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UNCANNY BODIES (2020) EDITED BY PIPPA GOLDSCHMIDT, GILL HADDOW AND FADHILA MAZANDERANI

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Goldschmidt, Pippa, Gill Haddow, and Fadhila Mazanderani, editors. *Uncanny Bodies*. Luna Press Publishing, 2020. 284 pp.

There is a wonderfully emblematic anecdote in the introduction to *Uncanny Bodies*. Considering the complex historical relationship between synthetic technologies and the organic body, the editors discuss the first medical x-ray, produced by German physicist Wilhelm Röntgen. Experimenting with a new technique to capture radiographic images, Röntgen created a transparent picture of his wife Anna Bertha's hand. Upon first being presented with this image of her own skeletal hand, Anna Bertha exclaimed, "I have seen my own death"(4). This intersection of technology and body, life and death, visible and invisible signals some of the ways in which the corporeal can be understood as uncanny. The body is, after all, a ready home for the strange. Its boundaries, which we so often characterise as immutable, are in actuality transient and permeable. New technologies, from prothesis to implantations, trouble the divide between human and nonhuman, interior and exterior. Likewise, our ever-evolving understanding of disease and illness forces us to reconsider our belief in a bounded, self-contained individual, remote and distinct from the world it inhabits.

Uncanny Bodies is a unique project that advances the concept of the uncanny in the wake of evolving scientific knowledge. As the editors explain in the book's introduction, they are particularly interested in "the intersection between the uncanny, human and animal bodies, and biomedical sciences" (1). Drawing on both Ernest Jentsch's essay "On the Psychology of the Uncanny" (1906) and Sigmund Freud's seminal work *The Uncanny* (1919), as well as later figurations of the disquieting like Masahiro Mori's uncanny valley, the book explores embodiment, technology and identity. *Uncanny Bodies* contains fiction, poetry, academic scholarship and (auto) biography, as well as hybrids comprised of some or all of these categories. As Goldschmidt, Haddow, and Mazanderani explain in the introduction, the desire to cross disciplinary and generic lines was itself informed by Freud's *The Uncanny*, a psychoanalytic study that centres its excavation of the human psyche around E. T. A Hoffmann's 1816 short story "The Sandman." In this way, the collection asks what it means to represent the body through words, to embody physicality in text: How might the corporeal experiences of illness, injury, or surgical intervention be conveyed through language?

The collection is divided into three sections. The first of these, "Pain, illness and healing," centres on physiological states, such as disease and pain, showing how they destabilise the notion

of a seamless, uncomplicated relationship between the thinking self and the body that houses it. The second section, "Situating bodies: the uncanny in the city and the forest," focuses on the spatial orientation of bodies and the related conception of the body as space. The final section is entitled "Transforming bodies into Other" and is comprised of works investigating the role of technology in effacing boundaries between the human and the non-human.

Following a brief introduction wherein the editors trace a concise history of the uncanny, we encounter the first creative piece printed in *Uncanny Bodies*. A poetic reflection of the more academically rigorous introduction, nicky melville's "familiars" is a found poem, cobbled together from all of the phrases containing the word "familiar" in two different translations of Freud's *The Uncanny*. The typography is such that the poem can be read either directly across or in two parallel columns. The phrases are vaguely similar, with the words on the left-hand side of the page coming from Alix Strachey's 1955 translation and the ones on the right from David McLintock's 2003 translation. The manner in which the words echo each other across the page gives the impression of mirror images in which the reflection is slightly distorted. In its playful intermingling of scholarly text and experimental poetry, "familiars" sets the tone for the rest of the collection, indicating an ongoing dialogue between the academic and the artistic.

The book is comprised of almost forty different pieces, and it is, therefore, impossible to discuss each one in this short review. While not every piece can be mentioned here, each one is – in its own way – intriguing, thought-provoking, or in some way illuminating. Section One opens with Dilys Rose's "Half Here, Half Where," a work that frames the experience of having a stroke as a sudden encounter with alienation, a vanishing in which "half of you evaporated – poof!" (19). The next two pieces, Alice Tarbuck's poem "Forgetting" and Sarah Wasson's essay "Pain's Uncanny," serve as a conversation about chronic pain. Another notable entry in the first section is Ritti Soncco's "Unbecoming Animal," a work whose title suggests both unseemliness and dissolution. The story is told from the perspective of a deer infected with Lyme disease, and the text describes the creature's awareness of bacteria multiplying within its body; "making strangers out of my organs; dislocating me from my inner worlds" (79). Through the voice of the deer, the story imagines how it might be to live with certain microbes and how their presence might render one's own body unfamiliar. Jules Horne's playful, unsettling dramatic dialogue, "The Stane Bairn: An Uncanny Play" delivers a particularly poignant piece. Written largely in Border Scots, the dialogue initially appears to capture a conversation between an expectant mother, delirious with the excitement of baby-clothes shopping and knitting outfits, and her unborn infant. As the conversation continues, however, the child, who identifies itself as the "stane bairn,"(29) becomes increasingly recalcitrant, telling its mother that it will never speak nor sing nor skip. The baby, we learn, is not a soft-skinned infant, but rather a fibroid (uterine tumour) whose growth gives the appearance of advanced pregnancy. Based on the author's own experiences, the play evokes a disquieting sense of simultaneous fullness and emptiness, growth without life.

Section Two, "Situating bodies: the uncanny in the city and the forest," investigates the relationship between space and the uncanny, considering the body both *in* space and *as* space. The

section opens with a poem by Sarah Stewart entitled "Revenant Visits Her Old Bedroom." This poem establishes a recurring motif that will reappear throughout the section, as it imagines the spatialised body in terms of haunting. The next poem, "The Dark Forest," also by Sarah Stewart, likewise deals with haunting. This time, she evokes notions of emptiness and absence, the almost tangible vacancy left behind in the wake of loss. In her subsequent response to the poem, Emily F. Port uses "The Dark Forest" to investigate not only themes of absence, but what the absence of humans might mean in a natural space. Without humans, Port suggests, the forest may never be entirely empty or silent, as even trees communicate with each other using underground fungal networks.

The section continues with Pippa Goldschmidt's "Ma," a magical realist tale that interweaves themes of family, illness and genetics through the central image of a knitting machine. It is followed by the analytical essay "Uncan" by Shona Kerr. This brief response to Goldschmidt's story fixates on the role of the knitting machine and argues that the machine's capacity to fashion body parts from wool functions as a metaphor for the encoding of instructions in DNA. Kerr explains that just as the knitting machine can only work properly if it receives accurate instructions, so too does the "machinery in every cell in the body [depend] on the accuracy of the instructions it is given on when to grow and when to stop" (150). Another fascinating piece in this section is Eris Young's "Little Cat from the Bronx." A darkly humorous tale, "Little Cat" spatialises the gender politics of post-war America, as a careless husband is forced to navigate traditionally feminine spaces when his wife, Kat, begins to neglect him in favour of spending time with another woman, Kiki. The most memorable contribution to Section Two, though, is Donna McCormack's reimaging of the transplant recipient's body as a kind of embodied haunted house. McCormack's essay, entitled "The Haunted House, or the Other in the Self," imagines transplanted organs, residues of the dead, as manifestations of Otherness haunting the recipient body. McCormack explains that if the body can be spatialised as the place in which the self is housed, then transplanted organs can be viewed as spectral traces of the deceased haunting the house of the self.

The final section, "Transforming Bodies into Other," brings together a series of works that explore the increasingly tenuous border between human and machine, or human and non-human animal. The first two pieces interrogate the now-ubiquitous figure of the virtual assistant. Alice Tarbuck's poem "Alexa" enumerates the many powers of the eponymous disembodied assistant, conceding that while "Alexa is no witch, no enchantress, no circe, no baga yaga,"(175) her enchantments are numerous and perhaps deceptive. "Alexa" is followed by a short scholarly article by Benedetta Catanzariti, a researcher working on affective technologies. Catanzariti provides an overview of scientific attempts to systematise human emotions and teach computers to comprehend them. The next two pieces are also closely related, united by their preoccupation with the phenomenology of the prosthesis. Jane Alexander's "The Lag" examines how the wearer of a prosthesis might not only experience their body as different or strange, but also how they might experience temporality in a new way. In Alexander's story, an amputee is frustrated most of all by the temporal "lag" that now characterises her movement, "the theft of a second with every step" (185). In her response, Clare Uytman uses "The Lag" as the starting point for a broader exploration of how amputees experience their prostheses.

The most arresting work in Section Three is likely Naomi Salman's "sur la comète," a love story between two cyborgs that foregrounds both the relationship between the two cybernetically augmented organisms and the relationships they each have with their implanted devices. Salman questions how cybernetic implants might complicate binary notions of human and machine, while also exploring the role of individual identity in mediating the interaction between biology and technology. The story is paired with an insightful response by Gill Haddow, who traces the history of the cyborg back to the coining of the portmanteau – from "cybernetic organism"(230) – in the 1960s through to later speculations about how the cyborg might serve to liberate us from classificatory categories. Haddow's essay culminates in an insightful reading of "sur la comète" in which it is argued that the cyborgs featured in Salman's story choose body modifications reflective of their own, pre-existing identities.

Uncanny Bodies is an innovative and thoroughly original exploration of the embodied uncanny. Each work in the collection raises urgent questions about how we relate to and experience our bodies. Echoing Freud's use of "The Sandman" as a prism through which to view the uncanny, this collection challenges the reader to interact with the uncanny from both an analytical and a creative perspective. This is a collection that will, undoubtedly, have a broad appeal. It can be treated as an anthology, a dynamic compilation of scholarly and creative works, and read for pleasure. However, *Uncanny Bodies* will also intrigue researchers working on topics such as embodiment, the Gothic, gender, Horror and Science fiction. Many of its essays, including Haddow's discussion of the cyborg, Catanzariti's history of affective recognition, and Vassilis Galanos's chronology of the uncanny valley, serve as informative overviews of their respective topics. For this reason, *Uncanny Bodies* may also appeal to teachers. The individual essays not only explain, clearly and concisely, difficult concepts related to embodiment and uncanniness, but they can also be easily paired with one of the many relevant creative works included in the collection. *Uncanny Bodies* is a unique intervention in the study of embodiment. A hybrid of art and scholarship, this is a book that challenges disciplinary categories and forces us to reconsider the familiar space of the body.

BIONOTE

Miranda Corcoran is a lecturer in twenty-first-century literature at University College Cork, Ireland. Her research interests include genre fiction, popular fiction, Science Fiction, Horror, and the Gothic. She is currently writing a monograph on adolescence and witchcraft in American popular culture.