

“Works from Eastern Europe”

*Things in the Night*

Mati Unt

Trans. and Afterword by Eric Dickens

Dalkey Archive Press

294 pages, with 20 pages Afterword, \$13.95 paper US

ISBN: 156478388-X

*Hidden Camera*

Zoran Živković

Trans. Alice Copple-Tošić

Dalkey Archive Press

217 pages, \$13.95 US

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by Jeff Bursey

In *CONTEXT* Magazine in 2003, John O’Brien, head of Dalkey, addressed one aspect of literature in translation:

“If we try to zero in on the question of how many “literary” works (any kind of novel, poetry, play) were translated... my guess is that, including everything that comes from the smallest of presses and not paying attention to quality or genre, the figure is about 150 works of literature out of the 150,000 books published in the United States... Even if we eliminate textbooks, how-to books, et al. from this 150,000 figure, we still are looking at an infinitesimally small percentage of books that come from the 200 or so countries that exist beyond [U.S.] borders. In a quick check of catalogs from Knopf, Norton, Viking, Harcourt, and Farrar, Straus & Giroux, for approximately the past two seasons, there were thirty-one translations of contemporary foreign fiction and poetry. Thirty-one! From the New York houses forever championed as carrying on the noble tradition of serious literary publishing.”

In such a marketplace, the literatures of Estonia and, to a slightly lesser degree, the former Yugoslavia don’t stand much chance of getting published in English, and less of getting read. As part of its mandate, Dalkey Archive Press puts into print, and keeps in print, translated works from all over the world. *Things in the Night* and *Hidden Camera* are quirky, highly readable, and funny novels. Part of the Eastern Europe series, they deal with the place and role of the individual in societies that have struggled, in one case peacefully, in another bloodily, to emerge from decades of oppression. Both novels feature an unnamed male first-person narrator: In *Things in the Night*, the narrator is a man whose bizarre imagination estranges him from others. In *Hidden Camera*, it is a man who hides behind proprieties and who fears the perceived, though never seen, “Authorities”. The first narrator is a type who, in a British or Irish novel, would easily be taken for a charming eccentric; but in a Baltic production, he’s not likely to be viewed in any indulgent light.

The narrator of *Hidden Camera* is a timid Clumsy Carp, someone many people resemble at least a few times in their life on those days when everything they do, say or think is inappropriate or ill-timed.

One notable aspect of *Things in the Night* is its tone: it mixes wistfulness, autumnal imagery, and a delicately balanced wryness. On the opening page the main narrator says: “I announced that I was writing a book on electricity. Of course, people wanted to know immediately what kind of book I had in mind. I said: One in the most general sense of the word. I was met with sympathetic stares, the kind you get if you say you are going to write a novel about Life, which is too broad a concept, or white mice, which is too narrow. I wasn’t taken seriously, and people were right, of course, because I didn’t have any idea what I really wanted either.” Unt has immediately set down how the self-aware narrator regards himself, and how friends perceive him. Readers may be leery of the narrator’s fascination with electricity, which occupies the first few pages, and wonder if the book is going to go somewhere.

When the narrator feels compelled, out of embarrassment, to write the novel he joked about to friends, he gives his interest in electricity to a character who plans to blow up a power station. The novel is abandoned after a few pages, as is what follows, the tale of a female vampire who wants a baby by the narrator. Both are revisited, later, but not before the narrative has gone on to other things: recollections of life in Estonia from the mid-1950s to 1990, extensive descriptions of cacti and meditations on daily life. Plot is just a low but handy peg on which to hang the important things. The narrator, speaking for the author, says at one point: “There has to be life in a novel. Key scenes write large and grotesque dreams should alternate with lighter city scenes... You have to give the reader a chance to breathe... And yet: I can’t be bothered doing the description.”

Unt’s writing (smoothly translated) is always of a high quality, as in this passage: “So the days went by and winter was already approaching, although it did so in its usual way, through darkness and sadness, not exactly surprising anyone, but hardly making them any happier either.” That’s a recognizable sentiment, given in familiar words, but the last seven words elevate the passage above the banal. What follows is startling: “On 13th December 1981, martial law was declared in Poland. A day later we were summoned to the command post from which Tallinn’s electricity grid was controlled.” That laconic statement suddenly alters the narrative’s tone, yet remains true to one of the themes which has slowly grown beneath the placid surface: a preoccupation with acts of terrorism, whether committed by an individual or by the state, with which the narrator’s novel began.

These ideas, various story lines (established by the narrator and minor narrators in shifting time periods) and philosophical conceits are held together by a simple structure: the book is an address to a mysterious woman identified as You, who has her own pages in the book. She appears to be the narrator’s partner, and he wants to disclose, with fidelity, his shifting moods and obsessions that find expression in fantastic tales—to reveal all, albeit in a quiet way. As in many people’s lives, there are few startling events, but the interior life is lit up with activity, anxiety, pleasure, and this elaborate recollection is told in a prose that is fascinating to read. The afterword is useful and clearly written. Unt, who died in 2005, has been well served by Eric Dickens and by Dalkey.

*Hidden Camera* takes place in an unnamed city. The narrator, an undertaker waiting for retirement, is without a loved one, family, or friends. His acute sense of civic responsibility barely masks an intense fear of everything and everyone. Early on we are given a glimpse of his aquarium.

“The fish were only aware of my existence during the brief moments when I fed them, and then only as some impersonal force that acted kindly towards them for some unknown reason. In all other circumstances they didn’t pay me the slightest attention.

I paid quite a bit of attention to them, however, although not as recognizable individuals with any feelings of attachment.”

The passage is given to us for a reason: it suggests an analogous relationship between the narrator and the fish, and the narrator and Big Brother.

Returning home one evening, he finds an invitation to a movie house, but believing it’s a marketing gimmick, he puts it aside. As he’s about to prepare his supper, “something suddenly snap[s],” and he rushes off to make the evening show. This impromptu action is in fact typical of the narrator; though he thinks of himself as calm and restrained, he is hasty and easily swayed by his emotions. This one night completely disrupts the narrator’s small life. In the darkness of the cinema, sitting next to an attractive woman (the only other person there), he watches a short film of himself seated on a familiar park bench. This footage is cleverly merged with separately filmed footage of the woman beside him. He concludes that some television show has hidden a camera and observed him; that it has, in fact, targeted him. What happens next becomes increasingly peculiar.

I won’t detail the surprises that follow. What can be said, without giving too much away, is that the realism with which the novel begins, slowly, naturally wanes and the narrative acquires a queasy, nightmarish quality before ending in fantasy. Slapstick humour, achieved through descriptions of the narrator’s clumsy physical actions, and his stubborn insistence on proper comportment at all times, keep the reader at a distance. This turns out to be a positive thing.

In the opening pages the reader feels either like an “impersonal force” or like an engaged observer, convinced that she’s smarter than the hapless schmo running around the city, trapped in one situation after another and worried all the while that he’ll be arrested by the police or sued by the show’s producers. Halfway through the nar- /7/ rator bravely, and foolishly, states, “Since I wasn’t about to give up, what else could I do but continue the game without getting involved in its meaning, regardless of where it took me?” Unbeknownst to the reader, the narrator has certain feelings and convictions which inform his actions, especially in the last pages, and these take him to a place the reader is unable to visit. Zivkovic isn’t interested in showing yet another victim of state machinery. Nor is he toying with his own creation. Something mysterious is visited upon the narrator—it can’t be said that he grows, although he does make some kind of transition—but nothing is allowed to reveal the nub of it to us.

At the end the reader is considerably less sure of his or her footing than the narrator—a reversal cleverly effected. Indeed, much of *Hidden Camera*—with its fish tank perspective of being utterly controlled by mercurial but not necessarily ill-disposed Higher Powers—is skilfully managed, with superb control of pace.

*Things in the Night* and *Hidden Camera*, both of which benefit from the efforts of sympathetic and proficient translators, present English readers with fine exemplars of translated contemporary works that are well worth acquiring.

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