Eerie and unsettling, Masatsugu Ono’s novel *At the Edge of the Woods* is a disturbing family story and a surreal tale of a world torn apart by disaster.

An unnamed father and son live in their isolated house near the woods. The mother has gone to stay with her family to await her new baby. Strange noises—coughing, laughing, and talking—emerge from the woods. Bizarre events pile up. The trees seem to move; someone has propped up the branches of an apple tree, but no one knows who. Then the son brings an old, half-naked woman home from the woods; she vanishes. Neighbors tells stories of imps who steal livestock and children.

A chill permeates the book, in which the lines between reality and illusion are blurred. Television news programs report floods and endless lines of refugees; the lines also appear on nearby roads, or seem to. Nature has gone haywire. The woods are full of menace and danger, shapeshifting and alive. The few people whom the family sees are hostile and grotesque.

The father narrates, expressing bewilderment over the world around him. He stops short of seeking answers, resulting in a sense of passivity and helplessness. His son is moody and distant, but there is little that the father can do for him. His wife, who traveled to seek safety with her family, also encounters menaces. There is no escape; these characters can only hope for survival.

The novel emphasizes atmosphere and incidents over plot, implying that the pleasures of narrative resolution are out of reach. Occasional flashbacks fill in the family’s history, but offer no explanation of their predicament.

Written in startling, imaginative vignettes, *At the Edge of the Woods* is an evocative, terrifying story about a family’s efforts to survive a crisis.

REBECCA HUSSEY (March / April 2022)

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