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Ghost Geographies: Fictions

Tamas Dobozy

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In Tamas Dobozy's "The Rise and Rise and Rise of Thomas Sargis," the sixth story in *Ghost Geographies: Fictions*, a Canadian academic finds himself, for complicated reasons, hiding under a bed in Cold War Budapest. He is not alone. A street urchin with a full bladder lies beside him: "But of course there was nowhere to pee under the bed other than into his own pants, which after an agonizing half hour he did, Sargis trying to edge away from the expanding dampness on the rug only to realize he had nowhere to go, and had to lie there, feeling the piss soak into his pants as well" (159).

This scene captures the often absurd spirit of Tamas Dobozy's superb *Ghost Geographies* whose thirteen stories are populated primarily by Hungarians and Canadians and Hungarian-Canadians who are frequently crossing borders of time, space, and imagination. One trio of Hungarians soars up, up and away, escaping to Austria by hot air balloon. Another, "the hobo of the Eastern bloc," has a magical, ghost-like "ability to slip across borders" (13) even back when the Berlin Wall was still up. Sándor Eszterházy, a vagrant itinerant artist based more or less in Canada, sneaks regularly across the Canada-US border in "Ghost Geographies."

The title story begins: "You can think of Sándor's map as a nation made of all the vacant lots in all the cities of the world" (280). Sándor has created a paper utopia that lies somewhere between "a nation broken up and scattered" and "a kind of placelessness, a nowhere" (281). Dobozy, throughout, riffs on concepts of utopia as a place that could be, will not be, and is no-place.

For a book about geographies and escaping to foreign lands, there is much confinement in these stories. Some characters are literally imprisoned in pre-1989 Hungary, others make it to Canada only to find themselves living in the sticks in a Company house, or cramped by poverty, or inhibited by language, or manacled by alcoholism, or taking care of a sickly father or friend. As one curmudgeon who survived the Siege of Budapest proclaims to a Canadian Second World War veteran, "Canada is my prison!" (274)



Most of Dobozy's characters are on a downward trajectory – perhaps none spectacularly than a former Hungarian judge in “The Glory Days of Donkey Kong,” now living in a backroom in his sister's house in Kitchener, Ontario. Fifty-five years old, Emil Tóth now spends his days at the video arcade, playing Donkey Kong. This latter day game wizard outplays grumpy children who have no appreciation of “every single thing that had happened in Eastern Europe over the last hundred and fifty years” (133).

Regardless of their lot in life, the characters in *Ghost Geographies* seem aware of *King Lear's* warning: “the worst is not / As long as we can say “This is the worst.” Or, in the optimistic words of Ekel, the urchin trapped under the bed with the transplanted Canadian academic Sargis: “At least I don't have to shit!” Good point. Indeed, even the by-proxy pant-wetter Sargis realizes that “as low as he'd sunk there were always places lower [...], jails and camps where prisoners lost fingers and eyes [...]” (131).

Throughout *Ghost Geographies* Dobozy marries the comic to the tragic, the fated to the chosen. As it happens, Thomas Sargis is under the bed in behind-the-Iron-Curtain Budapest because, back in 1950 he, daftly, chose to remain in Hungary after an academic conference. Decades ago, Sargis enjoyed a brief career as an apologist for Stalin, wining and dining on his fame until Uncle Joe died, pro-Stalin views immediately became less popular, and Sargis was shunted from apartment to apartment to former “railway switching shack” (156), before returning to Canada and, “of all places, a suburb in Buffalo” (167) – he has tracked down the wife he once deserted.

Throughout *Ghost Geographies* history haunts the characters' everyday lives, memories, and even dreams. Many spend time in official and unofficial archives, tracking down stories and truths about the past – whether it's in the Hungarian National Archives, the CBC archives, or the fictional Ecséri Archive, housed in the equally fictional Jazz Museum of Budapest on Városmajor Street. In a neat sleight-of-hand between the real and the invented, Dobozy has two characters retrieving information through Canada's non-existent “Freedom of Information Act” (rather than the “Access to Information Act”). In one story, meanwhile, a prostitute offers her help in excavating the past: “You want the real story on [a character known as] the Heckler, you come find me” (107); in another, a boy of ten offers insight into the mysterious Sándor Eszterházy's life. Information about the past may seem quantifiable, traceable, but it remains elusive.

Dobozy's stories are experimental, without descending into self-indulgent playfulness or too-clever-by-half metafiction. Stylistic brilliance binds them. Dobozy is incapable of writing slack or dull prose. One character, for example, is described as having a “rage for order” (40); another, having recently made it from Budapest to Vienna, bemoans “the undifferentiated plenitude of markets, stores, street vendors” (44). Another has “come to appreciate the power of [...] clothes, how they helped you believe



in your own performance” (164). We’ve all heard “clothes make the man” before, but in Dobozy’s rendering, the idea feels new.

Dobozy is also a master of the long sentence. One gem in “The Hobo and the Archivist” begins with a tongue-twisting “When Wuyts wasn’t sorting files in the ministry where he worked he was sorting files in his cabinet” (4) and stretches to 144 words. This syntactic Hawaiian shirt includes a bit of Hungarian, dashes, a colon, and a pithy quotation. Other long sentences are sneakily expansive. You can easily find yourself 60 words into a sentence before even realizing how long it actually is. Always controlled and musical, Dobozy’s long sentences are not look-at-me flashy, and neither are they powered by rage or ranting. They are like a well-paced movie that stretches, surprisingly, beyond the second hour.

Ghost Geographies also plays with form, stretching the boundaries of what we expect from short stories. For example, “Nom de Guerre” is in the form of a timeline of the sort we know from history class. Dobozy juxtaposes the fictional intellectual Nikolas Blackman’s life against actual events such as “the first toe-to-thumb transplant” (1972) (176), the Aral Sea splitting in two and “creating a patch of desert” (1990) (184), and other horrors and marginalia of history. The history and story are both controlled and random.

“Four by Kline Caro” pulls off the risky feat of describing tedious art films about rats and other vermin (“The grandfather’s jaws crunch down on the baby’s head. Credits.” (87)). Just when we might be thinking Dobozy has gone too far in his experimenting, he drops a wry commentary: “The critics are unanimous in their praise. [The director] Caro has brought political agency back to the movies. He is drunk continuously at the Cannes Film Festival” (92). This mixture of deadpan and juxtaposition drips irony, while also suggesting that Kline has put one over on the chattering classes.

Dobozy marvellously and deftly zips through decades as characters grow older though not necessarily wiser. For example, in “Ray Electric,” a would-be Olympic medalist named Károly Bánko defects from Hungary after murdering his inept wrestling director – a Party appointee who “fell from grace and was demoted and demoted and demoted until he landed here: director of the Hungarian wrestling team, a sport he knew exactly zero about” (30). Now free and living in Ontario, Bánko changes his name to Ray Electric and toils as a show wrestler, on a steady decline from staged to real fights and horrific injuries, to the prospect of battling a bear.

Ghost Geographies, a follow-up to Dobozy’s award-winning *Siege 13*, has flown under the radar in Canada. That’s a shame, an injustice. In a perfect, utopian world, these stories would be front and centre on the literary map of 2021.

