

# THE UNCANNY IN PROSE

# THE UNCANNY

- A psychological experience of something as strangely familiar
- Something realistic in an unrealistic setting (or vice versa)
- Something that unsettles when it occurs in repetition
- An event in an eerie or taboo context
- A doubling, or doppelganger moment

See Freud, Lacan or Kristeva for theories

## CATEGORICAL IMPURITY

In his book “Philosophy of Horror, or Paradoxes of the Heart” Noel Carroll identifies “categorical impurity” as essential to horror – rather than jump scares, or the idea of physical danger. The idea that the monstrous thing is categorically impure – it exists between states, and cannot be easily classified – means that it is cognitively threatening. One way to create something truly unsettling is to work in this in-between space, where a reader cannot easily sort the thing (whatever it is) into a clear category or type. It unsettles intellectually, and will linger with the reader.

# STONE



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d781CJXIS98>

## tone: establish early on

REE DOLLY stood at break of day on her cold front steps and smelled coming flurries and saw meat. Meat hung from trees across the creek. The carcasses hung pale of flesh with a fatty gleam from low limbs of saplings in the side yards. Three halt haggard houses formed a kneeling rank on the far creekside and each had two or more skinned torsos dangling by rope from sagged limbs, venison left to the weather for two nights and three days so the early blossoming of decay might round the flavor, sweeten that meat to the bone.

from *Winter's Bone*, Danielle Woodrell

# THE I-CAMERA



## LIMIT PERSPECTIVE

Translate the I-Camera: in horror film, a common convention is the I-Camera (which often observes the action/characters at some point, is assumed to be the killer, or obscures the killer's identity). This builds tension and suspense, and provides for a reveal later on.

Think about using perspective and POV to limit the reader's access to information.

Think about other ways to limit the reader's access to information: structural choices, cuts, missing moments, etc.

## EXPLOIT IMAGERY

Thinking back to theories of the Uncanny, and the idea of Categorical Impurity, utilize your skills of description and detail to highlight and place imagery in a way that heightens unease for the reader.

Take the everyday and make it strange, unsettling.

Consider characters who are unknowable in some way, caught outside of easy classification.



## IMAGERY

... Because he'd somehow gotten far enough away from the house, rushing to escape the hum, the flies had found him and were making quick work of the spilled fluids and broken skin. Blowflies work quickly to colonize flesh, laying their eggs – in a day or two they'd hatch. Blowfly maggots are called 'gentles.' Blowflies are the common name for these insects, so called because as the larvae hatch and grow, whatever-it-is seems to blow up many times its size, writhing as if alive again.

## IMAGERY

The house, and the land it sat on humming and throbbing, seemed to have a perimeter, and nothing living made its home there. The woods were absent of any animal, or insect – even the water fishless. But beyond that boundary the natural world continued its work. Just then, as the group at the house was pulling into town, a deer walked up to the wrecked SUV with its open window and looking inside, sniffed the contents. Its nose may have nudged Kevin’s arm a little, broken and wrenched through the steering wheel. The doe had an auburn coat, just russet, that would have been beautiful if it hadn’t been crawling with ticks. It blinked its long-lashed eyes and moved on.

# PROMPT

1. Describe a specialized process, something you understand well, that is highly technical – this will enable you to be very detailed, and exploit imagery.
2. Transplant this specialized process into a context where it doesn't belong, making it unsettling. Consider giving it to an unlikely character (uncanny characterization), or a place where it doesn't make sense (uncanny setting).

# PROMPT

1. Make a list of items – things that could be lost and found. Once you have your list, imagine a character who collects the items, and focus on the idiosyncratic items.
2. Imagine an observer of these collections, or these collectors. What kinds of assumptions or backstories would an observer invent (or wonder about) for these idiosyncratic collections? What kind of psychology would they suggest?
3. Create a museum catalog or archival document for the collection.

# PROMPT

Re-tell a story you know well, but in an experimental or highly-restrictive point-of-view. Consider:

- 2<sup>nd</sup>-person POV / [The Schrodinger's You](#)
- 3<sup>rd</sup>-person inclusive POV – a communal narrator
- A limited 3<sup>rd</sup>-person narrator (only having access to one or two characters' internal states)
- A fragmented narrator, or unknowable narrator
- A highly-unreliable narrator