

IKSO

ELENA FRABOSCHI

Ikso was a small-boned, not-white-not-black young man, gray hooded jersey sweatshirt and glasses, wire-thin glasses, tapering—their arms crooked upon his temples. When I first met Ikso, he was working at a fast-food restaurant and praying that he would find work elsewhere. I was walking the railroad tracks—a regular thing with me in those days, cutting across the tracks a mile or so to the bus stop. I would walk east on the main track and keep my eye on the train graffiti in the siding track, then cut south across the slippery, wet grass to Lowe’s. My first wanderings hadn’t been enjoyable, tho—or, at least, not calm. Not only did I have to anticipate the maneuvers of the locomotives in the train yard, which I did not know, but also I could not linger despite my cravings for watching the wildlife, which, as clouds passed over, would peek out from behind the bushes, then hide. In the end, I missed a few buses watching the dark flocks of starlings move slow in the white air, all at once to dive in and huddle together on the electrical high wires. Given the motionlessness and monastic silence that lay on the track on early mornings, it is easy to understand how the murmuration of stalks and leaves would on occasion frighten me to death. Suddenly a weasel would stand up at the periphery of a shrub, then, just as suddenly, retreat into its burrow. Some of this entered my mind the day I looked out in bewilderment at Ikso’s appearance at the railroad track, dawn of November, chasing me wildly, arms outstretched not to stumble on the rolling ballast and the ruin of the ties.

In the struggle between doe and coyote, the outcome is a matter of speed. Suppose them both strong and healthy. Then the doe is well equipped to confront the coyote with some lively choreography of her

own: better at kicking than he at lunging, she will, not seldom, exhaust him and turn him back. So I, a lover of the track (and of untroubled walks), used stare to be my fear's weapon, and turned around and looked the track, *I'd like to know whom you chase after*, and therefore made him freeze, and at length here comes one reticent teen, wrapped up in hiphop coat, shuffling his feet against the backdrop of great huge freight boxcars, and all of a sudden with him I walk down the familiar places—the marshy field, the sprawling storefront:

A man in checked shirt lingers against a trash can. From under his visored cap he stares. Then another one—this one's a big fellow in well-fitting trousers and suspenders. And Amish hat. North-end of Lowe's and the stutterings of trucks—low-hanging gallery blurring out the line of men. Two trudge to the store. The nearer to these men we walk, one poor-black young man, one poor-white old woman, the more estranged we become, everyone staring us in the face. Ah!—their reproving silence. ('Tho what is silenced is not necessarily bad,' Ikso would confide later, once we took to each other.) We press on: the bus stop is just 'round the corner. Ikso says he wants to take instruction at the Arthur Murray Dance Studio. A thought to be thought—

Looking down at his hands, 'I don't think they're open this early in the morning,' I say—I say and wonder if he knows what he ought to know: fees and schedule. But he looks at me very directly and says, 'I'm not going to take lessons just yet. I only want to ask about fees and schedule.'

The trees weather-stripped from which birds glare—

I watch Ikso nervously play with his homespun gloves, a very few fingers without holes, then I turn my eyes off him for fear (unwarranted, I know now) that he'll lose heart. I ask: 'What kind of dance would you like to do?' (*Can you make a living by dancing?*) I ask: 'Will you join a dance company, then?'

'What I'd like to do is dance as well as this guy I know. He has travelled the world over—he's been to Germany.'

‘Doing what?’ I ask.

He knows himself slammed. I have since become aware of his habits—how he drops back into the hood of his sweatshirt, his eyes getting smaller and smaller like starlings’ tongues. The arrival of the bus brings our encounter to an end. Ikso smiles and waves me in, I pick a seat, then he sits at the farthest end of the bus, and we revert to being strangers. Contentedly.

AT THE TRACK

The next morning, much to my surprise, he snaps on the track soon as he sees me, chasing me, swinging his arms. Maybe he does it because I have piqued his curiosity. Not many women walk the track, but—

I have walked the track for years now. I have sprung owl eyes on the back of my head, and so I turn my head just as he has got into his stride, and then he stammers. Same as yesterday, as if his actions today were started entirely by the power of yesterday. He stumbles on the narrow road, and I relax my pace to allow him to catch up with me. Ill at ease—pushes his right hand in his trouser pocket, rubs a bottle of water barely showing out, shoves it way down, then brings it back out and lets it dangle from his little finger.

‘Did you enjoy your dance lesson?’ I ask.

‘No no,’ he rebukes me, ‘I only wanted to *inquire*.’ He takes several minutes to unscramble what he meant. ‘Besides, it was closed—the Studio, I mean,’ he says, ‘it’s always closed in the mornings.’ He smooths out into other topics—he’ll soon be going to Florida. ‘Am quite sure of it,’ he says. He says it as though his uncertainties would go away if only he could convince me, then repeats it the next day.

And the day after.

AT THE TRACK

Early in the morning, when, barely over the horizon, the sun fills my eyesight, and the fog still hangs closest to the ground, there are genuine secrets beseeching us to recognize them: the paper bag, the burger wrapper. Here, at the railroad track, rail ties become firewood, travellers sit on the gravel. Someone went by this place—someone went by and ditched leftovers at every turn. (Is this the flight of Thoreau or the soup of the poor?)

From the wooded land north of the track, at the point where coals and other vestiges leave no doubt as to hobos passing through, it is possible to jump into and piggy-ride any one of the freight trains running east-west. These trains often lie on the track overnight, and so, on early mornings, seeing their artwork for the first time under the rays of the sun, my eyes delight on the latest nocturnal extravagances by the graffiti writers, and when I stumble on pieces that, though gleaming in dew, have endured the lashings of two decades, I'm filled with awe. (Fact is, except for occasional quarrels, committed graff writers will never spoil another writer's work—though they will be ruthless with their own. I have found dark, smudged letters, visible still under a re-coating of white background paint, on top of which the writer set out to retrace the same letters, obsessing about an effect he could imagine but failed to achieve at first.)

As for Ikso's plans:

of going to Florida, where he would have *su propio cuarto*—a room of his own.

The friend who told him that the two of them could ride in a third party's car now tells him that the trip has unravelled. (Does he even sound gloomy?) Other projects brew in his mind, though—projects that he remembers having thought about from time to time—buying a used car—moving out—registering for college—

I no longer remember exactly what Ikso said about each of these, but I do remember he was loath to speak of his current circumstances. All I could gather was, he lives in a single-wide trailer along with his mother, stepfather, and three half-sisters—the oldest one not a teen yet. Ikso, come to think, is 24 years of age.

He said all these things intermittently. I remember the modulations of the breeze in the green foxtails, the seesawing nature of Ikso's plans.

THE PORCH

Around this time I went back to a former habit of mine, of taking long, solitary walks, and ventured further out, away from the railroad track, in a westerly direction, on a street along which, as I could discern from the overpass near Vernal Pike and Curry Pike, cadaverous houses slowly gave way to modest family houses mid otherwise undeveloped woods and farmland. On a radiant day like that one, when the snow had melted and winter was grudgingly retreating, everything—every bare limb, every nick on the bark of trees—showed up at its crudest, and withered buds did not yet have a soft pulp. I passed a line of family lots whose acreage, gradually larger, afforded an intimation of open views, and the silence was so heavy and secretive that even the chirping of the song sparrows seemed strangely out of place.

The first robin of the season. The ground swollen with rotten leaves.



Three-fourths of an hour later I saw a house out of which were dilapidated, washed-out recliners and sofas, scattered like relatives kicked out. To the right of the front entrance, on a curiously framed canvas tilting precariously towards the ground, a painter had crudely drawn the Afroamericans' most salient, stereotyped features: frizzy short hair, flattened nose, prominent lips. Wheels on the gravel jolted me from my absorption. For a long time after this, the monstrosity of the drawing—two sexless heads on a sanbenito-yellow sackcloth, expressly drawn to prompt scorn—often crowded up into my mind, though I'd have been hard-pressed to say why, until another memory drifted in from years past, a boy doll I had seen at a family home in Martinsville, grotesquely carved in a wood stump. The doll's figure was distorted from lack of skill, yet the intention to portray an Afro-American man was clear, and I later came to know that the carving was used for target practice.

Although Ikso rarely complained to me, on a particularly chilly morning he did complain that his parents would not give him the key to the front door. During the months of winter, his mother would open a roll-away cot for him in the living room, because the shed he occupied in warmer weather was unheated. But the night before he had not arrived at the appointed time, and so everyone was inside, sleeping, unaware that he alone was outside. He'd never think of shouting, and his parents remained deaf to what was, by all accounts, barely a whisper. In the end, he stopped making noise, curled up in the porch, and simply let the day wear on. He heard a rabbit scurry by and imagined the beautiful silver back of a mother skunk, bringing up the rear of her litter. And through the mist shining white in the night, he saw an owl flit across the backyard. At length, he fell asleep.

AT THE TRACK

Mornings would start quietly. I was always the first one on the track. Ikso told me he would see me walk, then roll off his bed, toss something on his pajamas and run after me. He'd come out of nowhere, so I asked,

‘How can you run so well on the track,’ because the ground is so uneven. He answered as someone on-the-know, sly and happy to be reckoned with, ‘You mustn’t allow yourself to set down your feet as if you were going to stop. On the contrary, step on your tiptoes, take the next step right away, barely graze the ground, do not—

Do not sink your heels in!’

He skimmed along the ground like a bird flying low. He well knew how tracks go treacherous on the inexperienced wanderer, and so my question must have come as no surprise to him. ‘But once you get hooked on it,’ he added, ‘you crave the track wherever you go.’

That was when Ikso began to recount, now and again, incidents from his childhood in Fort Wayne. Even the least of his reminiscences, which could well intrude in the narration of a critical event, held details to such a vivid degree that I wondered whether Ikso did not miss life in Fort Wayne. He grew up playing on the railroad tracks, his favorite one being a yard he could observe from the empty third-floor of a filling station house. The house itself was one of the Tudor Revival buildings that graced the more prestigious neighborhoods in the city, only that particular neighborhood had undergone a natural decay and the house, the track, and the train station nearby, they were all vacant and in ruins. He’d sit on the broken-down steps of the train station, he remembered, and watch others just like himself, roaming the tracks with lowered heads. At other times there was no trace of movement but for one dog, which he often fed his homemade sandwiches. Along our walk, having reached the spot from which we’d climb down to the main track, I recovered a penny: it was nearly lost in the gravel, its vicissitudes clearly shown by its ghostly thinness, the widening of its diameter to twice the original size, the levelling of Lincoln’s ancestral face. At the sight of this penny, Ikso gave a hint of a smile, moved by a recollection that had all but slipped his memory—himself as a little boy flattening pennies.

On occasions, he would join a couple of eleven-year-olds on a three-mile trek along the railroad tracks that ran across the street from his house. Sometimes, they walked on the rails, balancing themselves with arms outstretched; sometimes they walked railroad tie by railroad tie. Once they vowed to reach a bridge that was only wide enough for the train alone, there to hang from a telegraph post next to the bridge, so close that they might even roll on top of the train if it chanced to stop right then, though they would rather test their mettle, uncertain if they could withstand the dreadful shiver when the train went by. None of the three ducked out of the unspoken pact, and after the thundering noise had faded away, Ikso told me they grinned at each other, filled with both pride and relief. The feeling that Ikso culled from this dreaminess was freedom. Yes, freedom. Now his youth spared him the aches from lifting trays of cans to refill soda machines, but his life was painful nonetheless, bound up as it was with tedious jobs, and with choices that made a mockery of desire, because every choice dimmed his joy.

BREAKFAST

The bus stops briefly at the terminal on Fourth and Washington Streets: passengers come and go in waves, their numbers swelling at ten after the hour, then dwindling. I can easily spot the regulars, though I am not really sure whether I have seen them before or whether there is premature wear and tear in my mental apparatus.

I look: On a bench outside the terminal building sits a very large woman, about sixty. Short socks. Eyes are murky—hangover bliss. She sees me and exclaims with unexpected familiarity, almost demanding: ‘There you are! Where’ve you been?’ Then her son gives her arm a squeeze and I decide against answering. He keeps an eye on her.

I look: On the sidewalk stands a middle-aged man. Little hair or fine down? There are people whose countenance and behavior kindle in me the belief in metempsychosis—he is one. Looks down Washington Street to his right. Looks down Washington Street to his left. Changes

his mind and looks to his right. The obvious analogy is with a suricate on its hind legs—must have a very supple neck to crank his head 180° every ten seconds or so.

Early in the evening I'm struck by the sameness of grays. At times it seems as though the only bright color is the purple of Lent, draped over the cross in the lawn of the First United Episcopal Church, east of the bus terminal.

I look: Just off the curb people are bunching together, helping a very old man to his feet. He has a voice like a woman's, thin, very much in keeping with the paucity of matter still clinging to him: short height, scant weight. But he's dandily dressed: ruffled country-dance shirt underneath his conventional gray jacket, belt with gilt buckle. And then—his shoes. As he stands up on nervous thin legs, ostensibly mirthful tho pastel cream from the scare, he denounces his shoes: 'They are a little too wide. My feet get twisted inside them shoes, they wobble this way, that way. . . .'

The shoes have been meticulously laced and shone, and they are new. There's not a soul in sight with new shoes. Then someone: 'The nearest shoe repair shop is two blocks away, on Washington and Sixth.'

'In no way,' the old man bristles. 'I get my shoes at the VA's office.'

Everybody glances over at his feet. A certain entitlement to orthopedic shoes would seem to be the only plausible explanation. Then someone: 'Well, get the VA to give you new shoes!'

'In no way,' says the old man, 'these are good shoes. Very good shoes!' He thinks it through for a moment, then adds, 'They'll fix them for me—they always do.'

Then someone: 'What—you take your shoes back to them?'

I look: At the alley north of the First United Episcopal Church, where Shalom is housed: there they feed breakfast and lunch to the homeless, and run a pantry for the poor. There a bearded man is. Himself one of Shalom's regulars, in his forties and blond, he doubles as Peter the doorkeeper, 'Nice to see you again!' A young couple muffled

and apart, speaking to each other in a whisper, both wearing jackets of leather, black. I look them over and see a girl seemly height but orange-and-crimson hair! On his back a rumsack, black. And they have now begun to hug, kiss each other.

(*Thursday*) A few minutes into the hour—this is now eight in the morning—and Ikso is running on the track, trying to catch up with me. He's holding up his baggy pants, it's really quite a sight—it's really quite simple. The trees south of the track appear to be standing straight like high candelabras, their shadows stretching out on ground we continuously leave behind, and Ikso's slender figure grows tall. He stops and doesn't speak. I sigh—

'Yes.'

'Yes.'

'Yes.'

'Yeah,' he says, 'I need to lose some weight.'

'Why?'

'I've gained five pounds.'

I look at him. 'How tall are you?'

'Five feet nine.'

'How much do you weight?'

'140 pounds.'

But he's started saying again, 'You don't understand. I *have* gained five pounds.' (*Blessed be weight that, same as weather, it lends a little commonality to our talk.*)

'Well, weight gain is unavoidable when you work in a restaurant'—I'm blindly feeling my way here.

Ikso nods as tho he is in agreement, then says little more. I had wanted to ask how goes it, but he's fallen quiet. 'I'm not working right now,' he finally says.

'So I was wrong about why you gained weight! Have you had breakfast today?'

His face a little long, his face—

His face a little black, he has withdrawn into his hip-hop grey jersey hooded sweatshirt like an animal asleep in his warm lair. He says no. A feral cat shoots between two shrubs, long hair flaring, black. The cat seems well nourished—perhaps there are ways. The conversation might have continued but—

The bus crosses the city streets. When it's 8:30, as it comes to its scheduled stop at the downtown terminal—as passengers bail out by the back door and telemarketers and grocery baggers climb aboard—poor folk file across the street, a frilly parade on their way to the Shalom kitchen. Ikso, too. He might have walked for an hour or longer without telling me that he was hungry. Persisting in an extreme, almost stupid, politeness. I tell him about Shalom, now he jumps up, 'I'll try them out,' then crosses the street like the rest, and waits by a tree. (In the dead winter, that was the last winter, the church gardener pruned the tree. It grew short, with feathered folk hunching on the skinny branches.) He and Peter are chatting, about this or not about this, but chatting nonstop. Having never met, they know each other by the hunger.

IKSO: THE NAME

Some mornings I am matter-of-fact: work is work, the track happens to be the fastest way to get to it. This morning, though, the track has all the look of a picture painted by a small child. I half-close my eyes, yearning to recall the stammering and puffing of the steam giants as they stirred out of their monstrous lethargy, *ch-ch-chooo chooo*. An engine breaks in through the early morning fog. I can only make out its huge beacon of light, air and ground disappearing into bright-flecked waves. Then I sense the yellow Diesel engine as it quietly emerges toward my back. I buck left and it glides in, close, and dissolves to the east.



When I was growing up, trains were transportation. I walk alongside an idle freight train. As I reach the grassy field leading to Lowe's, I glance over the train by way of farewell, and see the childish drawing of a chick in flight. The drawing is subtitled *ALIVE!* and has been sprayed high up on the train siding—youngsters will often do this by standing one on the shoulders of another.

The stillness of this moment. Is it frost or fog that so stubbornly hangs round this place? A stillness barely jolted when the engine hooks up with the boxcar farthest forward. Then, as fluids spill to the hydraulic brakes, a percussive beginning. But the train does not yet depart—not yet.

Graffiti writers enact very strict social control, and there is something brutally honest about what someone has sprayed next to the chick-and-*ALIVE!* drawing: *NOT IN MY YARD, TOY.*¹ I know from experience

¹*Toy* is a pejorative used by experienced graffiti writers to refer to others, often children, immature enough to spray-paint words and drawings without concern for their form or without obscuring their meaning from the outside world.

that the chick will not be permitted to stay up for long, and decide to capture the jabs between *writer* and *toy* before an opaque coat of paint erases the *toy*'s sketch. As I grope for the camera in my pocket, the train jolts again, imperceptibly, it begins to pull out.

'It's cold out here this morning!'

'I take photos because I like graffiti. Really,' I say. The stranger makes a shrug—we both know that I know he doesn't believe me. Ruddy build and fake suede jacket. If he's a graffiti writer, he has me pegged: he probably thinks I am an official from the Norfolk or Conrail administration, gathering evidence against graf writers, and the heck of it is, he might even think I'm a cop. Am mortified that I did not hear him walking behind me until he'd already closed in.

'I don't see anything wrong with graffiti,' the stranger says. His jacket must be at least five sizes too small, which makes him look bulkier than he is. Speaks with an unfiltered air of self-importance.

'Are you a cop?' I ask.

'Am not on official duty in the mornings, so I do not pack my gun.' He hems and haws, postures a bit, demands respect, but it soon becomes apparent that he's nothing but a mongrel bounty hunter. 'I often walk by at night, and I see that they're painting, and it *is* against the law, but I do not arrest them. I don't like to bother people.'

'You don't arrest them because there's no money in it!' I say.

I've long suspected it, now I have confirmation: some of the graffiti writers whose work I admire live in my backyard. One Kavis lives nearby. They may lurch along the track, they may be ungainly, anarchist punks, crass, too (*Rock with your cock out!*), but they make up for it all with a toughness of character. I would like to meet them in person. . . .

Even among studious observers, first impressions count, and my first impression of Kavis's graffiti is one of unspeakable violence. One of the hieroglyphs I was able to link to him shows a gun—bullets firing—the word ACT next to it. Kavis's work goes beyond the cartoonish

guns and the calls to political action, though: he designed his name—just five letters—to span the length of three consecutive boxcars. Even today I remember my astonishment at the sheer monumentality of that graffiti. In time I came to learn that he leads ACT, a graffiti crew whose ragged goals range from rebelliousness to hiring out as painters: they have decorated the corner of Walnut and Kirkwood streets, for example—their commissioned art, not surprisingly, tame.

From the start, though, I was drawn towards another local crew, which adopted the New Yorker acronym MUL (*Made-u-Look*), even though, by—and—large, they are artists far less accomplished than Kavis and the rest. I sympathize with MUL's Acero, and with Richie, and with Tcb, not so much for the flight of their fantasy as for their attachment to the reality of everyday—Richie's efforts to live the life of a hobo by hooking up with any job, bargain or steal move me, always. It is this mixture of homelessness of the heart, and longing, which they intimate on the boxcars in the simplest manner, that, I now remember, once tempted me to chime in (though I did not).

Ahead of me, a large buck has gone across: he sinks his hooves firmly into the snow—a slanted, downward-sloping movement, and in the bottom of the track black marks where he pierced down to the ground—then he drags them so that, after he has sunk away from sight, furrows remain. There smaller deer walk into, step by step. Am trying to gather my thoughts as I stroll: graffiti, graffiti, graffiti, graffiti, graffiti. Little orphans, mongrel dogs, the lonely, the throwaways, the irrelevant, each of them pulling himself up by the bootstraps, each trying out a name he has chosen all alone. Fatherless youth! (The point of the struggle, of course, is naming oneself.)

Two days later Ikso joins me, walking the snow-saturated ground with a kind of saunter as if he didn't feel the chilling from the north. He's lost some of his shyness, I can see the hint of a mustache. Walks in front of me, asks if I have seen "the new train:" boxcars on the siding track, overlooking the main track. I have not. 'Worth a walk?' I

ask. ‘Quite.’ Now he’s mocking me. ‘Paint me, oh paint me!’ he says, addressing *the train*. No doubt I have spoken too admiringly about graffiti. He points to one so-called throwup.² ‘Wow,’ he says, ‘I really like that one!’ When he reads it aloud, he pronounces it ‘IKE’ + ‘SO’.

On the track I think of Spinoza’s certainty that *we can know everything*. Of course he means that humankind will collectively be able to know—but that abundance of knowledge, as an expression of the future, hardly suits *this* life of mine. That said, I still fall prey to his brand of illusion, and am now looking to define what IKSO means.

‘Tell me what it means,’ I beg my young friend. I assume that *he* is the writer—why else would he lead me to a piece that, unlike other graffiti, shells out all four letters, one by one, without disguise or dissimulation. Then, when he holds his index finger to his lips, frost-colored, I conclude that I’ll have to extract the truth from him by hook or crook.

It’s hidden, lying out there, so I take up a single letter—the K—thinking that its glosses among graff writers are so few that I might find out what IKSO means simply by hitting on the K. ‘Icey Killah,’ say I with a stiff Yankee accent. ‘Illest King,’ he counters. I say that can’t be because King is not a name a writer would claim for himself—rather, it is a distinction bestowed upon him by other writers. We both sense that we are participating in a barter. That, with profound, mutual suspicion, we are trading information that we have in order to get some in return. We amuse ourselves with the more common ‘Kool’ and ‘Krazy,’ and bat about proper names, ‘Kurtis,’ ‘Kevin,’ ‘Keaton,’ ‘Kane.’

‘Kat!’ say I.

‘Kung!’ says he. (At length a word with sound hip-hop pedigree!)

²Technical name for street art that uses only two paint colors.



‘Stop!’ The K is bottomless, the I should turn up new solutions. But except for state names, I can picture only two hiphop I-words, ‘Infinity,’ as in INFINITY RAPPERS, and ‘Incredible,’ as in FLOORMASTERS INCREDIBLE BREAKERS.

‘And Ill,’ Ikso reminds me.

‘Of course!’ (That evening, obsessed, I added two more words: ‘Independent’ and ‘Invisible.’ And yet another one, ‘Ice,’ as in ICE T. ‘No,’ I tell myself. . .)

Wanting to know easily leads to blindness. I’ve gotten this mania for acronyms and neglected the love of detail. While it is true that every letter might point to a separate word, graffiti writers also indulge in one-to-many mappings, so TCB might mean *The Cee Boy* but also *The*

Collective Burner. Or the need to keep apace with speedier writers might move others to shorten their tag while retaining, each in his mind, the unabbreviated meaning, so TC could still mean the same as TCB—*The Cee Boy*, say. Not to mention deliberate misspellings (SEN for ZEN) or, worse yet, the writer’s decision to have a letter stand for *any* part of a word (so K would match KILLER and also FUCK).

I give up.

In a masterpiece of Argentine literature, Facundo, a persecuted man, writes with coal words unreadable by his countrymen. His hieroglyphics are said to contain outbursts, insults, and threats. ‘What does that mean?’ ask the officials when they finally learn what the words are. And this is just how graffiti work: tags encapsulate a writer’s private agreement with himself, and all of this makes it an exercise in futility to try to guess their meaning *unless the author gives it away*.

No longer on the sly, I ask: ‘Did you write IKSO?’

South of the track the land becomes civilized. Power posts rise from the Cinergy wirefenced station. Around it, the marshy field: garbage bags its ditches, starlings trill the wires. Farther south, heavy, rusty black Buicks whizzing down the street. Am smiling alone. Later I’ll laugh because, it turns out, my young friend is afraid of the dark. And as he’s afraid of walking the track in the twilights, he did not write IKSO on the boxcar: trains get “burned” overnight. Now we can stop playing games. We still know damn little about each other, though—I wish I knew his given name. . . . Till I know it, Ikso sticks.

AT THE TRACK

One day, while narrating an earlier trip to Ft. Lauderdale—this had been a trip for his high-school graduation, not a trip with his family but with his graduating classmates—, Ikso spoke with sadness about going off alone. They were fighting all the time, he said of his friends. ‘So what did you do?’ I asked. He withdrew into the quiet—

Into the quiet of a flat rock perched on the ocean. Was he looking at the ocean, as he said? (Was he looking the blue over—looking to reach into the horizon, which blurs?)

That evening he rejoined his friends, sporting not quite a sunburn but a very vigorous “tan” (we both laughed at the inadequacy of the word “tan, ” but he wanted to describe the particular glow of a well sunned, light-black Hispanic). ‘They didn’t think it at all odd that I’d left them,’ Ikso said. ‘And nothing changed: they kept on fighting all the time.’

‘What about?’

Ikso rolled big eyes. ‘They were into drinking,’ he said. ‘They were always drinking. I couldn’t take all that crazyness,’ and he shook his head.

On another occasion he had arranged to meet with a friend downtown, but when he arrived, his friend wasn’t home. He had no idea whether to wait—it was late afternoon, and one of his friend’s neighbors was having a happy hour, so the door was open. ‘I can’t remember,’ Ikso said frankly, ‘I might have had more than one beer. I don’t think I did.’ They filled his glass, and filled it again. Suddenly, he found himself the butt of blatant provocations by some of those rowdy fellows, whom he did not even know. ‘I wasn’t going to fight them,’ he told me, ‘I counted, and they were four or five, so I left and walked home.’ Unable to hook up with his friend, he had to hike over six miles—buses do not run on Sundays. He was always so utterly alone—

We were in the middle of the field that enveloped all four sides of the power station, a no-man’s land between the tracks and the mall, between the rocky knoll and the water breaks, between the wild grasses and the cultivated Brandon pear trees. Now and then, a car would speed by on the two-way street that ran along the field, and through the open grasses I could see Lowe’s north entrance (the one normally used by contractors), already lit by the sun up, and men, looking out at us. I summoned in my mind an outworldly being who would find

a wing beat much too loud. Then, wouldn't that soul just leave upon hearing anything louder than a bird taking flight, say? Even if he had come this far, if he couldn't take the blare from a radio—say he couldn't take the blare from a radio—, he would have to go back, he'd immediately return to his home. Listening to Ikso, I was struck by how unsuited to *barrio* life he was, being so drawn to peace and quiet. If it be true that old age fulfills the dreams of youth, then Ikso in his old age would live alone by the ocean.

OFF THE TRACK

'What's that?' I signaled a set of animal tracks that had hardened on the ground. 'Deer,' Ikso replied. That's the thing about animal tracks: they intrude into your field of vision very suddenly and then, just as suddenly, they vanish. Or perhaps they do not, but all your efforts to follow them are wretchedly thwarted: the tracks that first elated you



because they were so explicit now confuse you, because they venture

into woolly grasses and watery dirt, they cross other footprints, they fill up with particle dust and, in the end, they withdraw from your sights. Tracks hung about me in a premonition of memories I was then forming—

THE GRANDMOTHER

Today he was not wearing rainproof windbreaker, jersey sweatshirt underneath, but dark jacket, tie, and spit-shining leather shoes. I teased him, ‘Who’s she?’ He answered with a tinge of sadness in his voice, though perhaps it wasn’t sadness so much as it was amazement—the thing he was unprepared for: ‘Am going to my grandmother’s funeral.’

‘Oh!’ Then rolled the stories.

She wasn’t really his grandmother but someone his stepfather called grandmother, though even that relationship was founded on affection only. This particular fact might have made it harder for Ikso that no one, stepfather included, had the money to take the dead woman to the “beauty parlor,” as they called the funeral home, and so they would just get together at a religious service, the body absent. I did not ask whether she had been handed over to the town trustee for disposal—I do not think I had to, or that it mattered. As I gave my gloves to Ikso because they finished his getup rather nicely, I understood the day by the dead woman’s passing, though “understood” is, again, too strong a word. I believe I meant that I saw the whole universe inextricably bound in the quality of things being *gone and done with*. (For a while we kept busy divining the path a deer had followed. Later, other family stories would follow.)

THE BARRIO

He grew up with his own parents and an older half-brother from his father’s side. His middle school days ended with soda drinks at the railroad station, then led to the overpass bridge, where he tried his

hand at spraying graffiti. ‘I was never good enough,’ he said, ‘I could only write my name.’ (*And what’s your name?*) ‘But I had friends who were excellent graffiti writers,’ he added. His was—

A hesitant narration, as though understanding his own short life required that he butt his recollections together, threading them with conjunctions not yet invented. Speaking the way of graffiti, or artful deceit. Back to Ft. Wayne. In measured quiet lines, each rising at its end, Ikso told me this story:

‘It happened, I think, a way after graduation, though some of my classmates were very poor and never graduated. Some were very poor, some were not. And then some who were very poor all of a sudden got rich. I would go to the coffee shop and hear stories, though I don’t think I can repeat them here and now. The ones who made it big began to sell drugs, and then a rival would get up and run them out of town. All of a sudden my mother left. She had to go live her own life, and then my father moved out, too. My half-brother was eighteen already; he and I were saddled with the apartment at the Housing Project, but this was a time when we didn’t have any money, so I moved back with my mother and now my step-father. My brother lived alone. Later I learned that a guy from the Housing Project wanted to kill him, so my brother took evasive action. He moved out of the state. He left behind a bat from his fights at the Housing Project.’

It rained a lot that year.

We had reached the Lowe’s storefront: a line of white Buicks and light, rusty black Toyotas spread fan-wise in the parking lot. ‘I never heard from my brother again.’ We got to the bus stop just as the bus got there, too. Once aboard, we became strangers.

Again.

WHO IS IKSO

Lately I have expanded my weekend wanderings. For a long time I wanted to reach the track under the overpass east of *Pep Boys*; this is the trackage marked “218.4,” which winds up into town. ‘There must

be working rail equipment in that place, which likely I haven't seen elsewhere,' I told myself, and also, I found out that Ikso himself has been through there. He even suggested I take a look at the graffiti on the pilings, and he sounded genuinely excited about them. His enthusiasm mattered to me much more than the railroad equipment.

The wind was strong and gusty—packaging foam strewn in the tracks, both main and sidings, the waste that tumbled out of a boxcar, door wide open still, *Hi bitch* sprayed on the inside wall.



Even from afar I could see that a graffiti writer had taken grave risks to spray the walls of the overpass bridge. At first I thought he probably hung from a rope some 30 feet aboveground. I seemed to remember a news item, several years old, concerning a young man who had fallen off a bridge while spraying graffiti. (*Was it off this bridge?*) The writer became totally paralyzed. However, looking at the scene from a different angle, I realized that all that was required to spray the parapet of the bridge was to climb to the roof of the train: nowadays, freight trains are uniformly sized “Excess height,” and not a weekend goes by without boxcars parked under that overpass. But what makes a graffiti writer so obsessed with spraying his cryptic tag that he will risk even his life? Not this criticism—not even the dim recollection of that glum news—diminished my sympathies when I came within eyeshot of the pilings: those graffiti writers pictured themselves as artists, and that they'd hide their work impressed me all the more. In my mind, I went



back many years, when I had occasion to visit the Spanish cathedral in Toledo. Electrical lighting was added to it sometime in the twentieth century, and this made it possible to view the carvings, fine as lace, rising all the way to the dome. But the fifteenth-century stonecarvers thought that, once the scaffolding was removed, their work would never be seen—the cathedral walls might rise to the sky that the candles would not light them beyond head height. Yet if those men ever got to heaven, I feel certain they asked the Lord, ‘Where do You hide your carvings?’, so godlike they thought their work was.

You could barely see a sliver of sky from under the overpass. I spun around over and over again to grasp graffiti that were sometimes collective montage, sometimes individual sketches; here a piece of craftsmanship, there a monstrosity; sometimes felt political statements, sometimes cartoon-like clichés. . . . I read them all, each and every one of them, and at last reached the farthest pilings on the north side of the bridge: beyond this point the tracks merge into a single track, which runs west-east, toward Bloomington. On that wall, beside graffiti by

a local writer from the political activists' crew (ACT), I found a lone name. I studied it at length. It was a novice's /so-called "throwup," light-blue edges and white fill. Others were overly elaborate, letters bumping up against each other; this one was modest-sized and frank. It read MARK.



Could it be my young friend's name? He wasn't a good graffiti writer, he'd said, and the MARK tag on the wall attested to that—it wasn't artful enough. I became engrossed in the overlays of paint covering the two walls, the amorphous, chaotic shifting of paint that breaks and rolls, its surface broken by subsystems that interfere with it and appear and disappear, and finally vanish, the writers' unwavering expression of self only to have nature scramble the whole thing with vines imprinting on the wall, hooks spun through the air like miniature sickles, catching and digging into the concrete. I have come back to this strange place many times since. I look at the sprayed walls from one vantage point, then another, trying to remember what I first saw in them. Everything looks exactly the same, just as I thought it would when I approached the overpass.

All that and the silence.

AT THE TRACK

Yesterday, while I was walking towards a train idled away a hundred yards or so, a doe ran across the track from the clump of trees to the

north. Although the overgrown grasses hid the animal well, I could still see her: the doe standing motionless, looking up alert, two big sad eyes gauging the danger. On many other occasions, with every new view, every new graffiti, every set of animal tracks, I'd developed the habit of turning to Ikso and exchanging comments with him, and so now, under the spell of the doe, I entertained the distinct feeling that someone was running after me. Perhaps a ghost locomotive sweeping from a bend in the road. I turned around and waited, but the track was deserted.

Weeks ago Ikso told me that he'd been given till the end of the month to leave his mother's and stepfather's trailer. So he dared call his father in Richland, Minnesota, and asked for help. With his usual penchant for the understatement, Ikso said he told his father, 'All this hurry bothers me a little.' 'Relax,' his father answered. 'Don't worry. And count on me. I'll be able to take care of you.' Around that time we were waiting for the bus, and I saw him wearing a photo ID, limp from his neck. 'Are you working again?' I asked. I moved closer to him to see it better. He took it off and gave it to me. 'It's from my old job at Universal Studios, in Hollywood. What I liked about it the most,' I'm sure he paused for effect, 'were the subways.'

'Your name is Marcus,' I read it off the tag.

'Mark,' he said. (And was he saying good-bye?)

It's been weeks since Ikso last walked the tracks. My need for an ending cannot be permitted to dim this truth: I have not heard a word, I know nothing of Ikso. *What becomes of all these birds that people the air and forest? The sparrows seem always chipper, never infirm. We do not see their bodies lie about. . . .* The narrator vanishes. (She is overwhelmed by the vast silence.

She walks the profoundly solitary track, and await the trains, and the deer.)