's problems?
3. Should the wife have followed Lettie's advice and left her husband?
4. Would it have made a great difference to the narrator's life if she had encouraged one of the men who began to look at her as her figure and her morale improved?
5. Do you think the narrator is being courageous or cowardly in her quest to disappear? Support your answer.

D Making Connections

1. What is your society's attitude toward fat people?
2. Would you say that fat people are discriminated against in your culture? Give examples to substantiate your answer.
3. Are eating disorders common in your society? What do you think causes people deliberately to overeat or to starve themselves?
4. Does the concept of marital rape exist in your country? Do you think a man is raping his wife if he insists on having sex with her against her wishes? Should he be punished?

E Debate

Debate this proposition:

A person's weight is a reflection of his or her willpower.

PART 3 Focus on Language

A Building Vocabulary Skills

Complete the following sentences with appropriate glossed words from the text. You may need to change the form or tense of some verbs. First try to do the exercise by referring to the story without looking at the definitions of the words.

1. Monuments are frequently made of _____ because it is a material that lasts.

2. I have never met anyone as popular as my sister. Everybody is attracted to her because of her sunny _____.
3. They did not feel comfortable with the new people in the neighborhood, who were very _____ and didn't want to mix with the other residents.
4. Because of his illness, he _____ into bed straight after dinner every evening.
5. When you stir your tea, you will see the liquid _____.
6. If you want to avoid burning your eyes under water, always wear _____.
7. The athlete _____ in agony from a broken ankle when I rushed up to help her.
8. My cousin always looked uncomfortable in his school photos as he gazed out _____ at the unseen face of the photographer.
9. It was a terrifying sight to see a leg _____ out of the car after the accident.
10. As a result of the concussion she suffered, only _____ of her memory returned.

The following words appear in the story but are not glossed. First define each word, using its context in the story as a guide. Then fill in each blank in the paragraph below with the correct word from the list. You may have to change the tense or form of the word.

lowered (line 14) _____

floated (line 15) _____

scarred (line 20) _____

transparent (line 61) _____

vanish (line 104) _____

Since she was feeling nervous, she tried to _____ herself into the _____ water, looking anxiously at the chipped, _____ tiles. But after a while her fears _____, and she felt as if she were _____ on air as she swam successfully from one end of the pool to the other.

PART 4 Writing Activities

1. Imagine that you have woken up one morning one hundred pounds (forty-five kilos) heavier or lighter than your usual weight. Using the informal narrative voice in “Disappearing” as a guideline, write a monologue in which you express your immediate thoughts and feelings about this extraordinary event.
2. Have you or has anybody you know been obsessed with something? Write an essay of two to three pages in which you first outline the nature and source of the obsession. Next consider its effect on the obsessed person as well as on the people around this individual. In your conclusion, say whether you think the person can be “cured” of this obsession and if so, how.
3. In *Hedda Gabler*, a play by the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, the heroine shoots herself at the end as a way out of an unhappy marriage that she feels is killing her. Outline the plot of a book or movie you know in which a character feels forced to take drastic action to escape from an unloved spouse. In your discussion of the plot, try to convey the desperation of the character. Then give your opinion of the action the character took.
4. Both “The Rocking-Horse Winner” (page 123) and “Disappearing” are centered on an obsession and its drastic repercussions for the characters concerned. In a two-page essay, briefly describe the main characters of both stories and their obsessions. Consider which story was more disturbing to you, and analyze the reasons for your response. Say whether you empathized more with one character than the other.