Das Individuum macht sich oft seine Vorstellungen von sich selbst, von hohen Absichten, herrlichen Taten, die es ausführen wolle, von der Wichtigkeit, die es selbst habe, die es berechtigt sei in Anspruch zu nehmen, die zum Heile der Welt diene. Was solche Vorstellungen betrifft, so müssen sie an ihren Ort gestellt bleiben.

Often an individual imagines himself, his high ideals, the glorious deeds he means to carry out, his own importance which he is surely right to take as justification, as serving the betterment of the world. These ideas must be left behind.

— G.W.F. Hegel
Contents

The Hobo and the Archivist 1
Ray Electric 27
Four by Kline Caro 79
Lester’s Exit 103
The Glory Days of Donkey Kong 123
The Rise and Rise and Rise of Thomas Sargis 145
Nom de Guerre 173
The New and Improved Oscar Teleki 209
Spires 235
Crosswords 253
Ghost Geographies 279
Krasnogorsk-2 295
Black Hearted Villains 315

Acknowledgments 331
The Hobo and the Archivist
In 1976 Adelbert Wuyts received a personal letter from General Secretary János Kádár inviting him to come to Budapest. The letter was so enthusiastic, so overflowing with praise, that Wuyts read it four times and decided communism in Eastern Europe had finally become a good thing. “At least people there can eat!” he said to a friend.

“Yes they can eat — shit!” his friend replied, and Wuyts got so mad he didn’t even say good-bye when, a week later, he defected with the third-class train ticket Kádár had sent with the letter (though he did leave a note asking the friend to look after his place).

Wuyts never thought for a second to ask how anyone behind the Iron Curtain, never mind főtitkár Kádár, had heard of his work, falling completely for what the letter said about him being “universally admired almost everywhere in Hungary.” By the time he pulled out of Brussels the Western world had receded so far from Wuyts’ thinking that the train seemed to be passing through a mirage, and if you touched any of the buildings — the banks, the offices, the villas — they’d have disintegrated in a flurry of bank notes.

He had only one regret, and it burned hotter as the train clacked toward Hungary: he’d left behind his card catalog. It was the only thing of value Wuyts owned — an enormous piece of furniture that stored everything ever known about the cities
of the world, right back to the earliest human settlements. It was made of a wood called arbutus, incredibly brittle, that had been imported from British Columbia in the late nineteenth century, polished to a high gloss, and when fully assembled took up an entire wall, right up to the sixteen-foot ceilings in the apartment in Brussels where he lived.

Its size kept it from being stolen, that plus the fact that it was filled to bursting with the bits of paper on which he’d written and rewritten, drawn and redrawn his ideas, always compressing them further so they’d all continue to fit. Wuyts thought the cards beautiful, works of art, not only for the exactness of the cataloging system he’d devised, but because of what they promised when his project was finally complete: a city free of the mistakes that had ruined every city in the past. He was like so many of those other utopianists born into fin-de-siècle Europe, so woefully ordinary, camouflaged in middle management suits and overcoats, indistinguishable from the other file clerks along the sidewalk, even as their brains clacked and whirred with the gears of intricate dreams.

When Wuyts wasn’t sorting files in the ministry where he worked he was sorting files in his cabinet, and when he wasn’t sorting files in the cabinet he was publishing articles: pamphlets, broadsides, chapbooks printed on out-of-date hardware, old presses in attics and basements run by the usual eccentrics — tubercular anarchists, outlawed theorists, poets too far ahead of their times — everything printed in watery ink on paper already moldering by the time it went through the machines, to be hated, later, by every archivist charged with preserving them, including the longest article Wuyts had written, “Design for a Classless City Conducive to the Function of a Communist Society” (1963), which had been quoted in Kádár’s invitation, and was being furled and unfurled by Dezső Ernyő when he met Wuyts at the Nyugati pályaudvar upon his arrival from Brussels.

Wuyts got off the train with his little suitcase. It was the dirtiest train station he’d ever seen. It looked like someone had
The New Improved
Oscar Teleki
The old man was Joseph Fisk, but he said his name was Oszkár Teleki. And the way he said it, the accent he had, made you wonder whether he could hear himself speak.

He sat in the hospital room with a blanket around his shoulders, hands resting on a cane planted between his knees, and repeated the key moments, as he saw them, of “his” life: born and educated in Budapest during the 1920s and ’30s; his brief and absurd directorship of the Budapest Zoo; surviving the siege of the city 1944-45, when he was captured by fascist forces while trying to flee west from the advancing Red Army, pressed into military service, captured again this time by the Soviets, pressed into their service working for the secret police; finally escaping Hungary in 1956 and settling in Canada in return for providing information to NATO; finishing a doctorate in history at the University of Toronto specializing in “state repression” in the Eastern Bloc, tons of publications, fame both national and international; married, divorced, no kids.

More than half of this — the things he told them — was unknown information, for Teleki had been a very private man. Besides, his face, his DNA, the few acquaintances called in all said he was Joseph Fisk, an account manager living out his retirement in a room right next to Teleki’s at the Happy Meadows Extended Care Facility.
They called in Teleki’s ex-wife, Eva Makó, thinking she’d know him best, and she reluctantly agreed after it was made clear she was dealing with the police. She took one look at Fisk after she went into the room and snorted so loud they could hear her outside the door, but then Fisk whispered something into her ear that made Eva turn white and run out of there, and after that she refused to answer the phone or open the door, not even for the police. The whole thing was ridiculous. And creepy.

With Eva’s refusal the officers called in another Hungarian, oddly enough, on Fisk’s request. “Call up Professor János Varga,” he told them, “he’ll prove I am who I say I am.” Not knowing what else to do, they did. Varga had long ago been a star graduate student of Teleki’s — favored, mentored, invited for drinks at the faculty club. As the years wore on, and as he went from student to colleague to acquaintance (but never friend, Teleki had no friends), he’d even received half a dozen or so invitations to come over for dinner, to meet Teleki’s wife, to retire to the study afterwards for expensive brandies, learned conversation, and impromptu piano recitals by the esteemed professor himself. He even had the not so rare honor of having some of his research ripped off by the old professor back in the 1970s, but the police didn’t know that. Nobody did.

“So your father was Boldizsár?” János asked, and Fisk said that’s right, his father had fought in World War One under Admiral Miklós Horthy de Nagybánya, barely escaping with his life from the Battle of the Strait of Otranto in 1917, along with Horthy himself, who was seriously injured in the fighting. Fisk said Boldizsár was also there the following year, during the raid on the Barrage, watching from another ship as the dreadnought Szent István went down, torpedoed by an Allied submarine.

“You know what my father’s big word was?” Fisk asked. When Varga said nothing, he continued: “Loyalty. The most important virtue, he said.” He stood by Horthy after the war too, in 1919 and