

*The Unheimlich Manoeuvre*

Tracy Fahey

Kym Martindale

UK: [Sinister Horror Company](#), 2018.

ISBN: 978-1912578016, 182pp. £7.99.

The title of this collection is exquisitely witty, and invokes Ian McEwan – the early, dark and unsettling McEwan of *The Cement Garden* (1978), and ‘Solid Geometry’ (1975). ‘Heimlich’: homely, but also, as the blurb for this collection points out, the man whose name belongs to the ‘Manoeuvre’ which ‘restores order, health and well-being’ – the ‘manoeuvre’ forcibly ejects objects in the wrong place, and restores life. However, as all good post-Freudians know, ‘unheimlich’ undoes the same, being unhomely, *uncanny*, that ‘thing’ which unsettles by being like, and yet not. What we often forget though, is that, as Freud observed, ‘heimlich’ also means secret, hidden; thus, ‘unheimlich’ further refers to that which is uncovered, revealed. And this is the clever manoeuvre which Fahey, like McEwan, effects, revealing the fears, desires and weaknesses that pick away at the fabric of ‘home’. It is as if Fahey recognises, like Freud, how ‘heimlich’ carries at its core, its uncanny secret.

The collection is bookended by two stories which are initially tricky and not quite resolved. ‘Coming Back’ is an ironic gesture perhaps: it is the first story in the collection and is about a return that is not a return. In this subtle tale of haunting the narrator emerges from a coma, and is visited by an unknown figure; nor can she, it seems, either find or entirely shake off her old self. While this story invokes well-known tropes (coma, loss of memory), it resists easy terrors. The visitor, for example, wears a comfortable cardigan, and advises the narrator,

rather than threatens or scares her, or us; the narrator remains lost in a reality that is not necessarily another dimension, but might plausibly be explained as the aftermath of a coma. What kind of havoc would that wreak on the brain, after all? If anything, 'Coming Back' suggests a kind of hollowness at the heart of existence, and it is more bleak than conventionally frightening, simply because there is perhaps nothing to which to return.

The final story also has a cosmic or existential joke at its centre: the clue is in the title, 'Looking for Wildgoose Lodge'. Set in Ireland, and again, less conventionally frightening in its details, it teases us by offering gothic moments for our scrutiny and pleasure, only to put us on the back foot: the narrator is confounded by differences in scale, time, history and context, so that when she finally finds the place which her grandmother told her about, and which has gripped her imagination from childhood, it unsettles a foundational memory, which was, in fact, a fiction; so do we follow the narrator, hoping for ghouls, and ghostly re-enactments, that will somehow explain everything, only to find ourselves looking at the story itself through the wrong end of a telescope. Eventually, everything fits into a small suitcase, or a small plot (of land in this instance, but let the pun do its work). It puts into question the very purpose of the gothic imagination, and our attraction to it. As a child, the narrator begs repeatedly for the tale of the Lodge, noting how horrifying it is, but intuiting the very pleasure of that: 'In the darkness, I feel the familiar, cold wriggle of horror in my stomach. It's a horrible story. I don't know why I asked for it. But I'm mesmerised by its awfulness' (161). Like the narrator, the reader also finds a dark thrill in the horror of the events that the grandmother relates. There is a political nuance to this story too, as the sacking of the original lodge is displaced on to the obvious villains, the Brits, rather than the perpetrators being members of a Catholic agrarian society. The 'wild goose' in the title, is, in the end, truth. Here though, the tale is richly layered. The events related did actually happen; William Carleton did exist, as does his short story version of the burning of the lodge. And Tracy

Fahey posted an account of all this on the University of Stirling's 'Gothic Imagination' blog. In her own fictionalisation of the historic event, Fahey therefore compresses a history of imagining of history; it is no wonder that the narrator is left wondering what happened to the stature of the tale and its original narrator: on her death, her grandmother's effects are contained in a 'little, battered, maroon suitcase'. 'How', asks the narrator, 'can someone whose life was so large and uncomfortable come to be contained in something so little?' (165). Like the Lodge, whose ruins are 'tiny', its dimensions so at odds with the Lodge that 'has always stood so tall in my memories' (165), the tale is stripped and found to be strangely wanting, hostage to 'time's terrible diminishment [...] what remains behind when the story has ended' (165).

It is important that these two stories, unresolved as they are, frame the other stories, for these are more conventional in their use of familiar tropes: the doppelganger recurs, there is a 'changeling', and boundaries that should be impermeable, are not. It is often easy to recognise the trope in use – as anyone versed in the gothic and related genres, will do, and this alerts the reader to the probable outcome. This is not to say that Fahey's tales are predictable. In one important sense, they constantly dismantle the familiar: the modern housing estate, the trials of new parenthood and the stress of trying to be the perfect mother, suburbia and its fear of the underclass – the real horror of such cultural phenomena shifts into another gear as the doppelganger – harbinger of death in folklore – now confronts us with our complacency of self, how we sit thoughtlessly in our bodies, jobs and homes. The characters in Fahey's tales are thrown into loss violently as they are wrenched out of such complacencies. But if we are accustomed to the tropes in most of these stories, the first and last of them foil the lull that the enjoyment of them creates.