The Pandemic-Uncanny: Self-Estrangement and Environment in Out There and Bliss Montage

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The Pandemic-Uncanny: Self-Estrangement and Environment in *Out There* and *Bliss Montage*

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

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COVID-19 was declared a pandemic by the WHO on March 11, 2020. The COVID-19 Public Health Emergency lasted from January 30, 2020, to May 11, 2023. During this time, abundant literature across disciplines began appearing, assessing the pandemic experience and aftermath. However, there needs to be more investigation and application of the term uncanny in the pandemic experience and literature.

Two short story collections, Out There by Kate Folk and Bliss Montage by Ling Ma, both published in 2022, are works of pandemic literature demonstrating the pandemic's inherent uncanniness and the human experience. The term pandemic-uncanny represents an inherent attachment between these two words and an inseparable experience. Moreover, Freud’s afterwardness is defined and used to describe this term further, as the pandemic-uncanny is a phenomenon that worked to reveal a latent truth in the world, an underlying, traumatic understanding that humans are fragile and not in control of their existence or of the world.

Many stories across the two collections were published previous to the initial onset of the pandemic. Still, their use of the uncanny, their content and analysis of intimate relationships and place, the human condition, and existential understanding speak to the latent, uncanny truths revealed through the pandemic-uncanny. In fact, in the context of the pandemic-uncanny, their content is more profound and sharper, reflecting the hidden truths at the core of human existence that have always been there—existed before the time of the pandemic, in the stories and beneath the surface of human existence—but have now been exposed for all to see and address.
This Study by: Kersten Kahley

Entitled: The Pandemic-Uncanny: Self-Estrangement and Environment in *Out There* and *Bliss Montage*

has been approved as meeting the thesis requirements for the

Degree of Master of Arts

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Chapter One

Introduction

The Uncanny

The term uncanary or unheimlich was first coined by the German psychiatrist Ernst Jentsch in his 1906 essay “On the Psychology of the Uncanny.” However, Sigmund Freud reinvented the term—centering on its application to psychoanalytic studies regarding real situations and literary criticism. In his 1919 book, The Uncanny, Freud explores the multiple words, phrases, and interpretations of heimlich and unheimlich as they are present in the German language. The German heimlich represents the idea of the familiar, the known, and the home. In contrast, the German unheimlich commonly refers to the inverse, the unknown, the uncanny, and the not-home. According to Freud’s analysis and use of these terms, they are inseparable from each other, for you can’t have one without the existence of the other. The closest translation from the German unheimlich in English is uncanny, referring to the sense of strangeness, uneasiness, anxiety, and repressed fear that an experience with the uncanny creates.

When defining the term for his purposes, Freud claims that at its core, “the uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar” (Freud 24). Freud discusses the use of the term in his psychoanalytic theory and investigates appearances of the uncanny in real life and literature—the ability of humans to experience something familiar and unfamiliar simultaneously. By Freud’s definition, the uncanny presents through encounters with a specific material or situation—such as repetitions or doubles, life-like dolls, and other unclearly animate/inanimate creatures. These presentations originate from an old childhood fear or infantile belief brought to the surface, the presentation of the “evil eye,”
death and the dead, and the omnipotence of thoughts (Freud). Freud summarizes the varying criteria present in an uncanny experience, explaining:

an uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary, when a symbol takes on the full function and significance of what it symbolizes, and so forth. (150-151)

This definition gives the most general expression of what the uncanny is and how it manifests to the person experiencing it. Suppose something breaks down our clear distinction between known reality and fantasy, causing a blur in how we understand the real and the imagined, producing a strange sense—identified as uncanny.

Freud further discusses the presentation of the uncanny—specifically in literature—through his analysis of E.T.A. Hoffmann’s story, “The Sandman.” This story begins with the protagonist, Nathaniel, reflecting on the strange experiences he had as a child. He remembers being told about a “Sandman,” a being who would steal your eyes—he even meets this man repeatedly throughout the story and experiences paranoia, terror, and fear for his life. According to Freud, this sense of the uncanny originates in the childhood fear of damaging one’s eyes, and he argues that this fear of going blind connects directly to the fear of castration (139). Freud identifies some of the most noticeable moments of the uncanny as instances where the protagonist experiences confrontation with the terrifying, the unknown, and an experience of astonishment when something is not as it first appeared. Shock and a mix of certainty and uncertainty, are experienced in reality (i.e., déjà vu, coincidences) and in literature (i.e., crime stories, cautionary tales), but can only be identified as the uncanny if they are accompanied by
defamiliarization of the once familiar, fear, and the sudden revelation of a truth
previously hidden. In “The Sandman,” Freud argues the uncanny emerges when
Nathaniel experiences fear and uncertainty caused by the reappearance of the man who
killed his father and again, with the sudden confrontation that his love, Olimpia, isn’t
human. To Freud, Nathaniel’s experience, as portrayed to the reader, produces within the
reader a sense of the uncanny, relating to Nathaniel’s near-continuous uncertainty and
fear. The author, Hoffmann, continually stresses the primal fear of harming one’s eyes
and uses repetition of the same characters and horrific acts—although changed ever so
slightly. Freud states:

This work explores the connections that link the double with mirror-images,
shadows, guardian spirits, the doctrine of the soul and the fear of death. (142)

An uncanny experience is intensely rooted in Nathaniel's experiences—as he repeatedly
encounters the “Sandman” as the lawyer Coppelius and again as the optician Coppola.
Nathaniel experiences mortal fear as he remembers the violent death of his father and the
childhood memory of being threatened by Coppelius, who wants to burn out his eyes.
Moreover, when he reencounters the Sandman as Coppola, he is disturbed by the
uncanny resemblance to Coppelius’ presence and how Coppola is repeatedly at the center
of many events in Nathaniel’s life. Coppola provides him with an eyeglass through which
he sees Olimpia, a human-like automaton that he falls in love with and whose eyes have
been inserted by Coppola (137). His continuous reappearance inspires in Nathaniel a
sense of fear and uneasiness—an experience of the uncanny—and begins to correlate
Coppola’s presence with danger. Coppola is even present during the final moments of
Nathaniel’s life, as he is “seized with a madness” after using Coppola’s eyeglasses to
look at the street below while at the top of the tower of the town hall from which he
jumps (138). In this story, filled with the uncanny, Nathaniel cannot cope with the
repeated reversal of expectations and constant terror, primarily caused by the character
Coppelius/Coppola. Instead, he becomes suspicious of the world and people around him,
driving him towards literal madness.

Countless scholars have examined the appearance of the uncanny, many of which
analyze the use of the term in literature and the change in atmosphere and experience it
creates for the reader. For instance, Dr. Dominic Angeloch examines the works of horror
and suspense by Shirley Jackson that demonstrate these uncanny experiences of
alienation and depersonalization. In his article, “Beyond the Uncanny: Shirley Jackson’s
Poetics of Alienation,” Angeloch examines Shirley Jackson’s craft with a close reading
of her story, “The Tooth.” Angelosh uses the Freudian sense of the uncanny and cites
Freud’s letter to Romain Rolland, “A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis,” where
Freud relates to his friend the strange feeling that overwhelms him in the presence of the
Acropolis in Athens, Greece. In “A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis,” Freud
shares his experience of visiting the Acropolis—something he had been anticipating—
and the actual alienation, strangeness, and sense of the uncanny he felt while in the
presence of the Acropolis. Upon visiting the location, Freud describes himself as being
overcome by a “strange thought,” which is then synthesized by Angeloch as he states,

Not very surprising so far: Freud describes a feeling that everyone has felt in one
way or another, that feeling as if one were “beside oneself,” as the turn of phrase
figuratively puts it. Freud qualifies the particularity of this feeling, as he
experienced it at that moment, with an appositional adjunct: “far more sharply
than is usually noticeable” he had suddenly seen himself split, as it were, into two persons. (223)

Angeloch’s summary clearly shows the distinct feelings of depersonalization, estrangement, and experience of the uncanny during an authentic experience. A feeling overtakes Freud—he is now unfamiliar with himself, the environment, and even his thoughts. Angeloch continues to describe this phenomenon of depersonalization and derealization:

In the feeling of derealization, things, people, or even the entire environment appear unreal and unfamiliar to the point of being artificial or machine-like, colorless and/or lifeless, vaguely unreal, muffled, as if insulated. (226)

The experience of seeing the Acropolis transitions into being overcome with alienation and bewilderment—Freud becomes hyper-aware of the unfamiliarity of his environment and, as a result, of himself in this environment.

Angeloch argues that Shirley Jackson creates this same sense of depersonalization and derealization in her story “The Tooth” by shaping the depiction of “extreme mental states” as the narrative progresses (281). The story revolves around Clara Spencer, a young woman plagued by chronic pain from a tooth and forced to travel long-distance to New York to have the tooth removed. Throughout the story, Jackson maintains a sense of uncertainty in the reader, causing them to constantly question whether the events are actually occurring or simply the main character’s imagination. Angeloch emphasizes this sense of derealization and depersonalization and how it affects the reader through a series of questions:
The realities and the incidents in them alternate until it is impossible to decide which incident belongs to which reality. Clara had fallen asleep in one of the rest stops—did she really make it back to the bus with the man’s help? And as the ride continued, did she only dream of more stops at roadhouse restaurants, all strangely similar? Does Clara see the bus driving away through the windows of the roadhouse restaurant, or the roadhouse restaurant—where she forgot things, and perhaps even herself—through the windows of the bus? And when Clara arrives in New York early in the morning, has she really arrived in New York, or is she dreaming herself there from a roadhouse restaurant, or from the bus? Or is she dreaming about her bus ride while sitting in the terminal restaurant in New York? Or does she enter travel memories into her roadhouse stops while sleeping and dreaming in the waiting area? (230)

Throughout the story, Jackson produces these questions and uncertainties in the reader as the narrative takes shape, portraying prolonged sleep and groggy interactions with reality as if Clara is in a dream-like state throughout the story. There are instances of clear depersonalization and estrangement from oneself, as in the moment when Clara feels detached from her aching tooth:

Her tooth, which had brought her here unerringly, seemed now the only part of her to have any identity. (231)

Angeloch reflects on the horror of this moment as the reader witnesses this self-estrangement experience. Clara’s identity now seems insignificant—in the shadow of her tooth and its ability to influence her actions. Angeloch argues that the story demonstrates
how a work of literature can give the reader an experience of the uncanny through narrative development. Angeloch concludes her argument:

My suggestion was to understand the uncanny, against this background, as a questioning of the home, the place where we think, feel, locate ourselves in the space-time continuum, and that this questioning is accompanied by a suspension of what we are talking about when we speak of “I.” (233)

Angeloch synthesizes this experience of the uncanny, of something that can occur in the most seemingly mundane and familiar events. The uncanny produces a feeling of not belonging, of feeling unfamiliar with something that was once familiar, and of causing us to question our most basic understandings of ourselves and the world around us.

In addition to the uncanny experienced through literature, there is also the real sense of the uncanny in everyday life. Freud distinctly separates experiences of the uncanny in literature from experiences of it in real life, explaining the difference in occurrences of the uncanny:

many things that would be uncanny if they occurred in real life are not uncanny in literature, and that in literature there are many opportunities to achieve uncanny effects that are absent in real life. (155-156)

To Freud, in reality, the uncanny experience stems from experiences or fears in our past that reemerge at the encounter of the uncanny subject/object. In contrast, the uncanny experience in literature is directly a result of a piece’s ability to maintain a conflict in judgment over the events in the story rather than forcing the reader to accept the differences in the reality they have created. Clara experiences the uncanny through
depersonalization, as her once familiar self becomes unfamiliar; however, the reader experiences the uncanny through the unclarity of events, questioning what is real and what is not within the story. Since these uncanny experiences are fundamentally different in their causation—the former stemming from a repressed fear and the latter resulting from literary engagement—there are some instances of the uncanny, according to Freud, that are limited to existing either in reality or literature, but not both.

In the book *Heidegger on Being Uncanny*, author Katherine Withy investigates the *uncanny* as defined, applied, and theorized by Martin Heidegger. Withy begins the book with an overview of the uncanny employed by Ernst Jenstch, Sigmund Freud, and Jonathan Lear before transitioning to an analysis of Heidegger’s *uncanny*. Withy introduces Heidegger’s concept of *Dasein, or being-in-the-world*, as an integral part of explaining the uncanniness of the human condition. Withy declares through the lens of Heidegger’s uncanny, “If we both are and feel uncanny, then it is tempting to think that it is when we feel uncanny that we are exposed to the fact that we are uncanny” (48). By this understanding of the uncanny, the human experience of the uncanny is not only a passing experience but a latent aspect of human existence. To exist is to be uncanny—whether humans are aware of this truth or not does not change this fact. The existence of humans is open and fluid, continually evolving. Withy introduces the concept of angst, an integrated aspect of the human condition occurring simply from our existence, contemplating with awareness the reality of being-in-the-world and the overall human condition. Withy continues to describe *Dasein* as an essential understanding of the human condition, explaining the concept with the application of the uncanny:
The picture is this: the human being has openness insofar as it is the open site—the entity that understands being, the da. But the human being does not have openness insofar as it cannot wield openness perfectly against itself. The human being cannot open the origin of its openness in being. The reason is that being, the human being’s origin, absences or withdraws from openness. The whence of thrownness is obscure. This is the human being’s inner counterturning (pelein); it is its uncanniness. (141-142)

The inherent uncanniness of being human exists because we are aware of our openness but are not able to manage this openness. Instead, it is an unchangeable yet uncontrollable factor of the human experience. For example, detective fiction explores this complexity of existing within the uncertain while unable to make the world comfortable, cohesive, and sure. The plots have loose ends, unresolved elements, and endless cycles in the best crime stories and life. Withy identifies this unrestricted aspect of existence as something that, with Heidegger’s definition, is uncanny in origin. She continues, “Further, we have seen that all presencing requires this absence. This suggests that the human being is essentially uncanny. Uncanniness is required for there to be being, or entities as such, at all. The human being must be uncanny” (142). Again, Withy explains that the uncanny is an inherent, integral part of human nature; without this complexity of having an openness to our lives while simultaneously an awareness about the uncontrollability of this openness, we would not exist as human beings.

As a part of being-in-the-world, the uncanny is always present, something that may not be openly identifiable all the time but a truth that exists as a layer of our existence. However, during blatant experiences of this uncanniness, our nature’s
uncanniness becomes even more apparent. One moment in time, when the uncanniness ingrained in our existence became particularly egregious on a worldwide scale was the experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic caused significant disruption to the daily life of humans and the understanding of their being-in-the-world. Through the pandemic experience and by examining the innate uncanniness revealed through the event, humans have had no choice but to understand the uncontrollability of our existence and the fragility that lies at the core of human institutions. However, although uncanny and at most times frightening, the pandemic-uncanny also allowed for revelations about the self, lifestyles, and the prevailing enjoyment and creativity in times of turmoil that proved surprising and uncanny.

In this thesis, I have employed the term “pandemic-uncanny” to represent the instances where the experience of the pandemic has allowed this revelation about the uncanniness of human nature. Freud’s Nachträglichkeit, or afterwardness, is essential to understanding the purpose of the pandemic-uncanny and our ability to understand our past differently from the experience of trauma. The book Narrating the Past: (Re)Constructing Memory, (Re)Negotiating History, edited by Vartan P. Messier and Nandita Batra, investigates the idea of afterwardness and is defined in the chapter “Truth Versus Knowledge: Laplanchean Afterwardsness and the Traumatic Memory of Chappaquiddick in Joyce Carol Oates’ Black Water by Matthew O. Cleveland. Cleveland describes this concept:

In other words, Nachträglichkeit describes a process by which the experience of trauma is initially not registered because the subject lacks the understanding to place that trauma in a context that is meaningful (i.e. traumatic). This trauma,
which remains latent until it emerges in connection with a seemingly unrelated occurrence, is only experienced as trauma after the subject acquires the knowledge necessary to grasp the originary experience as one that is traumatic. However, even at this point, the subject is not able to consciously link this trauma to the originary event. (4)

When applied to the experience of the pandemic, we can understand that this trauma is not directly the cause of this event but instead demonstrates a latent trauma already present in the world. The inherent uncanniness of human existence has always contained a trauma produced from the reversal of expectations from how we perceive our existence in the world and our actual being-in-the-world.

In the article “Rear Window: Double-Take, the Uncanny, and Glimpses of Mortality,” Alfred Margulies discusses the experience of the uncanny across genres as well as the pandemic-uncanny (as I define it). Margulies begins his argument with a close reading of “Through the Looking Glass: Holding the Analytic Frame on Zoom” by Anne Adelman. In this article, Adelman discusses the experience of isolation from a child’s point of view against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and the sense of depersonalization created by a world reliant on and trapped in the Zoom application. In the article, Adelman explores the experience of living life through a window—and through a screen, in the time of stay-at-home orders. In addition to Adelman’s article, Margulies examines the 1954 film *Rear Window* by Alfred Hitchcock. Margulies emphasizes the similarities between Jimmy Stewart’s character, who “observes life through his apartment’s rear window” while recovering from an injury (504). The experience of viewing life as an outsider and viewer resonates with Adelman’s reference
to the child staring at the moving world outside her window and the way humans have
begun viewing life through a screen. Margulies connects these experiences: “And so Rear
Window uncannily renders our Zoom situation—but these days we have a twist: now the
camera-eye looks back at us” (504). Like Stewart’s character, people have adjusted their
lives from one of living to one of watching—whether watching people outside their
windows or watching people from behind a screen with a camera watching them in
return. The experience of Zoom is uncanny in that there is real depersonalization and
estrangement from the previous customs of everyday life—interacting with people face-
to-face, leaving the house—and forcing humans to live in semi-isolation. Through the
application, we have become virtual viewers, and in return, we have become virtually
viewed—allowing the camera to observe parts of ourselves and our lives. The view of
ourselves in the application—our face on the screen—exists as an eerie double that
doesn’t usually stare back at us in reality. Margulies continues his analysis of this
uncanny experience, reflecting on the human need to be the center of our world,
declaring:

    We feel off-balance, even ashamed, because we no longer feel the center of our
    own being-in-the-world. Now we are observed from within another’s
    subjectivity, objectified into the other’s script and narrative. (506)

The pandemic-uncanny challenges being-in-the-world our stability in our daily routines,
sense of control, and understanding of our purpose forcibly shift. In the age of Zoom—
during and after the COVID-19 pandemic—we experience the world hyper-aware that we
have fragile control over how others can view us and how we exist in the world with
others. In the fashion of the uncanny, this is a realization that emerges from things
familiar to us becoming unfamiliar—having to adjust to a new “normal” where we live primarily in our homes, socialize electronically, and the realization that humans are at the mercy of a virus. For some, this created an unfamiliar reality. Still, one that wasn’t entirely bad—introverts and recluses were allowed to recede into their homes and workspaces; artists were permitted to divulge themselves in their works. Nonetheless, the mere unfamiliarity of the pandemic-uncanny experience, the forced isolation, and the uncontrollable human life were frustrating and frightening for many.

Margulies continues to explore this aspect of the uncanny and its ability to present itself when something that was never apparent but always present reveals itself. Margulies examines Henry VIII’s court painter Hans Holbein’s painting titled *The Ambassadors* (508). Margulies describes the painting:

The hyper-realistic rendering of Holbein’s near-photographic style captures two worldly Ambassadors, standing and gazing back at us, and with two globes of the world between them. Below, out of focus, there is a vaguely phallic blur. From an extreme sideways perspective, this distorted, anamorphic image snaps into focus as a skull, a phallic death’s-head, penetrating the stability of the shared political world. (508)

At a straightforward first glance, the viewer would be nearly unable to identify the blur in the painting. However, when viewed from an “extreme sideways perspective,” the viewer can suddenly recognize the blur as a realistic skull (508). Not only does the reality of this aspect of the painting suddenly become prominent, but the inclusion of this skull allows for a different interpretation of the meaning altogether—as Margulies synthesizes that the
recognition of this skull permits the viewer to contemplate a skull’s meaning in the “shared political world” (508). Margulies describes this sudden realization:

It was there all along, only now our perspective has changed—and we cannot unsee what we have glimpsed. (510)

In the case of “The Ambassadors,” the viewer suddenly becomes aware of an aspect of the painting—what was always present but not identifiable on the surface—that they previously did not experience. This sudden realization is a prime example of the uncanny, forcing viewers to face a conflict between what they believe they know and reality. However, this aspect of the uncanny—something that is once familiar being turned into something unfamiliar—is ever-present in literature and art, as well as in real life. When considering the experience of the pandemic, as well as the age of socializing over Zoom, Margulies explains:

We have fallen out of our everyday, taken-for-granted worlds into something new and unassimilated, a toxic newness that traumatizes precisely because we cannot assimilate it. (511)

Stay-at-home orders and the length of quarantine during the COVID-19 pandemic presented humans with newfound estrangement from their lives. The absence of routines and the familiar provided space for isolated activities, such as individual creative projects, self-care, or rest, for many previously engaged in the other habitual activities of their daily lives. However, socialization, convenience, and the comfort many felt in their lives and regular days suddenly vanished. The world became a skeleton of former social
customs and everyday routines—and humans acknowledged that this reality of isolation and fragility of human control is always present, waiting to rear its head.

Although there are several forms through which the uncanny experience occurs in literature—short fiction, film, reality—in this thesis, I plan to focus on the form of short fiction. Both Freud and Angeloch examine the experience of the uncanny in short fiction, demonstrating particular examples of the uncanny as it appears in short-form literature. The short story is unique, allowing the author to capture a moment in time closely and the reader to experience this moment vividly with the accrual of specific detail and a form shorter than a novel. The chapter “Short-Storyness and Eyewitnessing,” written by Mariá Jesús Hernáez Lerena from the collection *Short Story Theories: A Twenty-First-Century Perspective* edited by Pâtea Viorica, discusses the short story’s ability to comment on the human condition and experience of the world, while also identifying the strangeness of the form as we receive it. Lerena explains,

> This situation, which exemplifies a contact or, rather, a clash with reality, does not necessarily rest on a spectacular or out-of-the-ordinary event; instead, the story confronts us, as life occasionally does, with an occurrence against which no system of thought can protect us. (173-174)

The author describes this phenomenon that short stories create as a sense of “helplessness” caused by the conflict between what we see and our understanding of previous schema, and in turn, force us to be “witnesses looking at a reality that our eyes unwillingly register and our mind absorbs, but without being able to decode it” (174). The short story is inherently uncanny by this definition—serving as a form that only
gives a glimpse of a different reality (no matter how closely or un-closely related to our own) that we cannot assimilate to previous “eyewitnessed” experiences.

Postmodernist short stories, in particular, investigate reality as it exists from many perspectives, demonstrating the complexity of how humans experience the world. These narratives offer a subjective experience that echoes the author’s view of reality or unique experience and interpretation of different aspects of the world. The short story form can genuinely share an experience with the reader—no matter how alien to our world, experiences, or understanding of reality—detailed, concise, and intricate narrative. Short stories create and characterize experiences using literary devices and concepts—some of the most prominent being character, voice, and atmosphere. In the case of the literature examined in this thesis—the contemporary story collections Out There (2022) by Kate Folk and Bliss Montage (2022) by Ling Ma—the authors have chosen to utilize tropes of the uncanny as it presents in real life and literature to capture the experience of the pandemic-uncanny. Although many stories in these collections were published independently before the COVID-19 pandemic, they comment on latent truths already present but made evident during the pandemic. These stories address the uncanny facts regarding body, place, relationships, and self-perception that humans—a wholly uncanny experience that is exposed in literature and life. These experiences in these stories are created via a character’s depiction to the reader through voice and their interactions with the world. Moreover, mood and atmosphere play an integral role in truly capturing the feeling of the uncanny through the characters and the reader. These collections exist as postmodern literature but exceed that category; they are built around fundamental presentations of the uncanny in literature and life, determined to expose the latent
uncanny truths lying beneath our world's surface. These stories bring hidden nightmares to life through the derealization of the familiar, arguing for their already-taken place in reality. Throughout these two collections, the characters are apathetic and estranged from their environment and themselves, introducing a self of depersonalization and derealization that completely conflicts with our desired perception of ourselves and the world.
Chapter Two
The Uncanny Experience in the Time of the Pandemic

In 2020, the world’s population began experiencing something nearly entirely out of the ordinary and unknown as Coronavirus began threatening countries worldwide with rapid growth in cases and rising death tolls. Many places issued country-wide stay-at-home orders, disrupting habitual ways of life, human interaction, and socialization, introducing new opportunities and frightening and unfamiliar situations. There were new social norms, restrictions on previous daily activities, and a new focus on literature and storytelling, with the pandemic experience as the central point in the arts realm. During and after the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a surge in sharing this uncanny experience through literature, film, and other mixed media. Alfred Margulies’s “Through the Looking Glass: Holding the Analytic Frame on Zoom” is an example of a discussion and presentation of both the experience of the uncanny in the pandemic as well as how authors share this experience in literature. Margulies examines the ability to narrate the pandemic so that it connects with prior disasters and mass events in film and literature. He discusses Adelman’s article concerning the pandemic experience, chronicling the estrangement, depersonalization, and warped time many humans encountered during this time.

The time of the pandemic has been analyzed across disciplines and by various scholars. Kevin Aho’s “The Uncanny in the Time of Pandemics” explores the experience of the Coronavirus pandemic within the context of Martin Heidegger’s application of the uncanny and his analysis of how humans exist—specifically in terms of mood, time, and space. The article begins with a declaration of the world we live in during the Coronavirus pandemic:
The planetary grip of the coronavirus has thrown us into a liminal state of strangeness and uncertainty. The temporal rhythms that orient our lives have been disrupted; our experience of lived-space has broken down; our relationship to our own bodies has been transformed; and the meaning-giving projects that give life its purpose and direction are in limbo. All of this as we witness great cities shutting down, healthcare workers overwhelmed, jobs and paychecks vanishing overnight, and global markets collapsing. And we have no sense of how or when it will end. We are all living through an experience of what can only be called “the uncanny” (das Unheimliche). (Aho 2)

Although the COVID-19 Public Health Emergency began on January 30, 2020, and ended on May 11, 2023, the WHO did not declare COVID-19 as a pandemic until March 11, 2020. In the following weeks, mandated shut-downs and quarantines began, emphasizing social distancing, a heightened reliance on virtual means of communication, and vastly shaping the world to be unfamiliar. Many humans could not complete their previous everyday routines, such as going to work, meeting with friends, and going to crowded places. Instead, this time in the pandemic created feelings of uncertainty about the world’s future, as well as an experience of the uncanny, where what was familiar had now become unfamiliar. Despite the uncanniness revealed, however, the pandemic-uncanny allowed creativity to flourish, for introverts to work focused in isolation, and for time to be spent differently—beneficial for some, frightening and frustrating for others. Aho elaborates on the uncanny experience during the COVID-19 pandemic:
the routinized familiarity that we take for granted is fundamentally insecure and unstable, that our existence is groundless; it rests on nothing. In this sense, the uncanny discloses something we very much wish had remained hidden. (2)

Aho draws on Freud’s definition of unheimlich when he uses uncanny, something previously hidden or kept out of sight and now brought into light. The pandemic produced a terrifying truth for humans: there is no guarantee of the stability of how we experience the world. The pandemic-uncanny proved that everyone—across the world—could simultaneously experience something that challenged their reality and existence in the world. Economies became unstable, mobility became limited and seemingly safe, and prosperous cities became places of disease and death. Our routines and sense of self are fragile and can be interrupted by outside factors beyond our control (such as a deadly virus). Even more so, we humans would have liked never to realize this uncanny reality, that instead, it would remain as something hidden.

Aho explains that to Heidegger, our existence is rooted in our ability to make sense of ourselves and the world around us. A critical aspect of this making sense-of-things is mood—“the way we emotionally resonate and make sense of things” (4). Aho applies this use of mood to how humans’ existence drastically changed during the pandemic. Before the pandemic, humans could understand existence through comfortable routines and feeling at home in established ways of life (4). However, Aho argues,

The pandemic shattered this global sense of being at-home; we suddenly found ourselves in a situation where things no longer mattered in the ways that they used to. The self-assuring grip that we had on things became slippery, and a different mood began to wash over us; we began to feel the angst of the uncanny. (4)
Aho references Heidegger’s concept of *dasein*, or *being-in-the-world*, and explains, “Heidegger is not concerned with our physical, psychological or spiritual composition; rather, he is concerned with being, with existence as a self-interpreting activity and how this activity already entails a tacit ability to understand and make sense of things, including ourselves.” Existence for humans relies not solely on our physical presence in the world but on our ability to interact with and assign meaning to our lifestyles and the world around us. Aho’s identification of the sense of *being-at-home* in the world relates directly to Heidegger’s *dasein*, as being a part of human existence, familiarity and understanding with the world around us, and the meaning of our existence. However, the pandemic caused a drastic change in our mood, and our sense of self and home originates in the unfamiliarity in a world where we are no longer sure of our routine or place. Commuting to work and school rarely occurred, and casual shopping or social gatherings became nearly nonexistent. Humans kept their home routines (such as getting ready, cleaning, or doing laundry). Still, even these were altered by the influence of COVID-19 (taking your temperature, wearing a mask, using more disinfectant). Under the surface, the world still exists as it always had—the seasons changed, animals and plants roused in the March spring and even began to encroach on the deserted cities from mandated quarantine, and birthdays passed inevitably—but they are less important during a pandemic.

In addition to mood, Aho also examines the experience of time during the pandemic, in contrast to the understanding of time before the pandemic. Aho describes the new experience of time during the pandemic, explaining, “Without the normal milestones and rituals that order and regulate the rhythms of our lives, time becomes
thick and shapeless” without routinized events and celebrations (6). Disruption of time is a prevalent focus in pandemic research and study articles, another of which is “Lost Time: Perception of Events Timeline Affect by the COVID Pandemic” by Daria A Pawlak and Arash Sahraie. The authors analyze the pandemic’s effect on time and routines. In the former, authors Pawlak and Sahraie examine the anxiety and affective worldview produced by isolation and uncertainty during the pandemic. They explain, “The pandemic has caused a disconnection between measurable objective time and internally perceived subjective time” (Pawlak and Sahraie). The authors explain previous studies of the effects of these negative emotions and isolation on humans, directly applying the distortion that occurs to the uncanny experience of the pandemic. The pandemic disrupted how humans experience and track the passing of time—such as routines, appointments, and annual celebrations.

The pandemic, particularly the quarantine and social distancing necessary during the COVID-19 pandemic—disrupted the natural progression of human lives. People could no longer keep track of time in the same way as weekdays blended with weekends, and holidays were celebrated differently in isolation. Aho relates this feeling of displacement and morphed time concerning his career as a professor. The pandemic interrupted the ingrained routines that Aho had developed as a professor, causing him to find conflicts with his identity as a professor. He was no longer able to meet in class, schedule one-on-one appointments with students, or participate in conferences in the same way he was able to before. Aho refers to Heidegger’s conclusion about the “temporal experience of the uncanny” as an “ontological death” since we are unable to be what we were priorly, and we have lost the meaning of ourselves (7). We can no longer
understand ourselves in the context of our actions through the behaviors that contribute to our identity. Again, Aho relates this sense of time to his experience teaching during the pandemic. His teaching transformed from presenting material to a room full of students to attempting to deliver content across Zoom or online lectures. The pandemic disrupted our sense of identity and our existence in time due to our inability to share moments, participate in rituals, and simply be in the presence of others face-to-face. Aho continues,

    So, we remain stuck in a continuous present that is thick and formless, alive but unable-to-be. And as we move in slow motion through this temporal molasses our relationship to lived-space and to our own bodies is transformed. (8)

Rather than progressing forward naturally, in humans’ known and habitual routines, the COVID-19 pandemic world seemed to stand still since we could no longer exist in the world the same way. We postponed significant list events, such as graduations, weddings, funerals, and other substantial ceremonies or coming-of-age moments that caused a disruption with time in the experience of the shape of our lives. Humans isolated and became reliant on Zoom and other media to connect to others and share experiences, and routines that previously existed had to be adapted or discarded.

    Aho continues investigating human existence during the COVID-19 pandemic by analyzing *being-in-the-world* and space. Heidegger’s *Dasein*, or *being-in-the-world*, also refers to how “humans are partially situated and involved in the tactile horizon of their lives” (9). Human existence depends on human’s ability to interact with the world and find meaning in their actions and lifestyles. Before the pandemic, the horizon in which humans could comfortably move was broader. However, in the time of the pandemic, this
space for humans to exist in has become narrower, more unclear, and fundamentally
different from the space we existed in before. Aho explains further:

And this uncanny sense of spatial contraction further diminishes my sense of who
I am because it warps my intersubjective relations with others, relations that, for
Heidegger, serve to hold my identity together. (10)

Here, Aho continues to explore the extent of the impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on
our sense of identity and self, as well as the overall way we exist in the world. Regarding
our spatial existence, the pandemic completely changed the regular patterns in which we
interacted and moved within our world. Humans instead were forced to inhabit smaller
spaces—their homes, a Zoom screen—and experience decreased mobility. For Aho, this
restriction inevitably causes conflict between who we are and who we believe ourselves
to be. The experience of the pandemic-uncanny revealed the uncanniness at the core of
our existence and the uncontrollability and isolation underlying our lives. For some,
isolation provided more time and openness to explore new routines, creativity, and
projects in a new and unfamiliar world. However, for many, the pandemic created an
uncanny disruption in their lives, leaving them physically or mentally displaced.

Lastly, Aho examines the real secret that the uncanny reveals: how our existence
during the pandemic has turned our understanding of our existence upside down. Before
the pandemic, we could assume that our lives and the world we had molded for ourselves
were concrete aspects of our existence. However, the drastic impact on our lives caused
by the pandemic made it clear that our lives that allowed us to exist comfortably—
routines, a reinforced sense of space and identity, and our sense of control—were
exposed as fragile and unstable. Aho continues,
But for Heidegger, we should also be cautious about our desire to blindly return to our pre-pandemic lives. The uncanny teaches us something important about who we are, that the background of worldly institutions and practices that we rely on to make sense of ourselves is always precarious and contingent; it can collapse, as Heidegger says, “in the most innocuous situations.” (16)

Although the secret revealed about our existence through the pandemic may be terrifying in some aspects, it is still a secret worth knowing and reflecting on. As Aho says, the pandemic revealed the precariousness of our existing institutions and the routines we live by (16). These foundations can collapse, and it is essential to be aware of the consequences of that collapse and cautious of relying too heavily on the ways of life we have built.

Lucy Huskinson’s article “Uncanny Places” also examines the changes to our existence brought about by the pandemic and the overall uncanny reality of these changes. In her article, Huskinson begins with a summary of the state of the world during the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the general reaction people had to the newfound lack of familiarity in physical places. Huskinson explains:

During the pandemic, many people reported that their familiar neighbourhoods, towns, and cities had transformed into strange places. No longer alive with the hustle and bustle of people going about their daily business, places seemed to take on new identities. Some likened once familiar places to an apocalyptic film set. The places we took for granted suddenly became noticeable, strange, even hostile. They had become uncanny. (Huskinson 38)
There are several correlations between the pandemic experience and the uncanny experience that Huskinson identifies. Firstly, she uses characterizations like “no longer alive” and “apocalyptic,” which contribute to the sense of the uncanny that accompanies death and the dead. Moreover, she emphasizes the sense of once familiar places—including neighbors and places where we spend most of our daily lives—as suddenly becoming barren and unfamiliar. Huskinson also relates the new reality of our human spaces during the pandemic as “a skewed copy or double of a familiar place” (39). Like death and the familiar becoming unfamiliar, doubles consistently indicate the uncanny. Huskinson is breaking down the significant changes in human environments and lifestyles due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic that has produced this uncanny feeling.

In addition to analyzing the aspects of this new normal that have had an uncanny impact, Huskinson also reflects on the implications of this uncanny world. In the fashion of the uncanny, this feeling reveals that this aspect of the world was “lying in wait,” waiting for the opportunity to show itself (39). Huskinson elaborates on this strange realization regarding the unfamiliar side that exists in the places we inhabit:

Uncanny places bring us to the daunting realisation that we are not in control of our environments as we had initially thought, and, worse still, an uncomfortable suspicion that the places we had come to trust may be in control of us. (39)

Huskinson is refining the argument that the sense of the uncanny manifests when something familiar becomes unfamiliar and creates conflicts with our previous beliefs or understanding. In the case of the uncanny places that Huskinson evaluates, this belief regarding having control over our environments—especially regarding the physical
spaces we occupy—ends up being challenged by the new behavior of physical spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Huskinson also explores the relationship of the home to the uncanny, both as a place where the uncanny can manifest and Freud’s reference to the psyche as being like a “house with several stories” (39). Huskinson expands on the role of the house and home in the experience of the uncanny, explaining,

The most familiar of places, those that we feel most attached to and contained by, are fertile grounds for uncanny experiences. It is perhaps unsurprising therefore that the place we call ‘home’ has its double in the most recognisable of uncanny motifs – the haunted house. (40)

The haunted house motif is one where the familiar—house and home—becomes jarringly unfamiliar. During the pandemic, the home became a safe harbor from the world but also a place of constant anxiety and claustrophobia for many. The physical world—or rather the absolute, safe mobility we had in it, appeared to recede to the area of the home and only the home. Our places of comfort and gathering turn into places of estrangement and anxiety. Freud identified basements and other dark, rarely visited parts of the home as representative of the unconscious part of the human mind. Narratives emphasizing the uncanny aspect of these places in the home tend to draw questions from the reader of whether a physical or spiritual being produces the experience of fear or anxiety or if these are just the “projections of a disturbed mind” (40). During the pandemic, uncanny places expanded to formerly busy spaces, such as shuttered malls, empty roads, or urban areas taken over by animals. Once, familiar places had become unfamiliar in the experience of the pandemic-uncanny.
An overall neighborhood or even a city can be a liminal space that manifests the uncanny when we examine the places we consistently avoid due to stigmas of violence or crime but are essential to supporting a city or neighborhood. Such places that remain out of sight and avoided unless necessary include subway stations, junk yards, or even cemeteries (40). Cities begin to exist in a liminal space when they undergo a drastic change; Huskinson refers to these cities as “cities in transition,” as they are unsure about their futures, haunted by the past, and transitioning. In the case of cities during COVID-19, transitioning became essential to adapting to a world of isolation and quarantine. However, this transition from past to present created an acute sense of the uncanny since these places have increased with the development of the disease and its dangers. Cities became sites of loss, trauma, and horror as the pandemic spread rapidly, taking the lives of millions. The terrifying effects of the disease on some of the largest cities in the U.S.—one being New York City—were broadcast nationally, sharing scenes of mass death, tent triage centers outside major hospitals, and ventilator shortages. In contrast, the absurd encroachment of nature in urban environments, such as goats roaming the streets of Llandudno, Wales, and jackals howling in HaYarkon Park in Tel Aviv, shared the tenacity of nature.

The article “COVID-19 the Intruder: A Philosophical Journey with Jean-Luc Nancy into Pandemic Strangeness and Tourism” by Ana Maria Munar and Adam Doering further investigates the impact of COVID-19 as an intrusive presence in our cities, lifestyles, and even our bodies. The authors chronicle their pandemic experiences, including photos of deserted airports and streets, COVID-19 test instructions, social distancing posters, and
hard-working nurses. Munar and Doering define and study the tourism industry for the reader as affected and changed by the pandemic. They emphasize the importance of our bodies moving in space, place, experience, and autonomy—and the lack of control over our bodies, spaces, and lifestyles due to the pandemic. The authors emphasize the local impact of COVID-19 and the global impact as they describe travel, tourism, and their long-distance partnership for the article. Their argument is closely related to Huskinson’s analysis of uncanny places, the new unfamiliarity of our lives, and the spaces we exist in due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Huskinson continues their analysis of uncanny places, turning to the works of the German sociologist Georg Simmel and the French cultural historian Michel de Certeau. According to these experts, cities are inherently uncanny due to the double they produce—in terms of what we expect from them and what they are. Huskinson explains their characterization of cities, describing:

The cities of Simmel and de Certeau are most uncanny indeed. On the one hand, their cities present themselves as an organised, governed system of visible and calculated relations, which lead most citizens to believe that they are living within ordered and rationalised environments. But, on the other hand, these cities disclose to their citizens a cacophony of bewildering and unpredictable social experiences that often disrupt their personal lives (41).

In intention, cities are places of organization and rationalization, but they constantly elicit unpredictable social experiences (41). De Certeau analyzes city planning as another example of the uncanny at work; humans plan cities carefully and with the belief—whether conscious or unconscious—that the citizens will behave in a certain way due to the city’s construction. In his book, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1974), de Certeau
carefully investigates the ambiguity of cultural practices and products and how they exist
in society. De Certeau challenges the relationship between functional cities and human
routines, analyzing the juxtaposition of rigid planning and human free will (Clark). Using
the theories of de Certeau and Simmel, Huskinson claims that humans are merely trying
to control an environment to prevent the inhabitants of that environment, only to be faced
with the lack of control they possess over the individual and the patterns of humans.
Huskinson concludes her article by urging the acknowledgment of these uncanny places
as they allow us to become aware of the limits of our control. Huskinson says:

Uncanny places alert us to the fact that we have become overly familiar with
ourselves and our environments and require a reset. It is only when our
expectations are every so often ruptured that our imaginations are stimulated by
new possibilities. (41)

The experience of the uncanny can provide new revelations and insights that weren’t
previously available to us. Although the uncanny creates a sense of uneasiness and
strangeness in humans, it frequently exposes another side to what we consider “normal.”

The experience of the pandemic-uncanny has been analyzed and narrated by
many, including Aho and Huskinson. Both examine the disruptions of life and routines
and the overwhelming sense and scenes of the uncanny produced through the pandemic.
Although Aho focuses more on the individual experience and perspective and Huskinson
on the widespread effects of the pandemic, both work to demonstrate the uncanniness
present during this time and the complex nature of its appearances. Similarly, Pawlak and
Sahraie, and Munar and Doering also investigate factors of the pandemic in their articles,
such as disruption of time and sense of being-in-the-world, and estrangement from one’s
body and once familiar places. These authors provide a rounded and in-depth analysis of the experience of the pandemic and the effects of this experience on individuals and the larger world. Through the lens of their concepts and the application of their definitions and discoveries, we can investigate why the uncanny presents through the pandemic, how to cope with this experience of the uncanny, and how to use this experience to change for the future.

In addition to an abundance of scholarly analyses regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, there has also been an abundance of creative pieces of literature that share the uncanny experience of the pandemic. In the article, “Are We Ready for COVID-19 as a Central Theme in Literature?” author Gabine Iglesias reviews several texts that have been published since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, commenting on the growing impact the COVID-19 is having in the literary field. Some of the pieces briefly mentioned in this article include Louise Erdrich’s *The Sentence*, Catherine Ryan Howard’s *56 Days*, Amitava Kumar’s *A Time Outside This Time*, Sarah Hall’s *Burntcoat*, Kristen Radtke’s *Seek You: A Journey Through American Loneliness*, Peter S. Goodman’s *Davos Man*, Kim Fu’s *Lesser Known Monsters of the 21st Century* and Hanya Yanagihara’s *To Paradise*. In addition to these novels and story collections, there have also been several anthologies created containing numerous authors and their pieces over the pandemic, such as *COVID Chronicles: A Comics Anthology; Lockdown: Stories of Crime, Terror, and Hope During a Pandemic*; and *And We Came Outside and Saw the Stars Again: Writers from Around the World on the Covid-19 Pandemic*. In this article, however, Iglesias examines two specific texts—Laura Kipnis’ *Love in the Time of Contagion* and
Margaret Peacock and Erik L. Peterson’s *A Deeper Sickness: Journal of America in the Pandemic Year*, which Iglesias identifies as

the two books that truly announce the arrival of literature with a central goal of helping us understand the psychology of the pandemic as it relates to relationships and dealing with each other, in the case of the former, and to understand the pandemic in a political, social, and cultural context in the case of the latter.

(Iglesias)

The former text, *Love in the Time of Contagion*, provides a close look at the impact of COVID-19 within the home. The author, Laura Kipnis, investigates the dynamic of relationships against the setting of the pandemic, identifying issues already present before the onset of the pandemic, such as narcissism. The book exposes ugly truths about human relationships, just as the pandemic exposed ugly truths about the United States as a country—uncanny truths previously not prevalent (Iglesias). The latter text, *A Deeper Sickness: Journal of America in the Pandemic Year*, supplies a broader view and critique of the United States’ experience of the pandemic. Authors Margaret Peacock and Erik L. Peterson provide journal-like writing about the pandemic, revealing the sickness in America already present at the beginning of 2020. These blights include entrenched racial hierarchies, an economic structure dependent on individual wealth and consumption of goods and entertainment, and an intentional historical amnesia that prevented the middle class (primarily comfortable white Americans) from doing anything to address the first two issues (Iglesias) Again, the authors of this book work to expose the uncanny truth underneath our everyday lives, that the uncanny experience of the pandemic brought to the surface.
However, Iglesias considers pandemic literature to be an essential and insightful genre. He says,

“We are naturally inclined to stay away from things we find unpleasant, and there’s a chance pandemic literature strikes some readers as precisely that. However, the narratives we’ve seen so far have shown that the pandemic can be a starting point for any story—and that writing about it can be a way of processing trauma, an exercise in trying to understand its impact on our psyche. This literature can add to a growing map of work that helps us navigate not only recent history but also our present and immediate future. (Iglesias)

Pandemic literature exposes truths—revealed when truly examining the pandemic experience—that humans would have preferred to remain hidden. The uncanny experience surfaces through the pandemic’s ability to completely shift our view of ourselves and the world. Kipnis Peacock and Peterson delve into these sudden moments of shocking clarity, addressing crucial problems that were always present but not nearly as recognized before the pandemic.

It is undeniable that the pandemic period was uncanny—both in terms of the sudden alienation from prior ways of life and the newfound sense of unfamiliarity in our surroundings and environment. The existence of the uncanny is evident in real-life experience and the literature created during and about the pandemic. In this thesis, I will investigate two short story collections published in 2022, while COVID-19 was still a Public Health Emergency, and with much of the writing and revision of these collections done by the authors while experiencing the uncanny of the COVID-19 pandemic. Through these collections, the authors narrate and reflect on the uncanny experience of
the pandemic—delving deep into the emotions and relations previously unapparent in relationships, lifestyles, and our self-perceptions. Folk and Ma utilize tropes of the uncanny to develop their stories, explicitly examining atmospheres, bodies, and homes as aspects of human lives that we were previously familiar with but became unfamiliar with. Through its presentation in *Out There* and *Bliss Montage*, this analysis will demonstrate that the pandemic in life and literature is undeniably uncanny. Folk and Ma investigate the human uncanniness of being-in-the-world as exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and work to create a narrative of awareness and change previously not discernable before the pandemic.
Chapter Three

*Out There: The Uncanny Body and Place*

*Out There* by Kate Folk is a collection of short stories published in 2022. This collection contains stories exploring the weird in mundane situations, with presentations of loneliness and estrangement that become starkly clear when examining the complexities of relationships—with others and ourselves. Voice, character, and atmosphere throughout the stories create experiences of the uncanny atmosphere, place, and body. The collection investigates known uncanny tropes, such as life-like robots, unfamiliar bodies, and a house that comes to life. One of the most substantial roots of the uncanny resides in an actual reversal of expectations. Usually, with a result that ends for the worse or ultimately challenges our previous understandings of ourselves and the world around us. The stories in *Out There* do just this, detailing shocking revelations through characters and the strange phenomena they encounter. The development of the uncanny—precisely the uncanny atmosphere, body, and place—parallels the historical period in which the collection was written and published. Thirteen of the fifteen stories in the collection were previously published in different forms before being published as part of the collection in 2022—with the stories “Big Sur” and “Moist House” appearing only in the collection.

*“Out There” and “Big Sur”*

The title story, “Out There,” originally published in *The New Yorker* in March 2020, is told in a near future San Francisco, when the world has begun creating human-like artificial intelligence robots that appear as overly handsome and perfect men, with the mission of stealing and exploiting women’s electronic data. The stories reveal the
uncanny truths about bodies, places, and relationships, which had existed before but were made evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. The story “Out There” explores a scenario where the uncanny is present through a genuine, known phenomenon—the fear or anxiety of chatting with bots on an application or a chatroom. In the age of online dating and chats, there is an increased possibility of being mistaken about the humanness of the person behind the screen.

According to Freud, one of the hallmarks of the uncanny—and the use of the uncanny he analyzes in his essay—is “doubt as to whether an animate object is alive and, conversely, whether a lifeless object might not perhaps be animate” (Freud 135). The sense of the uncanny is heightened since the beholder of the uncanny subject cannot definitively tell if the subject is human or nonhuman. Freud uses “The Sandman” by E.T.A. Hoffmann as an example of a text that creates this sense of the uncanny through the presentation of a life-like, animated doll, Olimpia, that the protagonist, Nathaniel, mistakes as a human for most of the story. Similarly, in “Out There,” a sense of the uncanny is evoked by the human-like robots called “blots.”

Set as a reflection of the narrator’s recent past, the story begins with the conversational, familiar statement, “I was putting myself out there” (3). Already, the reader experiences a familiarity with this phrase, with the connotation of “doing what you’re afraid of doing” or “reaching out to meet others.” However, almost immediately, even the familiarity with this phrase becomes warped as the narrator steps into an unfathomable situation for both the reader and herself. The narrator sets the scene of the dating pool in her reality, explaining, “it was estimated that men on dating apps in the city were 50 percent blots. But what choice did I have? Apps seemed to be the way
everyone found each other these days” (4). The “blot phenomenon” is introduced as the reader learns about these blots’ increasing creation and circulation on dating apps. The narrator rather nonchalantly begins to accept the risks of meeting a blot, contemplating, “In the end, it seemed to come down to never dating again, or taking the chance of being blotted. I supposed there had always been risks” (4). Through the narrator’s calculating voice, the reader can identify her resignation regarding the events in the story. A similar sense of detachment or depersonalization is present in many of the stories throughout the collection, such as “Head in the Floor,” “Doe Eyes,” and “Dating a Somnambulist.” The narrators in these stories introduce the events in their lives as if assessing them from a distance, apathetically, and estranged from them. Concepts identified by Margulies and Aho regarding the COVID-19 pandemic—the experience of self-estrangement, unfamiliarity, and isolation due to exposure to the pandemic-uncanny.

As “Out There” progresses, the narrator introduces her first encounter with a blot named Roger during a social experiment disguised as a dinner party. According to the narrator, “blots” were created as a kind of artificial home health aid—but the idea of artificial intelligence in healthcare did not sell. Eventually, a Russian company infiltrated blot programming, producing blots to pursue women in the United States, establishing a relationship with them, and programmed to hack and steal their data to exploit it. Uncannily, the Russian intervention with the blot phenomenon echoes the U.S. presidential election tampering by Putin and Russia in 2016. Blots represent fears in our current reality—that our information will be stolen and exported by malicious corporations and individuals and that if we open up to someone, they will eventually turn what we tell them against us. Historically and in literature, women like the narrator
possess an intense fear of having their emotions or romantic feelings exploited and have been put at greater risk of this exploitation happening. These are familiar and mostly unfounded fears, as humans typically do not exist solely to use other humans (or so we would like to believe). However, this exploitation occurs in reality and different literature genres, which converse with this uncanny truth about human relationships. In “Out There,” and in the case of blots, there is a one hundred percent certainty that they will steal and exploit information, which is what they are programmed to do. With the introduction of the blots and their impact on the narrator’s reality, two more tropes of the uncanny are entered into the text—the uncertainty of whether something is animate/inanimate (represented here more as whether something is human/nonhuman) and a conflict with what the narrator believes to be accurate or expects.

In this narrator’s reality, blots become increasingly well-known, and most of the time, distinctive features tell a blot from a human being. The narrator describes the uncanny, perfectly uniform blots:

The early blots had been easy to identify. They were too handsome, for one thing. Their skin was smooth, glowing, and uniformly tall and lean. Jawlines you could cut bread with. They were the best-looking men in any room and had no sense of humor. (4)

However, despite the apparent and identifiable “Barbie Doll” qualities of the blots at the beginning of the phenomenon, blots were refined over time to become increasingly challenging to identify among humans. The line between human and nonhuman became unidentifiable as blots began to better camouflage themselves among human men. Similar to the story “Out There,” the final story of the collection, “Big Sur,” returns to a reality
where blots are present. However, this story appears to occur earlier in chronological time than “Out There” since blots are not nearly as well known and are just beginning to emerge. This story explores not only the perspective of a human woman but also blot pursuing her. As a result, the reader experiences firsthand the similarities and differences between humans and blots, both in lifestyles, thinking processes, and the inevitable programming of blots that is unchangeable. Moreover, the blot the story follows—Roger—shares the same name as the blot introduced by the narrator in “Out There.” “Big Sur” introduces a kind of meta-uncanny within the collection as the reader experiences the familiar yet unfamiliar narrative.

The narrator of “Out There” shifts to an anecdote regarding her friend, Alicia, who had been “blotted” in the past—Alicia mistook a blot for a human man, missing the tell-tale signs, and eventually having all of her data stolen when on a remote trip to Big Sur. The narrator refers to this “blotting” impersonally, explaining, “This was textbook blot, a red flag Alicia should have recognized. Blots always wanted to go to Big Sur, where cell service was spotty, to give themselves some lead time with the victim’s data” (8). The narrator views blots as a danger that can be avoided by being vigilant in perceiving any strange behavior in a relationship. She simultaneously demonstrates her constant suspicions about her partners, second-guessing their human/nonhuman status, and exposes the uncanny ambiguity regarding a cyber-partner’s identity existing when “Out There” was written and initially published. The initial fear and uncertainty that the narrator experiences concerning the inability to know whether the person she is talking to online is human—or really who they say they are, or even on the other side of the screen—was a heightened uncertainty during the pandemic. The introduction of the
pandemic-uncanny exacerbated this fear and uncertainty of others regarding COVID-19 exposure and vaccination status, in addition to the present fears surrounding digital communication. As Margulies explains, the world became reliant on digital communication for work, school, and relationships and became estranged from others and previous ways of life. “Out There” investigates this growing fear by demonstrating the narrator’s uncertainty in real life, not only when chatting virtually.

Later in the story, the narrator meets Sam on a dating app, deciding to meet him in person and go on dates with him seriously. Throughout their relationship, she faces uncanny uncertainty about whether he is a blot or a human. This ambiguity regarding Sam’s human/non-human status causes her to constantly analyze his actions and her judgment. She contemplates Sam’s actions:

Sam would fail to ask a logical follow-up question. I savored these instances of human selfishness. Even if the new generation of blots had more flaws than the old ones, I figured they’d still be primed to retrieve any breadcrumb of a woman’s past that might help them more thoroughly fuck her over when the time came.

Sam’s inattention was a kind of freedom. (10)

The narrator invites Sam over to her house repeatedly. On each occasion, Sam robotically hides his jeans and boots on the highest shelf of the narrator’s closet—an act the narrator finds both suspicious and strange. The narrator hides her phone and laptop on the nights he visits, not fully trusting if he is a human or a blot trying to steal her data. Sam lives in the basement of a house with roommates, whom he is highly cautious of, nearly hiding his presence in the house as if he should not be seen or heard. The narrator describes the experience of her visit:
He warned me to be silent as we descended the carpeted stairs to his room. He’d lived there only a month, and wasn’t sure if having overnight guests was cool with his roommates. So I was asked to pretend I didn’t exist, something I had plenty of practice with. It was a little degrading, which I took as a promising sign. (14)

The narrator constantly observes Sam’s actions warily—both at her house, when at his house, and in his communication. However, multiple times throughout the story, Sam does something that would generally be disappointing for a partner in a romantic relationship. She has to hide herself from his roommates, something “degrading,” but that, in this relationship, she “took as a promising sign” (14). He is not interested in genuinely getting to know the narrator, sharing intimate details about himself, or even treating her kindly, which generally are red flags for an uncaring partner. Still, the narrator considers them positive signs that he’s not a blot. She has created an inverse of positive and negative, a reversal of expectations and the familiar, a staple of the uncanny. Nonetheless, these negative aspects remain unnoticed by the narrator due to the overwhelming sense of uncanny produced during her interactions with Sam. Here, “Out There” exposes a hierarchical categorization of priorities, commenting that new, ambiguous factors can block out familiar, identifiable factors. The narrator pushes her efforts into discerning Sam’s blot/human identity since this is a unique, unfamiliar terrain in a relationship; however, this focus on his human/non-human status comes at the expense of not recognizing the problematic aspects of their relationship. The pandemic-uncanny introduced this same phenomenon, as relationships were challenged by new, unfamiliar factors, such as vaccination status, masking, occupation and housing stability,
and mental health became increasingly significant in already established, new relationships.

Eventually, the narrator proposes taking a trip over President’s Day Weekend, creating a plan to visit a hot spring north of San Francisco. The narrator uses this as an opportunity to simultaneously test Sam and grow closer to him—if a blot, he will try to steal her data, and if he is a human and interested in her, he will try to get to know her more. She is determined to make the unfamiliar familiar by replacing the ambiguity of Sam’s human/non-human status with certainty. At the hot springs, the narrator first finds it “weird” that everyone is naked in the pools and is ambivalent about it—introducing the reader to the feeling of defamiliarization and strangeness that she already feels with the place and the trip. There is another couple in the pools, a woman who appears to be in her thirties and a man looking suspiciously handsome, leaving the narrator suspecting him to be a blot. Immediately, this couple is recognized as a doubling of the narrator and Sam—as she regards the possible non-human state of the man, seemingly evident to her but not identifiable. Moreover, they provide a mirror image of the uncanny dilemma in which the narrator has found herself. In the pandemic-uncanny, these mirrored images appeared everywhere—broadcast on TV, at local grocery stores, and even in our homes. Humans faced the reality that everyone lived with constant fear and uncertainty, and everyone’s COVID-19 status existed as a suspicion.

The narrator points out the uncanniness of the couple, saying, “Do you think he’s a blot?” with Sam replying, “A what?” (24). Before this, Sam had never heard of the blot phenomenon and shows little interest as the narrator explains the prevalence of blots on dating apps—something that had led to her caution and sense of the uncanny during their
relationship. She even says, “When we first started dating, I was worried you might be one,” to which Sam responds, “Well, sorry to disappoint you” (24-25). Sam’s comment strikes the narrator, annoyed that he will not join her in speculating about blots, that he is not as unsettled by their existence as she is. She is off-put by the fact that he is not experiencing the same uncanniness that she is—that he is ignorant of a truth lying beneath the world’s surface and uninterested in successfully integrating it into everyday life. The pandemic-uncanny produced this same encounter, as those getting vaccinated, wearing masks, and generally cautious of their fellow humans were faced with humans who were ambivalent about these practices and the dangerous uncertainties of the disease. For the narrator and Sam, their conversation continues to break down as she reacts jokingly to Sam’s comments and eventually delves into a story about a past relationship. Sam chides her actions, saying, “I don’t think it’s wise to talk about previous partners […]. You’ve done that before, and it was a turnoff then, too” (26). The narrator is “stung” by this sudden observation and loses her enthusiasm for this trip or conversation. She is no longer concerned with Sam’s human/non-human status and is just disappointed in the reality she is faced with.

They spend the remainder of the trip overly conscious and wary of each other—with the narrator feeling judged by Sam. Sam's text message after dropping her off at her apartment, “Great weekend,” with a heart emoji, only forces her to face the uncanny truth about relationships in her reality (32). Feeling estranged from Sam, the narrator’s confidence in the relationship shatters. She realizes that her boyfriend is not a blot but an inattentive, emotionally absent human man. Throughout the story, the narrator has been vigorously focused on Sam’s—and other men’s—human/nonhuman status, ignoring her
previous values and desires in romantic relationships. The reality of the pandemic-uncanny is presented in the story through the narrator’s relationships and experiences. Margulies explains, about the painting *The Ambassadors*, “It was there all along, only now our perspective has changed—and we cannot unsee what we have glimpsed” (510). This same explanation can be used to understand the pandemic’s uncanny truth regarding relationships. Couples, families, and roommates were thrust into prolonged proximity during quarantine, sometimes forcing things previously hidden or not addressed in the relationship to come to light. Positive and negative truths that existed below the surface in reality—devastating secrets revealed, deeper bonds made, or previously unnoticeable incompatibility made evident.

At the end of the story, the narrator passes what she and the reader assume are blots in a park, chatting with each other. They call out to her, telling her how beautiful she is, how they believe she must be intelligent and admirable, and finally asking her to go with them to Big Sur. The narrator does not explicitly reveal her interest, but she walks over to mingle with them, ending the story. The reader can assume that the narrator is interested in these blots since they are taking an interest in her in a way that Sam did not. This scene links directly to a characteristic of the uncanny—faced with the truth not previously evident, that something one “sees” cannot be “unseen.” The narrator has spent the entirety of the story being vigilant with caution while dating, priding herself on the ability to assess whether or not someone is a blot. By the end of the story, though, she is contemplating the flaws in her relationship with a human that a relationship with a blot corrects. By the end of the story, the narrator and the reader see the uncanny truth: a relationship with a nonhuman is more predictable and fulfilling than a relationship with a
human. This realization feels very foreign as, in the current day and age, humans love humans, and humans have relationships with other humans. Humans prefer to be with other humans instead of being in a relationship with a robot; this story turns this fact into something ambiguous. In the text and the context of the pandemic-uncanny, latent truth and trauma are made obvious—human relationships can be faulty, ugly, and full of misread signs and issues. Humans are not artificial robots and have unclear motives and unreadable actions at times, so a clear give-and-take robotic relationship offers an appealing clarity and sense of ease that a human relationship may not.

“The Bone Ward”

In the middle of the collection, the presence and focus of the uncanny shift to the body and the self. Instead of a narrator constantly questioning her lover’s animate/inanimate status as in “Out There,” in “The Bone Ward,” the narrator experiences unfamiliarity and defamiliarization towards her body and its functions. The story, “The Bone Ward,” originally published in McSweeney’s Quarterly Concern in 2019, is a story that takes place in a remote hospital where the patients are getting treatment for “Total Nocturnal Bone Loss,” a disease where their bones turn to liquid during the night, and solidify in the morning (Folk 90). The characters in this story experience a sense of alienation and depersonalization from their bodies—a feeling created through the characterization of the first-person narrator, who discusses her disease with a distance from herself and as a secondary concern to the social relationships in her life. Frequently, the narrator ignores her improving condition, convinced her happiness depends on staying in the hospital ward.
From the story’s beginning, the text introduces the feeling of estrangement from body and environment. She discusses this unique illness, TNBL, as the target disease to cure in the Bone Ward. In this illness, a person’s body becomes utterly unfamiliar in shape and control. The actual setting of this story contributes further to the unfamiliarity that the patients experience as they move to The Ward’s remote location in the Montana Plains. At this location, the patients receive treatment and rehabilitation in isolation from the rest of the world. The narrator describes the wilderness around the Bone Ward—coyotes, the forest, and the complete lack of anything else human. In this ward, not only is the environment suddenly unfamiliar and foreign, but the body becomes foreign too—as it begins acting irregularly with the onset of TNBL, and the patients experience a lack of control over their bodies. In this story, illness and body autonomy are investigated, demonstrated by TNBL in the story, and resonating with the future apparent pandemic-uncanny. The body is identified as a source of constant uncanniness, made further evident when tracking the reaction and effects on a body from disease.

Ana María Munar and Adam Doering reference French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy and his essay *L’Intrus* [The Intruder] as an investigation into the unfamiliarity of a body experiencing disease and the lack of control humans have to stop this experience. In *L’Intrus*, Nancy describes his experience after having a heart transplant as the unfamiliar heart remains something foreign and uncanny, yet inseparable from him. Nancy introduces the concept of an “uncanny body” to describe this phenomenon, an idea that Munar and Doering then expand with the experience of the COVID-19 virus. They establish that the body is always vulnerable, ambiguous, and biologically uncontrollable.
As the pandemic-uncanny experience revealed this truth to many, in “The Bone Ward,” TNBL forces it upon those it inflicts.

Defamiliarizing the body from the individual is a consistent theme in stories throughout this collection, occurring as a central focus in “Heart Seeks Brain” and “Shelter.” The narrators of these stories speak about the body with a certain estrangement to its functioning and the overall experience of living in a body, being human. Specifically, in “Heart Seeks Brain,” the story’s reality is one where individuals are attracted to certain aspects of the body’s functions and organs—the cardiovascular system, the gastrointestinal tract, the kidneys—and want to possess these parts of their partners’ bodies. In this way, the body becomes fetishized and broken into multiple parts rather than a whole. The sense of the uncanny is developed through the desire to control the body at any cost despite the body’s unpredictability and will of its own. Furthermore, the body and the purpose of its functions are defamiliarized, making a story that presents an uncanny experience of relationships. In reality, defamiliarization of the body occurs in cases of Body Integrity Identity Disorder, body dysmorphia, eating disorders, and chronic diseases that leave lifelong changes to the body, such as cancer, renal disease, diabetes, and many other illnesses. The experiences of the pandemic-uncanny heightened the reality of the uncanny body, of the uncontrollability—or increased sense of danger—when possessing preexisting health risks.

In “The Bone Ward,” the narrator, named “Gumdrop,” is the only woman who resides in this ward, and since her arrival six months ago, she has become close to a man named Bradley, engaging in a sexual relationship with him. The narrator interprets this relationship as not only a sexual relationship but also an intimate romantic relationship.
Due to her love of Bradley, the narrator emphasizes, “I’m in no hurry to go back to my life in New York” (Folk 90). Instead, she has grown fond of the relationship and life she lives in the isolation of the Bone Ward. In this way, the story introduces a warping of priorities—the changes in her health, even the improvements, mean very little to her in the Bone Ward. As part of the patients' everyday rituals, they watch the daytime talk show *Maury*. Throughout the story, the character retells three different episodes of *Maury*, all starring a young woman named Amy, looking for the father of her child. The juxtaposition of this show with life in the Bone Ward—with *Maury* representing a kind of familiar normalcy from life before hospitalization—the reader can see the stark differences. The group laughs at the revelation that “JC” is not the father. *Maury* serves not only as a juxtaposition of before and after, but the show itself creates an uncanny scenario—a ghost-like child, unseen to the viewer, the men, uncertain of their father/not-father status, and women like Amy, who is in a constant state of not-knowing the identity of the father. However, the narrator explains the situation: “In the TV room, the men chuckle, presumably at Amy’s impressive promiscuity. I laugh, too, at the ridiculous scene of JC taunting the crowd, though in my previous life I’d found the show gross” (95). Since arriving at the Bone Ward, the narrator’s experience demonstrates the differences in her past and present selves—her priorities have changed, and her former values are unimportant. So, too, in real life, during the pandemic, people’s sense of self, values, and priorities became warped. Aho describes this disrupted being-in-the-world as a similar kind of “ontological death” that the narrator in “The Bone Ward” experiences; the routines, familiarities, and values previously held in daily life have been stripped in
this new and unfamiliar reality. Instead, like many of us during the pandemic, she faces a kind of limbo where she is being and not being, choosing to adapt or not act.

However, after Gumdrop describes her daily life with Bradley and the other men in the Bone Ward, she soon learns that there will be a new patient arriving—another woman. Immediately, the narrator feels anxious and fearful. Although she cannot identify where these feelings originate initially, she soon attributes them to a dread that what she possesses will be stolen by the young woman, Olivia, nicknamed by the men “Starling.” In Freud’s analysis of the uncanny, he refers to this phenomenon as the appearance of the “evil eye”; this is when one feels as if the envy of others will destroy what they hold precious (Freud 146). However, this projected envy usually ends ironically in a loss on the part of the person who possesses these fears. Throughout the story, this anxiety about having Bradley—and the new life she has become accustomed to in the Ward—taken from her grows in intensity.

Olivia is sicker than any of the other patients. She can barely sit through dinner before her bones start turning to liquid—which spurs empathy and pity in the other patients. Gumdrop reflects on her TNBL, confessing, “I sometimes miss the sensation of total bone loss, its own kind of orgasm. A forced surrender, a sudden lack—like a floor dropping out, air and light rushing into a room” (Folk 101). Although a terrifying, harmful disease, it has become familiar to the narrator. A sensation she even longs for now that she has begun recovering. However, the narrator strongly focuses on Olivia’s recovery and presence in the Bone Ward. Slowly, Olivia’s condition starts to improve as she participates in meals and their group activity of watching Maury. Olivia’s behavior—arguably even her beauty and youth—is reminiscent of Gumdrop’s life before her onset
of TNBL. The men begin to treat them similarly but differently. They make a familiar joke of, “Smile for me” or “She’d be prettier if she smiled,” which always leaves Gumdrop to respond with an exaggerated frown and is answered by Olivia with a radiant smile (104). In this way, Olivia creates a sense of the uncanny evil eye for Gumdrop and acts as a double of her former self. The two women are directly compared, demonstrating a doubling of their scenarios, while Olivia is an unfamiliar presence to the narrator. When watching *Maury*, much like how Gumdrop would have acted in the past, Olivia is put off by the show, saying softly, “This show is disgusting” (106). Unlike Gumdrop, Olivia can get an apologetic reaction from the men, and as she leaves the room, Bradley follows curiously. The experience of self-estrangement, mirroring, and depersonalization that Margulies identifies as the production of the pandemic-uncanny, is similarly demonstrated through the effects of isolation and illness through Gumdrop and Olivia.

The story portrays the two women as past and present, emphasizing the difference between the narrator before and after the onset of her illness and her isolation in the Bone Ward.

Bradley begins to take a specific interest in Olivia as they share an inclination toward music: she is a singer, and he is a cellist. The narrator becomes increasingly insecure at the growing relationship between Olivia and Bradley, especially as Bradley spends more time with Olivia and less time with Gumdrop. Unlike most of the Bone Ward residents, he does not participate in the group activity of watching TV. Instead, he has joined Olivia in clinging to his previous identity as a dedicated and focused musician rather than existing as just one of many patients. When the narrator finally confronts him, his disinterest in her becomes more identifiable. As they sit on the couch together, he is
distracted and distant. Gumdrop explains, “I have rarely felt a person’s absence so acutely” (108). She is capturing an extraordinary phenomenon where, despite a person’s literal, physical presence, they feel far away, absent. The pandemic-uncanny’s quarantine and digital communication, Zoom, and similar applications allowed for face-to-face communication, but people were still far from each other; or even more harrowing, people could be quarantined together but feel entirely alone. Although, for Gumdrop, some of this sense of absence is caused directly by Bradley’s actions, it is exacerbated as she continues to be both envious and anxious towards Olivia. Finally, as their relationship becomes nonexistent, the narrator confronts Bradley on the topic, as he argues, “Listen Gumdrop. You know I enjoy spending time with you. But I just can’t deal with this kind of pressure right now” (109). He breaks off the relationship, emphasizing that he must spend time with Olivia as they make a music album. This turn of events crushes the narrator; she feels she has lost the one thing essential to her, the one thing that makes life in the ward livable. Again, the story demonstrates the uncanniness of being-in-the-world, a human condition that can constantly be disrupted. Aho describes his personal experience in the pandemic of facing an ontological death—his previous ways of life, revolving around routines and teaching, dissolved, and as a result, so did his understanding of existence. Gumdrop has not only faced the disruption of her previous life due to TNBL but is facing the disruption of her current life and has been exposed to the latent uncanniness of being-in-the-world due to the unfamiliar presence of Olivia. This double estrangement demonstrates the effect of unpredictable change on humans, similar to the pandemic-uncanny’s demand of isolating, becoming accustomed to isolation, and integrating back into open society. Gumdrop has been isolated in the ward,
adapted to the routines and place as familiar, and is again confronted with the unfamiliar way Olivia enters the ward. Moreover, the onset of Gumdrop’s TNBL is sudden and terrifying, but she doesn’t associate it with these feelings; rather, she has adjusted TNBL to be an inconvenience and for Bradley to take precedence over any bodily crisis. When is confronted with Olivia in the ward, another disruption to her life, she then associates this with something fearful, anxiety-causing, and even life-threatening. Again, in the context of the pandemic-uncanny, this demonstrates how afterwardness works to reveal a latent truth or reality that was previously hidden. Gumdrop recognizes the trauma of disruption to being-in-the-world only after her confrontation with Olivia, the same way that many people only realize the latent fragility of their life structures and the uncontrollability of their lives after experiencing a massive, unignorable scale, such as the pandemic.

However, Gumdrop’s condition has significantly improved since she first arrived at the Bone Ward. She can stay up late without her bones turning to liquid, later than the other patients. She contemplates leaving the ward while watching TV alone at night in the lounge—the other patients asleep. Gumdrop reflects on her situation:

It’s 11:00 P.M. and my bones are still firm. I could leave the ward tomorrow, go back to New York. But that would mean giving up on Bradley completely. Though my rational mind tells me it’s hopeless, my heart clings to contradictory evidence—his insistence that there is nothing romantic between him and Olivia, and his promise to reevaluate our relationship once the album is finished. There is hope for us, my heart insists, as long as I remain on the ward. (110)
Gumdrop desperately hopes that her relationship with Bradley is not entirely over. However, she is torn between rational and hopeful thinking, two sides that exist within her and aspire for different endings. Eventually, the narrator returns to her room, realizing she must pass Olivia’s room on the way. Suddenly, Gumdrop describes,

The instant the idea occurs to me, my body reacts. Suddenly I’m moving to the back of Olivia’s pod and pulling the plug that powers the anti-gravity in one quick motion, like tearing a root from the earth. Immediately, I regret it; there is not even a moment of satisfaction, only horror at the damage I might have caused.

(111)

The narrator is shocked by her actions as they play out almost uncontrollably. Moreover, she emphasizes that “there is not even a moment of satisfaction” as the action only causes horror to arise (111). This moment is uncanny—both in the sense that Gumdrop’s body acts in an unfamiliar, strange way and by introducing the genuine possibility of death and murder. Moreover, the reader witnesses the drastic results of Gumdrop’s sense of the “evil eye”; her anxiety and projected envy have led her to do something violent and dangerous. The narrator and the reader can only hope these actions do not kill Olivia. The next day, however, Olivia does not get out of bed, and the staff and patients find her body mangled: “The whole heap of her is wet-looking, like cheese left out to sweat in the sun. My stomach turns, and I reel back instinctively. It’s the most grotesque thing I’ve ever seen” (112). This image of Olivia, at the worst stage in TNBL, is undeniably uncanny. She is described in comparison to nonhuman and not naturally existing objects, spurring disgust and fear. A horrible reversal of Olivia’s previous self is created—with her former beauty and youth absent. Olivia goes to the Iron Skeleton, a machine that the patients are
placed into when their bones no longer hold the correct form—high-pressured oxygen is blown through the pod, molding the correct shape of their bones. Through this mechanism, the story suggests a reference to the Polio pandemic and the use of iron lungs, giant respirators that patients would need for weeks or even lifetimes. In the Iron Skeleton, the patients cannot move or speak inside the Iron Skeleton, and the pain is unbearable. Despite Olivia’s situation, the other patients watch Maury as Amy returns to the show, bringing a man who turns out to be her baby’s father. Again, the normalcy of this moment—the supposed resolution of finding the baby’s father—is out of place in a hospital ward where a patient has nearly died. After the patients visit Olivia outside the Iron Skeleton, looking in on her, the narrator becomes increasingly paranoid and terrified of getting caught. She has the impression that the men have discovered her misdeed as they begin to treat her suspiciously. She describes their actions, “No one will make eye contact. I know they’ve been talking about me” (115). Consequently, the men’s actions and Gumdrop’s anxiety make her increasingly isolated and estranged in the Bone Ward. Her action—one, nearly sub-conscious, immediately regrettable act of violence—has become the thing that defines her, like how on Maury Amy has been defined by discovering the father of her baby.

However, to throw off their suspicions, the narrator stops taking her medication, hiding it within the lining of her pod. Gumdrop describes her condition: “I don’t expect it to happen so quickly. My bones soften earlier each night, and I wake to the old pain of bone tunneling through flesh” (116). Still, Gumdrop does not take her medicine, finding comfort in the fact that she is now repeating Olivia’s regression, weakening suspicions directed at her. Eventually, Gumdrop’s condition becomes so bad that she must go to the
Iron Skeleton. She describes the experience, “The Skeleton wraps me in its purr. Needles of cold, highly pressurized air pulse into me, penetrating every millimeter of my skin [...]. I remain awake, in agony, for hours that stretch into days” (118). The Skeleton is described in an almost monster-like fashion, purring and inflicting horror upon the narrator. When she emerges, the men are again treating her warmly, showing her empathy. More determined to leave—so as not to be found out and to escape the ward—she begins to double dose her medicine to fix her condition rapidly. She maintains this goal even as Bradley pursues her again, as she reflects, “I have given up on the dream of a life together beyond the ward. What I feared from the beginning was confirmed the day Olivia arrived—that given a world of women to choose from, he will never, ever choose me” (121). Gumdrop has now concluded that her hopes and desired life in the Bone Ward were never anything but a false reality. It crumbles if she tries to translate her relationship into the real world—where she is healthy and happy. Again, the narrator becomes acutely aware of the uncanniness of the human condition, as being-in-the-world is impermanent and wholly unfamiliar. Moreover, as Aho examines in the context of the pandemic, the actual stability of our everyday lifestyles is fragile. Our existence can be challenged when our sense of self is disrupted, and our lives become immersed in unfamiliarity.

After Gumdrop’s condition improves, the men ask her to hike outside since it will be the first time they have been left unattended by the Bone Ward staff. Her condition has improved, but she has not fully recovered, and soon she feels exhausted. She asks to return to the ward, but they admonish her, saying, “We want to watch the sunset” (123). Gumdrop is suddenly starkly aware of the time, the fact that her bones will start turning to liquid soon. She is horrified, knowing that she will not return to the ward before
sunset, and then, inevitably, her bones will start to melt while she is outside—a reverse vampire, a death shrouded in darkness, and puddles of flesh. With horror, she synthesizes what the men must know, describing, “Their voices are mechanical, as though they are reading from a script. I realize they must have planned this for weeks” (123). They are characterized uncannily as “mechanical,” demonstrating the new unfamiliarity with the men, the strangeness of their words, and the revelation of the truth that they were concealing the whole time. Gumdrop’s legs buckle, and she cannot run or even walk. Around her, the men began to take their leave, spurring the realization in the narrator: “They will murder me by walking away” (125). As Gumdrop is left alone, her bones quickly turn to liquid. The story ends, as the narrator says,

The coyotes howl closer now. The wind raises whorls of dirt, filling my open mouth with tiny stones. My lungs suck against themselves. My heart struggles to fill its chambers. Darkness, silence, a pit without walls. Into the void of the boneless night, I fall. (124)

At the end of the story, the narrator is not only at the mercy of the men who leave her but also at the mercy of her own body. Although illness itself—and being unable to control one’s body effectively—is already uncanny, it is exacerbated in this story by both the process of TNBL and the deathly result of such an illness. Being ill forces humans to face the uncanny truth that they never possessed complete control over their body or fate in the first place. Similar to the presentation of the unfamiliar that Munar and Doering examine regarding the lack of control over the body when experiencing an illness such as COVID-19. The unfamiliarity regarding our bodies is latent, something increasingly noticeable in times of sickness or frustration with the body’s abilities—but made clear
through the experience of the pandemic-uncanny. The understanding of the uncertainty of our bodies and their controllability, to an extent, is vital. In this story, the unfamiliar body has not only uncovered an always-present lack of control but also produced a terrible result of death.

“Moist House”

The uncanny occurs throughout the collection through estrangement from body and place and defamiliarization. Similar to “The Bone Ward,” the story “Moist House” investigates not only the uncanny body but also the uncanny place. “Moist House” revolves around a middle-aged man, Karl, who moves into a new house requiring lotion moisturization. As the story progresses, the protagonist becomes increasingly obsessed with applying lotion to the house—with the house’s dryness and need for moisture soon mirrored in his physical appearance. The uncanny creation of an animate house breaks the understanding of what humans believe to be animate and inanimate objects. This house is characterized as needing physical care and attention, and it will harm the owner if it does not receive these.

The story, told in third-person limited, focuses primarily on the character, Karl. The story begins with Karl meeting a landlord named Franco, whose father knows his mother. Karl desperately needs a house to stay in, and Franco offers for him to stay, free of charge, in a house that needs moisture. Karl considers this the chance of a lifetime, but Franco corrects him, saying, “I am hiring you to care for the house that needs moisture” (163). Immediately, both Karl and the reader assume that this house does not require moisture in a literal sense. However, Franco then proceeds to give Karl a half-used gallon of lotion, emphasizing, “The house is accustomed to this type of lotion […] . It will stave
off the worst of the dryness, but you must apply it many times daily […]. In fact, you must apply the lotion almost constantly” (164). Franco’s explanation of the house characterizes it as something alive—emphasizing its needs and preferences. This moment introduces the uncanny into the text, specifically through the ambiguity as to the animate/inanimate status of the house.

Karl travels to the house’s remote location, visiting a grocery store to buy provisions. He approaches the house, as the narrator describes the exterior, “It was indeed a perfect cube. Its exterior was whitewashed […]. The door was painted red, like a mouth with lipstick. Karl was charmed by the house’s simplicity. It was like a drawing he might have made as a child” (166). Immediately, the house description identifies seemingly familiar and unfamiliar aspects. Karl can recognize the shape as something he would draw as a child, but the house shares characteristics with something living, “like a mouth with lipstick” and as if the entrance was to a human body itself. When entering the house, the narrator describes its interior: “The door opened with a shucking sound, like the lid peeling from a vacuum-sealed container. The interior air of the house was thick and yeasty, forming a second skin on his face” (166). Karl’s first encounter with the house is, again, one of strangeness and unfamiliarity—faced with a house whose environment differs from the known. Uncanny houses and homes are a familiar trope of the uncanny, as something once familiar becomes unfamiliar. The uncanniness of this home mirrors the experience of the pandemic-uncanny, as Huskinson describes in her article “Uncanny Places.” Karl is faced with a house that does not align with his previous understanding of what a house is and its inevitably inanimate nature. Similarly, the pandemic’s mandated isolation to the home created a sense of entrapment and claustrophobia for many, as they
lost the autonomy of travel and socialization. Karl similarly fell victim to the moist
house’s entrapment, feeling a distortion of time when inside and having fleeting anxiety
about having to return and remain there.

Soon, Karl notices water droplets forming on the walls touched by the sun—and
only the areas touched by the sun—wiping them away, thinking the house appears moist
rather than dry. However, that night, Karl dreams the house is speaking to him, crying out
due to dryness. The narrator relates Karl’s dream: “Karl dreamed the house was speaking
to him. ‘Dry,’ it said, again and again, until it screamed the word, and he woke” (167-
168). This dream sequence is both frightening and uncanny to the reader and Karl—as,
again, the idea that a house is alive and can communicate is emphasized. Moreover, the
ability of the house’s voice to permeate Karl’s dreams adds a threatening and
supernatural aspect to its characterization. When he wakes, Karl sees that the walls are no
longer wet but incredibly dry and flaky. The narrator describes the dryness, “In some
places the dryness looked painfully deep, tinged red like scraped skin” (168). Again, the
house is humanized, having a similar appearance to “scraped skin,” something entirely
uncanny (168). Carl tries to reason that this dryness is not the result of a living house but
may be a “novel form of mold” (168). Karl tries to fit the house’s characterizations into
his prior schema of understanding—unsuccessfully attempting to integrate the unfamiliar
into the familiar. Despite his denial of the house’s true nature, he sees no harm in
applying lotion to the walls to fix the problem and does so. The house’s smooth walls,
post-moisturizing, remind Karl of his thirty-eight-year-old age. Reflecting on his recent
past, he briefly describes an affair with Tatiana, a twenty-two-year-old receptionist, the
balkanization of his marriage, the loss of his career after a decade, and his current
situation. He claims that the fault of the affair falls entirely on Tatiana, referring to her as “the aggressor” of the relationship, bitter that she had filed a complaint against him with their workplace HR and exposed his actions online (169). Tatiana’s desires were too burdensome for Karl, a woman who demanded the impossible. The organic reflection taking place here—regarding Karl’s most recent, unsuccessful relationship—is juxtaposed with the uncanny doubling of his new relationship with the house.

Karl begins to find a routine for putting lotion on the house. The narrator describes his routine: “As he rubbed, he felt the wall warm to his touch. The house seemed to purr around him” (170). Similarly to the Iron Skeleton in “The Bone Ward,” the house is described as “purring,” as if it is creaturely alive—and as a result, monster-like due to its lack of cohesion with reality. However, this process of lubrication is filled with sexual undertones and is an intimate process between Karl and the moist house.

While in the house, Karl develops a disinterest in the world outside. Instead, he prioritizes “the house’s needs,” placing them above his own (170). The narrator describes his thought process:

The house’s needs, meanwhile, were tangible and immediate. Karl kept telling himself, just one more wall, but he could hardly moisten one wall without moistening the wall that adjoined it. By the time he’d applied lotion to all four walls and arrived at the original one, that wall had gone dry again. (170-171)

Karl is becoming increasingly obsessed with caring for this house, seemingly forgetting his wants and needs. The house’s needs were simplistic and focused—the moisture is gone and there, Freud’s fort-da game of the pleasure principle in action, the house consuming his life. Soon, however, Karl runs out of lotion. At this realization, Karl
realizes the isolation he has been in since moving to the house, as the narrator divulges, “How had he been seduced into endless moistening, as though he were an automaton?” (172). Again, the house exists as if it is living, considered similarly to how Karl judged his previous relationships. Karl reaches out to Franco, attempting to move to a new house; however, Franco responds, “You don’t belong in any of the other houses. You’re committed to this house […]. It would be better to abandon the house entirely than to accept its shelter while refusing to provide the moisture that it needs” (172). Here, Franco’s comments uncannily appear to have a double meaning; they apply to the house and a romantic partner. The direct connection between the two alludes to the fact that Karl is in an intimate relationship with the house.

Karl soon discovers the lotion he has been using is far beyond his budget—costing $233—and instead, he looks for cheaper options at the grocery store. The same cashier present on a previous visit reveals she is familiar with the house, suggesting the use of cooking oils as moisturizers. Although he had believed her to be rude on the first trip, she now offers him the oils free of cost. Karl dives into a memory of his past involving his mother and her feminist reading group. He grew up with these women—was loved and doted on by them—and firmly held the same beliefs. However, when Karl reached puberty, they began to reject him since he was unavoidably different from them—a man. The narrator describes, “Suddenly he was an intruder, their enemy” (174). The place and people Karl considered familiar, reliable, and comforting have become estranged as his body changes. Moreover, this truth was always present, lurking beneath the cover of childhood. In response to this isolation, Karl begins to make extravagant displays of his masculinity—cutting his hair, playing sports, drinking milk from the jug—
eventually making him hate himself, killing his soul in the process. The story briefly alludes to Karl’s past and previous encounters with the uncanniness of being-in-the-world, briefly referring to an experience where his ontological understanding of himself was challenged. As Aho’s examination and application of Heidegger’s *being-in-the-world* demonstrates, human existence is tied to our understanding of ourselves and how we interact with the world. Karl’s understanding of himself was challenged when he became estranged from his mother’s reading group and again when his life crumbled in the aftermath of his affair. Similar to the *afterwardness* of the pandemic-uncanny and the latent trauma humanity experienced through the shattering of their everyday lives, the latent trauma in Karl’s life surfaced when the desires of women repeatedly demanded more and more of him. The genuine destruction of former lifestyles, in the narrative and as a result of the pandemic-uncanny reveals the integrated uncanniness of human existence.

Karl hurries back to the house equipped with the cooking oils and new painting tools from a hardware store, eager to work on moisturizing the house. On his return, the narrator describes:

"Upon entering, he found the walls retained little of the moisture he’d left them with. The morning calm had fractured into a sharp wind that made the house groan, heightening his sense that it was suffering, and that he was the only one who could soothe it. (175)"

Karl feels a responsibility and a connection to the house. He has identified himself as the only possible caretaker of the seemingly alive place. He quickly applies the olive oil to one side of the house and the coconut oil to the other, convinced that it will be a
successful moisturizer. After falling asleep, Karl jars awake the next day, hearing a high-pitched ringing in his ears. The house has cracks and blisters on its walls, with identical ones covering Karl’s body. The narrator describes Karl’s appearance:

Karl was so shocked by the sight, he was slow to register sensation on his own body. His skin felt tight and hot, like a bad sunburn. His lips were crusted with dryness, and when he darted his tongue out to wet them, his bottom lip cracked, filling his mouth with the taste of blood. (176)

The house has now begun to affect Karl’s physical health and well-being, having an eerie connection to his body’s state. The house here is becoming increasingly like an uncanny place, precisely like a haunted house, able to cause mayhem and pain. Karl asks the house, “There, does that feel better?” as he applies more lotion to its irritated surface (177). The relationship between Karl and the moist house grows increasingly intimate as if the house is alive and human, able to be Karl’s romantic partner—lubricating its walls and speaking gently. When he was in a relationship with his wife—specifically at the beginning of their marriage—Karl was attentive, kind, and nurturing. These traits begin to resurface while Karl tends to the house. As Karl applies the lotion, he watches the cracks on the walls heal in unison with the blisters on his skin. Again, this demonstrates a new, horrifying connection between the house and Karl’s physical body—Karl must care for the house if he wants to avoid harm. The uncanny house is becoming increasingly terrifying and unfamiliar, and Karl develops an anxiety over the house’s ability to harm him. As Huskinson has described, places—including the home, became warped and unfamiliar due to the COVID-19 pandemic and quarantine. Places previously familiar and cozy, such as cafes, restaurants, boutiques, and corporate stores, became dangerous.
The house also began to morph into something more sinister, feeling claustrophobic and confined. However, this presentation of the uncanny demonstrates a truth that was always hidden, the strangeness and uncontrollable characteristics of places of comfort, such as homes and familiar cities. The pandemic-uncanny exposed the fragile reality that these places always have this dark nature lurking underneath the surface. The experience of this monsterization of home and place during the pandemic is astutely exposed beforehand through the characterization of the moist house.

Another story in the collection that explores the idea of a living house or a “monster house” is “The House’s Beating Heart.” This story describes a literal translation of the living body overlaid onto a house and its rooms—again introducing an uncanny place through the ambiguity of a house’s animate/inanimate status. The story closely follows a group of roommates who discover that the house they are living in has a heartbeat. They search room to room, identifying the lungs, the stomach, the kidneys, and other organs in the human body. The home becomes unfamiliar in its life-like state, and the roommates ultimately destroy its “heart” to destroy the lack of cohesion with previous understandings of house animation regarding being alive/unalive. The uncanny place is again presented as a haunted house—resonating with the “Moist House” by applying the characteristics of something living rather than not living, creating an authentic experience of the uncanny and how it presents itself.

In “Moist House,” after several weeks, Karl realizes he can use his entire body to coat the walls in lotion, rubbing his body on the walls and becoming aroused. The house has consumed all of his life and attention. Months after arriving at the house, Karl sees his wife’s face through the window and is horrified. He has not spoken to her in six
months. He becomes sharply aware of her gaze and the state of the house: “He was suddenly aware of the room’s smell, thick with his body odors, his semen and sweat and oily scalp, along with the faintly gluey odor of the otherwise unscented lotion” (179). However, as his wife begins to speak—explaining that she has talked to his mom, misses him, and wants him to come home—the house stops purring, demonstrating to Karl its displeasure with the woman’s presence (180). Despite his wife’s pleading to return to Paso Robles, Karl maintains that he has to stay with the house to keep its walls moist. His wife pleads, “I’m not leaving you here. Karl, you’re scaring me! [...] Forget the house! Just leave it” (181). Simultaneously, the skin on his body tightens with dryness, and the narrator points out Karl’s realization: “If the house suffered, so would he” (181). Karl reflects on his past relationships again and does not want to disappoint the house in his current relationship. While reflecting on his wife’s visit, Karl cannot remember if her car was in the driveway. This realization introduces another form of the human/nonhuman sense of the uncanny, as Karl begins to question the humanness—even realness—of his wife. The possibility of an apparition or uncontrollable hallucination continues to structure the paranormal presentation of the uncanny throughout this story. He has to question the house’s animation and the animated identity of anyone who approaches the house.

Similarly to his wife, Karl’s mom appears outside the house and tries to convince him to return home—the first time he has seen her in six years. Karl looks for her car this time but only sees his own. He does not respond to her questioning and pleading, instead ignoring her. Only after a while does he turn around to check that his mother has gone. Again, the house reacts to the apparition, disrupting the rhythm of its purring. Karl’s
dedication to the house’s care is reinvigorated, and two months later, Tatiana visits Karl. She is crying outside, but he ignores her as the narrator divulges to the reader the details of the affair—sneaking around during his wife’s absences. Tatiana confronts Karl with the reality of their relationship, its ending, and its emotional impact on the two of them. Angry and hurt, Karl is tempted to leave the house to go outside and see her.

However, the narrator describes this moment: “He backed away from the window, appalled by his weakness. This was not the real Tatiana. The house was testing his devotion. He’d dispatched his wife and mother easily, but this time, he’d nearly capitulated” (185). He had been tested in the past and failed, so now he refuses to disappoint the house. The visiting women—presumably apparitions—are described as having expressions of “malevolence” and “malice” at Karl’s recognition of them. The repetition and evil intent layered throughout these visits add to the uncanniness of the house and Karl’s experience, as he is isolated, combative, and unsure of what is reality and what is not. After the conclusion of this final visit, Karl resigns himself to his fate: “Karl knew he had proven himself. He was alone with the house that needed moisture. No—the house that was always moist, now that he was its partner” (186). Again, the narrator compares the house to a partner, to a house in need of sexual satisfaction and lubrication; the women’s visits juxtapose Karl’s previous intimate relationships and his current relationship with the house. After facing his past actions, habits, and lack of focus toward the women in his life, he is determined to prove his dedication to the house. To adapt, Karl has developed a new understanding of his life and existence—he dedicates himself to the house, confined to it and tending to its needs. The pandemic-uncanny exposed the need for new lifestyles, routines, and fundamental changes in how humans
understand and interact with the world, similar to Karl’s realization about himself and his relationships. Although his choice is made with good intentions, it does not positively impact his life.

The story ends five years later with Karl working to moisten the house—not having any “visitors” since Tatiana. After moisturizing for ten hours, he slips and falls off a ladder, breaking a part of his spine, and is unable to call for help. As Karl lies on the ground, dryness overcomes his body, the narrator explaining, “The pain was annihilating, yet Karl’s only regret was that in the end, he had not been able to provide the house with the moisture it needed” (187). Months after this, Franco, the landlord, feels dryness on his skin and decides to check on the house; he has been “…happy for Karl, and the house, which had been so particular in choosing its mate” (187). When he opens the door, he finds Karl’s “desiccated corpse” lying in the center of the room, while the walls of the house, however, are “unblemished, perfectly moist” (187). An uncanny place is created—the deadly moist house—that essentially forces a codependent relationship onto its human caretaker. The house is personified as a woman, who demands more and more, asking for everything, and is only satisfied once she has killed the man. Even when Karl dies, unable to care for the house anymore, the house continues to harbor Karl’s body until Franco finds it. Their relationship appears as something inseparable, confined to the house.
Chapter Four

*Bliss Montage: The Uncanny Return*

*Bliss Montage* is a collection of short stories written by Ling Ma that explores the intricacies of people’s lives, romantic and platonic relationships, and the experiences of loneliness and estrangement. The phrase “bliss montage” is initially used for film, as reviewer Molly McGinnis explains: “In film, a bliss montage is a set of quick-succession images aimed at building a visual fantasy” (McGinnis). With this definition, the reading of the stories in this collection becomes increasingly uncanny, introduced through the dissonance between what a “bliss montage” is and the actual experiences of the characters in the stories. Her stories—rather than being filled with bliss or a desired fantasy—demonstrate narratives where her characters are struggling, lonely, and sometimes in peril. Mood, detailed characterization, and voice fully demonstrate the uncanny experience in her stories. The experience provided through the collection mimics the hidden uncanny that existed during their production, made obvious through the exposure of the pandemic-uncanny. Four of the eight stories were published in other formats before being published in the collection *Bliss Montage* in 2022, although three of the four were still published in the year 2022.

*“Los Angeles”*

The story “Los Angeles,” published initially in *Granta* on November 9, 2015, relates the experience of a narrator who lives in a Los Angeles house with her husband, children, and one hundred ex-boyfriends. The story explores the daily life of the narrator, as well as the history of her relationships and how they continue to have a presence in her life. Two of her ex-boyfriends stand out among the rest: Aaron and Adam. The story
carefully leaves out the names of her family and only mentions the names of her other boyfriends in passing. She refers to most characters by their relationship to the character (i.e., the Husband, the Daughter, the Son) or their characteristics (i.e., Short, Tall). The sense of the weird—specifically the uncanny—begins with this out-of-the-norm representation of the narrator’s relationships. The boyfriends in this story strongly allude to the uncanny experience of ghosts—even death—as they represent previous relationships that have ended or essentially died.

One of the most substantial presentations of the uncanny throughout this story is the use of doubles—creating doubles for the narrator and her relationship. She can see her old apartment complex and the girl who lives in her old studio from the house. She reflects on this: “Another girl lives in my studio now. In T-shirt and slip, she drinks a glass of juice, stands hunched over the sink in the kitchen that I painted seafoam green. It is three in the morning, it is three in the afternoon” (Ma 3). The uncanniness of this moment demonstrates not only the growing estrangement of the narrator from herself and her past but also derealization as time moves out of chronological order. She then summarizes her everyday events with her 100 ex-boyfriends—they ride in her Porsche and order food at shopping malls. However, she focuses on two ex-boyfriends, Aaron and Adam, who do not speak or interact with the rest.

The narrator switches the focus to The Husband, who works at an investment firm. She can recognize his arrival home from the sound of ice clinking in a glass and bourbon pouring. The Husband only speaks in money—literal dollar and cent signs. The narrator refers to The Husband’s role: “The Husband is a resting place. He is a chair” (5). In the most literal sense, The Husband is a depersonalized figure—he does not exist
outside his role. She needs him the most in the early evenings when it feels like she is
dissolving and when her 100 ex-boyfriends scatter; at these times, she and The Husband
leave, taking the timeshare jet to have dinner (5). At a restaurant they go to, the narrator
sees a couple who looks exactly like The Husband and herself, years in the future. Again,
there is a doubling of the narrator, and in this case, The Husband, as well, as an uncanny
depiction of the future. During the meal, the older woman leans over and says to her with
her hand on her wrist, “You will produce beautiful children” (6). However, to the reader,
she describes the children she already has, explaining, “I have one son and one daughter,
one gang-bangingly after the other” (6). This introduction of her children is not warm and
familiar but rather cold and estranged. The children look and behave like The Husband,
proper and obedient. She describes her ex-boyfriends’ relationship with the kids,
explaining they take turns teaching them new things—music, math, and games. She again
stresses the significance of two, Adam and Aaron: “Aaron because I was in love, Adam
because he beat me” (7).

These men are pivotal relationships that have contributed to the narrator’s current
experience of the world and relationships. Recounting her abuse with Adam—the
suffering, the reading of domestic abuse books—the narrator remembers Adam’s
insecure questions about her love, reciting, “How do I know, Adam once asked before he
struck me, if what you feel is real? And not something you felt for everyone else that
came before? And everyone that will come after?” (7-8). The story has begun to
defamiliarize how humans establish relationships and the understanding that love forms
in different places and times. The second story in the collection, “Oranges,” returns to the
concept of an abusive boyfriend named Adam. Both “Adams” serve as the “first man,”
introducing the narrators to particularly abusive relationships—and the following men, serving as an echo of this relationship, fundamentally copies. However, it is unclear to the reader if the narrator of this story is the same as the narrator in the previous story. Nonetheless, doubling occurs through the characterization of another woman who has suffered abuse, and the narrator realizes that she wants retribution. The story chronicles countless doubles of the situation—women who have dated this Adam and experienced assault, and also his current relationship. Despite both narrators’ estrangement from their abuse, at the sight of Adam, they experience a disruption in their lives, immediately reminded of the past.

This reflection of the past is then juxtaposed with the present as the narrator and The Husband return to their house, where she retreats to the guest cabin for the night. Their isolation and the transparency of their relationship as one of mutual need, again, conflicts with the established human understanding of love, marriage, and relationships. The impermanence of the human experience is investigated—specifically regarding relationships, homes, and understanding of the self. Aho’s investigation of existence and uncanny revelation of the human condition of being-in-the-world during the COVID-19 pandemic narrates an experience of estrangement from oneself, others, and lifestyles.

After some time, somebody knocks on the door—Aaron. He asks the narrator to drive him someplace, determined to move out, declaring, “You can’t say you didn’t expect this […]. Everyone’s overstay[ed]” (9). The house’s strangeness, where 100 ex-boyfriends live with their ex-girlfriend and her established family, is emphasized again. The house, the atmosphere, the relationships are uncanny. Reluctantly, the narrator gets into the Porsche with Aaron as he directs her where he wants to go. She reflects on
familiar places she sees as they drive—the grocery stores they used to frequent, his old apartment, and the Taqueria where they first met on the first date. That first day, Aaron had taken her to what he called a “strip mall mosque”—where two minarets stood outside a strip mall, standing out as an uncanny reminder of the past. The narrator describes the mall in the present: “Since then they tore down the strip mall too […]. The minarets still preside over the place, silent” (11). The minarets directly double the presence of the narrator’s 100 ex-boyfriends in the house. Their relationships have been “torn down,” essentially have died, but their presence still permeates her house. She considers the love she feels for Aaron—for all her ex-boyfriends—and their insecurity about whether it was real or not. After breaking up seven years ago, she says goodbye to Aaron at the international airport. Again, a situation is created that emphasizes the uncanniness of the story—as the narrator says goodbye to Aaron years after the end of their relationship. Mirroring appears repeatedly throughout the story—mirroring the main character, mirroring her relationships—to demonstrate self-estrangement and unfamiliarity. Now, she is saying goodbye to her boyfriend despite having “said goodbye” to their intimate relationship years earlier, and as a result, demonstrating the uncanny lingering under the surface of human existence, made apparent through the experience of the pandemic-uncanny.

The narrator begins a countdown, listing, “99 ex-boyfriends. Then 59. Then 29. Then 9. They move out. They get jobs. They get married” (13). Slowly, the men leave while sending her Christmas cards of their new families before finally cutting off contact. A few ex-boyfriends remain scattered and out of sight; the back wing of their house, where they reside, is dusty, stagnant, and rundown. The house is a strange and uncanny
place as the narrator navigates the maze-like setup of over 100 rooms. She hears a faint noise and begins searching, and behind door forty-nine, she finds The Husband sitting in an old armchair. She confesses to the reader that recently, she has not seen him, now appearing aged, with silver in his hair. He is weeping, speaking in cent signs, and the narrator tries to ask why he never called out for her. The narrator reveals their relationship originated through the website “LoweredExpectations.com” (15). On her profile, the narrator wrote, “I want to know someone for longer than a few years”—looking for contact and constancy (15). In the present, The Husband begins extensive sentences of “$” speech again, causing the narrator to reflect, “He speaks quickly, with the conviction of righteousness. The truth, when it finally hits you, sounds a lot like a slot machine hitting the jackpot” (16). Again, The Husband is characterized as inhumane—while comparing their conversation to the workings of a casino game and the preprogrammed noise it makes. As a result, the charged emotions are stripped out of their speech.

The doorbell rings and continues to ring, with two police officers waiting at the door—Tall and Short—looking for a perpetrator in a domestic assault case. They show the narrator a picture of Adam, and she identifies him as an ex-boyfriend. They ask if he had ever assaulted her, and she reveals he has, ten years ago. They tell her the statute of limitations to prosecute him has passed, to which she responds, exasperated, “Then why did you make me tell you?” as flashes of the abuse flit through her mind (17). The narrator’s anger and frustration when confronted with her past arises, forced to recognize it after estranging herself from it for so long. The Husband, The Son, and The Daughter flock to the door, where The Son reveals that he saw Adam a few seconds ago. The
narrator is restless to find Adam herself but lets the police officers enter the home at their insistence.

Nonetheless, she clings to her connection to Adam, emphasizing, “But he’s my ex-boyfriend” (17). The two have a connection that the narrator refuses to let go of—the death of their past relationship. She is determined to find Adam herself. The Son and The Daughter go running, followed closely by the narrator—the kids smashing the house in their path. They “punch through” the door that leads to the back wing, continuing to run with the narrator yelling (18). She reflects, “The kids are running after him. I am running after them. The Husband is running after me. The LAPD are running after we. We are running after he” (18). This wordplay identifies the strangeness of the event, as well as the circularity of it. The structure of grammatically correct English is warped into something unfamiliar as the narrator attempts to describe the strange events in the story. There is an uncanny chase, with each character running for a different reason but ultimately for the same result. After running around the house, following the children this and that way, the narrator is now outside. As she runs, her shirt snags on trees and her shoes fill with pebbles, cutting the soles of her feet. She is running, she is screaming. However, when she stops, the narrator describes,

When I blink and my vision clarifies, I see, in the distance, a single windowpane of light with a girl inside. She’s standing in her kitchen in El Paraiso, barefoot in a summer dress. It’s Friday night. She is going out. She is putting on her shoes, her jacket. She gazes out the window, and for a brief, implausible moment, I could swear that she is looking at me. Then she switches off the lights. (19)
In her kitchen, this woman doubles the narrator again—similarly to the young woman referred to at the beginning of the story, living in the same place that the narrator previously did. The story creates a double, an increasingly uncanny double that looks directly at the narrator as she pursues her ex-boyfriend and, consequently, her past. Much of the narrator’s understanding of herself is connected directly to her past relationships and the existence of her past self. The narrator’s new awareness of the latent uncanniness of being-in-the-world parallels the disruption of routines and questioning of human existence exposed by the pandemic-uncanny.

The narrator sees Adam—his body, face, hair, and eyes—describing, “I know his breath as if it were my own, I know his hands, with their worn knuckles, as if they were my own” (20). Another presentation of the uncanny via depersonalization is ingrained in the narrator’s characterization of her and Adam’s features. Despite this impossibility, the narrator feels intimately close to Adam’s physiology as if it were her own. The two of them stand unmoving as she becomes acutely aware that they are alone, that she is vulnerable, but she still yells for him to stop. The chase begins again, the narrator not knowing what she will do when she catches him but desperately wanting to reach him:

But I am close enough that I can see the goosebumps on the backs of his arms, and it isn’t until I am this close that I realize how much I want to catch him. I really, really want to catch him. I want to masticate him with my teeth. I want to barf on him and coat him in my stinging acids. I want to unleash a million babies inside him and burden him with their upbringing. (20)

The narrator reveals to the reader intimate, previously unrealized desires. The divulging of these fantasies conflicts with her prior actions—amicably living with Adam in her
house and associating with him calmly. Still, the reader and the narrator realize these desires have always existed. They are an uncanny presentation of the feelings she has tried to estrange herself from regarding her past relationship with Adam. However, at this moment, the narrator has seen him again, as the abuser she once faced, and she cannot unsee him or what he has done to her. The narrator chases Adam towards the road—a cacophony of love songs bursting from the cars—and she can almost touch his shirt, feeling his warmth and scent. He jumps beyond her reach as she realizes, “But I am close. I am so, so close” (21). To the reader, the narrator has begun to come to terms with a truth that previously was not determinable, a hallmark of the uncanny. This story is about the revelation of something not immediately evident to the narrator—or even explicitly determinable by the reader. The narrator is in a strained relationship, negotiating the longing for and memories of her ex-boyfriends with the current, stable, but merely transactional relationship with her husband. Nonetheless, she continues her pursuit of both, trying to chase what she wants when her emotions are being spread increasingly thin. “Los Angeles” narrates the presentation of the uncanny, particularly in conversation with the instability of lifestyles, relationships, and self-understanding exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. A truth that was always present, lurking in the home, is exposed.

“Returning”

Similar to “Los Angeles,” the story “Returning” presents the experience of the uncanny through place and atmosphere, specifically through the desire to return. In the context of the pandemic-uncanny, we see the impossibility of a perfect return to an unchanged past and the inevitable defamiliarization of places and people that were once familiar. The story “Returning” focuses on a married couple’s trip to “Garboza,” the
husband’s home country, to participate in a festival focused on rebirth and recreation of oneself. The wife has been having an affair emotionally, intellectually, and physically with a man she went to college with—and the story follows the development of this new relationship parallel to the disintegration of the relationship with her husband. She is someone who has struggled with depersonalization, self-estrangement, and defamiliarization with her life and the people surrounding her frequently, which impacts her relationships and self-care. The festival in Garboza revolves around a ritual of burying those in need of change and healing in the ground and unearthing them the following day to find them either dead or altered for the better. The husband in this story is determined to partake in this festival, while the wife is left mostly bewildered about the reason for the trip and their participation.

The story begins with the narrator, shaken awake after her plane lands in Garboza. Instantly, she realizes her husband, Peter, is not on the plane with her—that he has already left his seat. The last thing she can recall is falling asleep during the safety presentation as she reflects, “In case of a crash, I thought, as the Ambien took effect, my husband would put the oxygen mask on me. He would inflate my seat cushion for me. We’d reconcile our marriage in the face of a catastrophe” (88). The reader is introduced to the relationship of these two characters and the state of their marriage, simultaneously comparing the saving of a relationship with the saving of someone’s life. When she disembarks the plane, the narrator sees that Peter is not at the exit—and is nowhere in sight. A sign above her says, “THERE ARE NO STRANGERS IN GARBOZA,” written in English (88). The airport itself is reminiscent of communist architecture, gray and blocky. The terminals, baggage claims, and restrooms are all written in what the narrator
describes as “Cyrillic-like Garbonese” (88). However, she explains, “But what struck me was the absence of identifiable brands. No Starbucks, no Hudson News, no duty-free shops with cartons of YSL cigarettes, Davidoff perfume” (88). The narrator has a previous schema associated with how airports appear and what they contain. However, this Garbozan airport is wholly unfamiliar from her prior understanding and experience with airports and begins the creation of an uncanny atmosphere in Garboza. The narrator is visiting her husband’s home country—Garboza—where he is from the capital—also called Garboza—and the lack of familiarity leaves her utterly estranged and confused. When introduced to Garboza, she is thrown into an unfamiliar place, challenging her previous understanding of airports, stores, and communities. An airport becomes something strange and eerie—similar to the airports photographed and described by Munar and Doering, vacant and unfamiliar due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The strange scene of the airport reminds the narrator of a visit to an art museum with Peter, where he had wept uncontrollably in front of a Brueghel painting. Now, seeing Garboza in the present, she understands that it looks exactly like a Brueghel painting—the familiarity of it in a place so unlike his home ignited an emotional response. The narrator circles the airport, looking at the different stores, walking to the customs area, and circling back, searching for her husband. He held both their passports and visas, so it would be strange for him to leave her at the airport.

When reaching the original gate she exited from, the narrator asks an attendant, Serk, for help. He responds skeptically—confused as to why she wants him to call her husband’s name over the intercom. The root of his skepticism appears to come from the fact that she is unfamiliar—asking her if she is from Garboza. She reveals her American
identity and explains Peter’s Garbozan citizenship. Although Serk is satisfied with this connection to the country, he corrects the Americanized “Peter” to the Garbonese “Petru” (90). A unique form of doubling begins here—creating an unfamiliar double of the narrator’s husband, demonstrating two identities within the same person. The stories in this collection, particularly this story, challenge familiar immigrant narratives and representations in literature to demonstrate the complexity of these experiences in reality. All three main characters are children of immigrant parents, and the doubling of their characters demonstrates the dynamics of their identity and the mistaken interpretations and representations some immigrant narratives produce. After producing an alternative name, the narrator confesses to Serk that Peter and she intend to visit the Morning Festival, although she knows little about the festival and the country. Serk reveals, “We receive so few tourists nowadays. You are brave to come” (90). Serk allows a glimpse of an unsettling reality of this festival and this country—that it is a place you must be “brave” to visit. As she’s confused and anxious, Serk hurriedly tells the narrator to go to the airport’s café and that he will call over the intercom for her husband to meet her there.

The story is told both in the present and as a reflection of the past. At this point in the story, the narrator begins reflecting on her marriage and life before the trip—how recently her husband has been gone a lot, leaving her alone. She describes her excitement and energy towards domesticity at the beginning of their marriage and the growing emptiness forming in his recent absence due to work. One night, alone, she takes a long walk to an informal college reunion—a small gathering of friends. When arriving at the host, Y’s house, the party is filled with her peers, adults in their mid-30s, some who had brought their children, and some who were just drinking and socializing. The narrator
almost mistakenly gives a toddler, who runs to her side, a cocktail. She confesses to the
mother that she does not have children and that she and Peter are focusing on buying a
home, emphasizing the “linear narrative of marriage, house, baby” (93). Y intervenes,
taking the abandoned cocktail and dumping it out, making a Negroni for the narrator,
something she liked in college. However, the narrator believes Y has confused her with
the other Asian student and their comparative literature department, Bethany Wu, due to
the unfamiliarity of the drink. This sense of unfamiliarity—and a doubling, mistaken
identity caused by merging the identity of two Asian students—introduces the narrator’s
doubling as she splits between two relationships. This depiction inherently contributes to
the uncanny as it is present throughout the story. The narrator accepts the drink
nonetheless, finding its unfamiliarity refreshing and reminiscent of what she liked in the
past.

Later that evening, the narrator finds a copy of *Arrival Fallacy* at her home—Y’s
graphic novel that they had discussed at the party. She falls asleep after re-reading the
ending; her husband enters the room, trying not to wake her, but recognizable from his
smell and his whispers. The sense of familiarity that the narrator possesses in the
reflection soon changes to unfamiliarity in the present. The narrator shifts to a reflection
on the beginning of her marriage, considering her devotion to domesticity—making
Peter’s morning coffee and grocery shopping for the freshest ingredients. She becomes
bewildered during the story’s progression from a role of domestic duty, unable to engage
in these acts of domesticity with vigor.

Turning to *Arrival Fallacy*, the narrator explains the graphic novel's plot. The
story takes place in a future where a space crew has identified a twin planet to Earth,
exploring this planet and its probability of sustaining humans. Their trip originated from a mission to find alternative places to live due to Earth’s economic disparity and climate crisis. When the crew returns to Earth after their trip, they discover that the company that employed them has gone bankrupt, and there are no records of their mission despite them being gone for 200 years. The narrator describes the crew’s situation: “No one is expecting them, and their wives and children have long since passed” (98). In response, the government officials who greet them question, “Who asked you to do this? What made you even want to take on this responsibility?” (98). The novel revolves around a doubling as the crew visits a planet that is uncannily similar to Earth. *Arrival Fallacy* they are defamiliarized from the Earth as they are welcomed back to a place that has no record of their mission, their existence, or appreciation for their mission. The crew leaves believing they will make a difference in their world and create impactful change for the future. Instead, when they return, they receive a hostile, frustrated welcome. The use of a fictional novel occurs three times, with three distinct fictional novels in “Returning,” each in conversation with the experience of the uncanny presented in the story. The device of an unreal story within a story is uncanny; a doubling of text, presented to the reader as both real and unreal, real within the story and a real idea, but not real outside of the story. Through these fictional novels, the concept of “returning” to a place, to a past, and the utter impossibility of a perfect return are investigated through these pieces. “Returning” exposes the flaws in wanting to “return,” similar to the flaws Aho identifies in the COVID-19 pandemic and post-pandemic expectations.

In the present, the narrator hears Peter’s name called over the intercom as Petru. She waits at the airport café, ordering a cake with red fruit filling, a slice of pink Jell-O,
and selecting a teabag that she believes is chamomile. As she sits down at a table, the flight attendant from the plane joins her. The attendant inquires about Peter, and the narrator explains that she has never been here before and is bewildered as to where her husband could have gone. The attendant decisively tells her, “He is here or not here” (99). The attendant begins to discuss the Morning Festival—that in Garbonese, “morning” and “night” are the same word, so morning festival or night festival are interchangeable. At this moment, the narrator realizes her tea is not chamomile but a smoky, hay-like flavor.

The attendant continues explaining that the festival happens both morning and night since the participants are buried at night and uncovered in the morning. Before this discussion, the narrator understood the festival as an event where participants write personal resolutions on paper at night, burning them in a communal bonfire in the hopes that they will come true by morning. The attendant stresses, “If you’re sick and have no choices […], then you do it” (100). Participants must be specific in their desires for the festival to work. Not all participants survive the night buried in the ground—there is always a risk of death. At this moment, the narrator takes a bite of what she thought was Jell-O, turning out to be some kind of head cheese. Peter is spotted by the attendant, walking across a bridge outside, heading towards the town. The narrator runs towards the window, screaming his name, but he cannot hear her—however, he stops and looks back at the airport. The narrator describes, “He was close enough I could recognize it was him, but far enough away that I couldn’t decipher the expression on his face” (102). Several instances of the familiar becoming unfamiliar are juxtaposed in this scene. The narrator’s slow learning of this festival details conflicts with her previous understanding. At the
same time, she has selected familiar foods to eat. Still, they reveal themselves as unfamiliar and different from how they appear—they are defamiliarized to her, made strange and uncanny. The sight of Peter acting indiscernibly after seemingly abandoning the narrator in the airports adds to her sense of estrangement and isolation in Garboza.

The narrator begins reflecting on the first time she met Peter—both had been attending a panel for immigrant writers. From the narrator’s description, we learn that the gathering of writers has written novels across genres, sharing no apparent similarities aside from the author’s identity as an “immigrant writer.” The panel setting itself is a set-up of chairs and a showcase table of empty platters and water jugs, causing an uncanny reversal of expectations when the writers try to get refreshments. Peter’s novel, “Homecoming,” was the center of the panel, his animated interaction with the audience capturing them, whereas underneath the table, his hands were clammy and nervous. However, he declares regarding the topic of his novel, “And so, when he [main character] returns, I put everything back the way he remembered. Of course, it becomes nightmarish for him. Because there’s no such thing as a real return” (102-103). Here, Peter introduces a pivotal aspect of the story—the action of returning—and the reason for the inescapable uncanniness of returning to the past. Next, the narrator explains her novel, Two Weeks, characterizing her presentation as slow-moving and robotic. While promoting her book—during this panel and at other events—the narrator found it as if she were trying to reanimate the person she was while writing, something now deceased despite her being in the same body (104). She spent a decade writing her novel, and after publication, she refers to her life in comparison to her peers, contemplating, “Their lives had progressed while my life had been frozen, was just now thawing” (104). We learn that the narrator
has had several encounters with depersonalization and derealization—reaching into the past as she became estranged from herself and her sense of reality while writing and living. Critiquing her past superstitious habits and depersonalization, she says, “Another self was needed to move into the future” (105). Throughout, the story introduces the past to demonstrate the narrator’s understanding of herself, her existence, and her estrangement towards herself and her relationships. The “Another self was needed to move into the future” assessment applies to the narrator’s situation and the experience of the pandemic-uncanny. Rather than simply continuing past ways of life, humans were forced to adapt and change to survive safely in the pandemic.

After their initial meeting, the narrator and the other writers meet at Peter’s apartment for drinks. When alone, after the others have left, Peter offers to make the narrator dinner—a sour Garbanese soup. After a day and a half, she departs Peter’s place, describing her reentry to the world: “I felt amazed, jostled out of character. I had never done this before, I wasn’t the type to stay overnight at a stranger’s apartment. I thought, How bizarre that you can be someone else and the world will still absorb you” (106). The narrator considers the progression of her relationship—Peter moving from New York to Chicago to be with her, Peter proposing. She is unnerved by the construct of an engagement ring, of putting emotional value into something physical but inherently empty. Peter, however, argues for the future: “You’ll be glad that you have something timeless” (108).

The narrator explains the second novel in the story—Peter’s book *Homecoming*. The novel starts with an older man’s plans to travel to his home country after learning that the previous totalitarian regime ended. The older man has not communicated with his
family since escaping, so he imagines that his parents have passed and that he has a
collection of nieces and nephews waiting for him. The trip takes a day and a half, and the
closer he gets to his town, the stronger the familiarity of it all becomes. The scenery is
nearly identical, and when he reaches home, he is surprised to see his father answer the
door. He is awestruck by his family: “They look exactly as he remembers, but that’s
exactly the problem” (109). He identifies himself as a traveler, not wanting to cause
shock. He is invited in by his parents, seeing that his siblings are there—and still
children. Everything is the same—down to the silverware they use for the dinner offered
to him. The impossibility of this reality, the sameness of his family, yet their
estrangement from him since they have not aged, creates an overwhelming sense of
uncanny timelessness. As Peter says earlier—it becomes “nightmarish” as something so
familiar becomes unfamiliar. The three fictional novels in the story work to demonstrate
the uncanniness of returning to past places and ways of life. Multiple scenarios are
produced, centered around returning to previous homes, lifestyles, cultures, or the split of
different cultural and national identities, all producing the sense of the uncanny and the
realization of the impossibility of successfully returning to an unchanged way of life. The
narrative cautioning against returning is simultaneously urging for growth and change
rather than regression—similar to this impossibility of returning captured throughout
coming-of-age narratives.

After escaping the airport through an unguarded door, the narrator explains the
third novel in the story—the narrator’s work, *Two Weeks*. She describes her rigid writing
regimen and herself, declaring, “I had the clearest sense of myself then” (113). A
romantic break-up spurred her writing after her ex-boyfriend exposed her lack of
enthusiasm for marriage. The novel revolves around a married couple who, due to an economic depression, decide to cryogenically freeze themselves and live off their collected assets in the future. The couple signs for 92 years—however, the morning they undergo the procedure, the wife’s chamber does not freeze. When she wakes from the anesthesia, the agency explains that she must wait two weeks to be frozen again. As a response, she goes home, and most of the novel takes place during those 14 days when she is waiting. Like the other two novels discussed earlier in the story, this novel explores the impact of leaving and returning, the uncanny experience of a reversal of expectations.

Y read her book the past winter, declaring confidently that the wife would not be frozen. He argues if she wanted to undergo the procedure, she would have made a temporary solution—staying with a friend or booking a hotel, but instead decided to return to her house, tending to it. Y and the narrator are talking in Y’s bedroom, a house that the narrator has consistently visited over the past few months—the two work separately in the house on their writing. The narrator prefaces her and Y’s relationship as one of mutual interest in conversation—however, the relationship does become sexual. Their relationship and proximity cause the narrator to reflect on the similarities between Y and herself—he is rigid and follows a monotonous schedule. His way of life doubles the habits she possessed in the past, isolating herself and routinizing her life. She acknowledges the changes in her life due to Peter’s presence and influence. She says, “And it was a relief, sort of, to find out that I could live the same way everyone else lived, that I was the same as everyone else” (120). Depersonalization is demonstrated as the narrator begins to identify familiar and unfamiliar sides of herself—traits that she was previously unaware of. The narrator had understood herself only through her current
lifestyle, and her existence became unstable and murky when she realized this lifestyle could be challenged and even changed. The narrator describes the experience of the estrangement and disrupted sense of being-in-the-world produced through the unfamiliarity and uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The night before leaving for Garboza, Peter finds the narrator’s journal, surprised by the emotionally charged content; the narrator, wanting to hide the truth, declares the entries are fiction. Simultaneously, a movie plays in the background of their conversation, described: “On screen, the countess was prostrating herself before the count […]. She had done something transgressive, and now she was repenting” (120). Peter specifies a change in her writing, more emotional and personal. She confesses they are journal entries, not about Peter, but someone else—Y. Peter brushes this off, reminding the narrator to pack for their trip. The narrator glances back at the movie, describing:

Numbly, I watched the movie. The duchess was being told that she was forgiven. She burst into tears. Then, out of nowhere, a toddler joined her on-screen, comforting his mother and reestablishing their family. Finally, the count joined his wife and child, kneeling to tearfully embrace them, reestablishing the hegemony of marital unity, of hearth and home. The end credits rolled. (121)

In this scene, the narrator and Peter are dramatically doubled through the countess and the count. Their relationships are juxtaposed, creating an uncanny gap between the emotionally charged scene the narrator watches and the cold, calm reality. The narrator offers not to go on the trip—to allow some distance between them. But Peter is adamant she comes with, explaining, “They call it the Morning Festival because everything looks new in the morning. So I think, at least symbolically, it’ll be good for us to witness this
festival together” (123). To Peter, change is necessary for their relationship, and this trip will provide a perspective they cannot see in the present. It will allow them to return to the previous state of their marriage and love. The articles examined in chapters one and two of this thesis emphasize the uncontrollability of human existence in the world, and the uncanniness of the COVID-19 pandemic, acting as a disruptor of previous ways of life. They emphasize the opportunity provided by the hidden realities forced to the surface through the pandemic-uncanny to change our understanding of our lifestyles and encourage an awareness of the fragility of our existence. The narrative demonstrates the latent reality of the uncanny already present in the world, a truth that became widely evident through the experience of the pandemic-uncanny, while cautioning against ignoring or hiding this truth.

In the present, the narrator walks to the town of Garboza. The narrator can see the festival and the strangeness of it all—the lack of artificial light, people dressed in funeral clothes, and a giant bonfire. The festival itself was different from what she expected, lacking energy as the participants appeared to be mainly waiting. A violinist plays a melancholy song, reminding her of something Peter sang before. She was out of place, not wearing black, and searching faces for Peter. As a priest begins tending to the fire, she approaches him, inquiring about Peter with a picture. He recognizes him as “Petru” and tells the narrator that everyone transforming is in the forest (126). He explains, “They are transforming. We put them in the dirt, in the earth. We will see what they look like in the morning” (126). The priest tells her to wait until morning to find Peter, to see the changes. This festival—a Garbozan tradition—is exceptionally unfamiliar to the narrator and reader. It is dangerous and uncannily shrouded with the risk of physical death, rather
than the symbolic or spiritual death and rebirth commonly part of rituals, the high stakes involved in change.

The narrator shifts back to describing her novel *Two Weeks*, revealing that the wife does not join her husband but instead continues her life. She never remarries but has a daughter who then has another daughter—producing a double doubling of the wife. She instructs her granddaughter to meet her husband when he wakes to take care of him, and when the husband does wake, he mistakes the granddaughter for his wife. In the following years, the granddaughter visits and cares for him, bringing meals and doing the groundskeeping. He is not an older man, but he acts like one—out of sorts and in a daze. The world is different from the one he remembers; despite his wealth, he feels estranged and unable to act. One afternoon, he tries to reach for the granddaughter’s hand, but she smacks it away, saying, “I’m not your wife, old man” (128). Like the other two novels already described in the story, this book possesses a reversal of expectations at its core. The wife decides not to be frozen, and the husband—rather than living his life happily and with great success in the future—is estranged and confused. The other novels emphasize this scenario of a return and returning to a place that is both unfamiliar and familiar. The inherent doubleness of the uncanny place. A place that, through the changes of time, has become uncanny. The husband has experienced a disruption in his experience of time and a newfound unfamiliarity with his surroundings—demonstrating the latent uncanny fragility of the human experience, made more vividly evident by the experience of the pandemic-uncanny. This estrangement and disruption of time is discussed in the story through multiple presentations of the uncanny through the main
character of “Returning,” as well as the multiple fictional novels discussed in the story, directly in conversation with the uncanny experience of the pandemic.

One night during the past winter, the narrator decides to stay at Y’s house after working there due to an incoming storm. They visit an Eastern European grocery store to buy provisions—a place familiar to Y but full of new and strange food for the narrator. Y made them soup for dinner, doubling the soup Peter made her on their first meeting. The reader can see a direct juxtaposition of these men and similar but different relationships to the narrator. The narrator confesses she is happy for the first time in the story; however, she tells Y she will not see him again after returning from Garboza. The trip is an effort to repair her marriage. However, Y points out, “I don’t think this is you,” to which the narrator responds, “Maybe it’s not what I want now, but it’s something I will want in the future” (130). After being estranged from herself and her marriage, the narrator tries to ignore her current desires for the ones she believes she will have in the future. The haunting of her past self and habits—the excessive appearance of derealization and depersonalization—urges her to maintain a relationship with Peter, her partner who could stabilize her life and identity.

The narrator wakes in the present beside the burnt-out bonfire. The other participants have migrated to the forest, and she follows, noticing plots scattered across the forest ground. The priest and the violinist dig up the shallow holes in the forest floor. An older man emerges from the plot they are currently uncovering, his family inspecting him. In the following plot, a middle-aged woman surfaces and reunites with her family. The whole festival is strangely informal to the narrator—with the crowd hovering, commenting, with grave urgency. The process repeated, uncovering the third, fourth,
fifth, sixth, and seventh graves, with the crowd applauding each successful uncovering. In the eighth plot, the person did not rise from the ground. The narrator reflects, “What had happened? [...] They dragged him out of the earth, holding him, this man, this father and patriarch. They bore him to their chests, beating his back as if to beat the life back into him” (134). The narrator is increasingly alienated from the rest of the participants, not genuinely comprehending the sense of mortality permeating the festival. The priest methodically moves to the following plot to continue, and the narrator reflects, “The Morning Festival did not allow for grief, it seemed. If the transformation didn’t work, it didn’t work” (135). This phrase echoes the decided response of the flight attendant to the narrator, “He is here, or not here,” a statement devoid of emotion (99). In the festival, it works or does not work—the inclusion or absence of sentimentality will not change that fact. However, humans are inherently emotional beings, and a setting deprived of such sentiment is uncanny. The crowd continues, uncovering the ninth, tenth, and eleventh plots, with family members stopping and mourning their loved ones who did not survive in each plot. The rest of the crowd pushes forward with determination, uncannily ignoring the deaths of the others. This unique presentation of a culturally based presentation of the uncanny—the narrator and reader find the scenario uncanny since they are outsiders, but the Garbozans find this ritual familiar. The narrator is working to demonstrate an aspect of the immigrant experience, an unfamiliar culture, not aligning with one’s previous understanding of celebrations, community, or sense of belonging.

After the fifteenth plot, the narrator catches sight of a suitcase—Peter’s carry-on. She recognizes the luggage immediately but is unable to approach the plot. Instead, the narrator watches the priest and violinist begin digging from a distance. When the men
search for her face, finding Peter’s unmoving body, she joins them, uncovering the plot with her hands. Out of place, acting unlike others in the crowd, she reaches Peter’s nose, cheeks, and the perimeter of his closed eyes. Peter opens his eyes, and she can recognize that his face is the same but blank, empty of expression or recognition. The narrator repeats his name—Peter, then Petru—attempting to spur some recognition of her. She describes him:

There was no indication, at least not yet, that he recognized me. Rather, he appeared stunned, new to himself. And so he was new to me too, in that moment of uncertainty. I was trying to see what had changed, how he had changed. Maybe the transformation was invisible. (136)

The narrator begins to change the calling of Peter’s name from “Peter” to “Petru”; at this emphasized change, he fixes his gaze on her. Peter is now unfamiliar—his body and actions—as he possesses none of the closeness the narrator previously felt towards him in their relationship. Similar to the three novels discussed, the sense of returning creates an inherently uncanny outcome. Peter and the narrator have been striving to return to his home country, Garboza, but also to a previous time of pleasant domesticity and clarity in their relationship. However, at this supposed return, they find each other so unfamiliar they are nearly unrecognizable as being the person they were formerly so familiar with.

In the pandemic-uncanny, the world became wholly unfamiliar, a foreign place with new social practices, ways of communication, daily routines, and ways of celebrating. In the context of the pandemic-uncanny, humans can constantly be thrust into a sense of not belonging, being out of place, and unfamiliarity. However, we can also find community,
relationships, and place, amid the pandemic, in a foreign place, or a relationship—no
matter how stable or unstable.
Chapter Five

Conclusion

How do these texts manifest the Pandemic-Uncanny?

Margulies defines the COVID-19 pandemic experience in detail, focusing on the presentation of the new and strange, describing:

Also piercing our awareness are the quieter, mournful images of hospitals and morgues and funeral homes overwhelmed and overflowing with bodies… We have fallen out of our everyday, taken-for-granted worlds into something new and unassimilated, a toxic newness that traumatizes precisely because we cannot assimilate it. This is now my working definition (Margulies, 2020) of trauma: trauma is the intolerable disrupter of our taken-for-granted, everyday world; a disrupter that resists and defies assimilation; that disrupter that demands return, après coup. (511)

This period in modern human history proved to be a mountainous physical, emotional, and psychological challenge. Both collections, Out There and Bliss Montage, explore the uncanny in physical, emotional, and psychological engagement with unfamiliar places, bodies, and atmospheres. Literature provides an opportunity to thoroughly examine an experience as the readers witness the events in the narrative through mood, voice, and character. The stories in this thesis and the collections Out There and Bliss Montage are works of pandemic literature. They contain some stories produced years before the publication of the collections in 2022 or even the onset of the pandemic. Still, they are re-represented within the context of the pandemic-uncanny. With the pandemic experience, we can read their content with newly revealed deep and decided uncanniness, commenting on the afterwardness at work in the world. As mentioned earlier, the
pandemic exposed latent trauma to the world and irreversibly altered how humans view their lives, institutions, relationships, and selves. Reading and re-visiting these stories with the experience of the pandemic-uncanny allows us to identify these hidden parts of the human condition, the fragility and uncontrollability at the core of existence, and the ways to cope with the inherent uncanniness of being human.

*Out There* and *Bliss Montage* stand out as collections exploring the tropes of the uncanny largely present in literature and translating the experience of these stories—and all their uncanniness—to the lived experience of the pandemic. In “The Bone Ward,” a new, vivid presentation of a body sick with TNBL directly converses with a body afflicted with COVID-19 and its unfamiliarity and terror. “Out There,” “Los Angeles,” and “Returning” replicate relationships that are inherently complex, woven with past and current loves, doubt, and fear of the unknown, and the reversal of expectations. The authors—Folk and Ma—benefit from the short story form, vividly presenting a moment in time and the intricacies of each aspect of this pandemic-uncanny. Margulies also offers a revised definition of trauma, how it is produced in instances where we can no longer see the world as it was—trauma changes the way we see the world, the way we see certainties and impossibilities, and acts as an uncontrollable disruptor in our lives (511).

These stories include a stirring disruptor in the characters' lives, whether in the form of a surprisingly alive house, love bots that deceive and steal data, or the impossibility of returning to the past. These elements of the story replicate natural disruptors that emerged during COVID-19—such as the loss of daily routines, the intrusion of a deadly disease, or the psychological impact of necessary isolation.
Aho reflects on the atmosphere of the pandemic: “In times of crisis, our all too human response is to cling to what is most secure and familiar; but this prevents us from accepting and owning up to the uncanniness at the heart of the human condition” (6). It is human to err, it is human to fear, and it is human to crave a sense of comfort and home-like familiarity. It is also human to adjust unfamiliar things to be more familiar. During the pandemic, we still tried to gather—in small groups or online—to have celebrations, attend school, work, or participate in social justice issues. Heidegger, Withy, and Aho expose that the human condition is inherently uncanny. Our being-in-the-world simultaneously causes freedom and restriction, as humans are aware of their openness but unable to wield it entirely; the pandemic-uncanny demonstrated our endurance and ability to adjust, but also human fragility and lack of control. Folk and Ma extensively explore the human condition—the complexities of relationships with others, the self, and the selfishness with which humans assume control over their environments, institutions, and immune systems. In “Out There,” the narrator tries to be vigilant in correctly identifying the “humanness” of her partner, believing that she would be happy and prosperous if she isn’t “blotted”; nonetheless, she experiences her relationship utterly devoid of some of her most yearned-for needs, such as intimacy, interest, and trust. “The Bone Ward” follows a woman who is apathetic towards her body’s health and is instead only preoccupied with love, attempting to chase happiness—but is confronted with a love that anxiously eats away at her, destroying her. Both “Moist House” and “Los Angeles” demonstrate characters haunted by their previous relationships, each living attempting to start anew but trapped in an uncanny place with ghosts of the past. In “Returning,” the narrator, as well as Peter/Petru, and the characters in the novels the story discusses are all
obsessed with recovering the past as it was—returning to it—but are faced with a reversal of expectations, the unfamiliarity of the past as it emerges in the present.

The onset of COVID-19 revealed faults in relationships, health, and, most strikingly, previous ways of life. Our routines, institutions, and even our sense of control are all more fragile than we would like to admit. During the pandemic, humans were forced to witness their lifestyles crumble at the introduction of a more powerful force—the Coronavirus. However, Aho cautions—a similar caution demonstrated in the story “Returning”—against trying to return to normal. He references the book *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude* and paraphrases Heidegger’s suggestion that “the experience of the uncanny, although unsettling, always presents an opportunity for transformation. When the world collapses, it creates an opening where previously concealed meanings and possibilities can emerge” (6). The world as we knew it began to collapse in March 2020. Although terrifying and unfamiliar, the pandemic-uncanny has created an opening for change, learning, and freedom from previously entrenched routines. The experience caused a temporal disruption, exposing the brittleness that resides in the way we experience and apply meaning to the passing of our existence.

The narrator of “Returning” has a kind of awakening herself as Peter aids her in glimpsing a life outside her rigid lifestyle, discovering, “And it was a relief, sort of, to find out that I could live the same way everyone else lived, that I was the same as everyone else” (Ma 120). Although her life has transformed into something previously unfamiliar, she finds herself pleasantly surprised by what she is capable of and what change can do. Throughout the story, we see her trying to revert, while Peter, and even
the story itself, cautions against returning to the past and instead urges for change. The pandemic-uncanny left many yearning for “the before times” or “the way things used to be.” A frequent tool that these stories emphasize is defamiliarization. The characters are suddenly faced with unfamiliar people, places, atmospheres, or situations, which cause conflicts with their understanding of themselves or the world around them. During the pandemic-uncanny, the world became defamiliarized—we saw it as an empty husk, as a place of disease, but also of digitalization. Again, many humans wanted a world they were familiar with, not the unfamiliar one that exposed the uncanny truth that society bent beneath the pressure of a deadly virus—something that exposed many faults within systems and lifestyles across the globe. Like the narrator of “Returning,” humans can discover that they can exist differently, be capable of change, and learn and grow from the past rather than reverting to it.

As controllers of policy, institutions, and lifestyles, the human—as an archetype—can create and respond to catalysts of change. Moreover, as Aho and Heidegger, Folk and Ma argue throughout their various mediums, a hidden truth will always be exposed. Although that remains an unchangeable fact ingrained in the human condition, we can continually revolutionize how we respond to these uncanny truths.
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