

## Toilet Training

I  
Few cars and fewer people. The sun perched, hawklike, on a rooftop corner. The sky blue and silent. Hatch gazed into the rich expanse of his shadow and felt challenged. Something flared up inside him. With spring in his legs, he bolted through the strange but familiar constellation of streets. A strong staying breeze, an uneven blowing at his ears. His eyes straining against their sockets, needles pricking his lungs, and the sidewalk grabbing for his ankles. He ducked inside a doorway and sat down hard on the stoop. Head bowed, feverish, he struggled within.

The sun grinned down. What up, homes?

Hatch removed the water pistol from inside his jacket pocket, shielded his eyes, and sighted along the barrel. Curled his finger around the trigger and gently squeezed. The sun steamed from the blast of cool liquid, trembled, but remained lodged on the rooftop. Frowned down into Hatch's face and spewed sharp angles of light in retaliation. Hatch drew back, defeated.

A small figure moved in the hollow of an autumn afternoon. Jacket, a backward apron; sleeves tied around his waist. The sun waited, half-swallowed by the horizon. But he walked quietly, drawing

reassurance into himself with each step, his sneaky shadow slithering along behind him.

## II

Cosmo squats behind the hedge, claws dangling at his groin like wicked catcher's mitts. The dome of his head visible above the green edge, a half-risen half-fallen sun. His hair crinkled and greasy like fried bacon. The sky brightens. Sunlight darts inside the hedge. Dungarees ignite, boots glisten. A rat scuttles through the grass, unaware.

In one movement, Cosmo crashes through the hedge, lands, froglike, and levels a claw. The rat is still and lumpy, a sack of loose rocks. Cosmo rubs his claws with joy. The rodent recovers and rushes for the grass. Too late.

Cosmo snatches up his prey, cranes his neck, and begins lowering the rat headfirst into his mouth. The rat's front feet pedal in air. Buckteeth snap at Cosmo's lips. But the front feet and the buckteeth and the head disappear inside Cosmo's mouth, a fuzzy sword. A gurgling sound announces its descent. The butt wiggles. The hind feet stroke Cosmo's cheeks. The tail whips.

Cosmo blinks, hard, squaring his mouth. The feet twitch a little. Cosmo brings both claws to his mouth and forces the rat inside, its tail gyrating between his lips. He sucks it up like a string of spaghetti, throat pregnant.

*Carpet, coffee table, chairs, love seats, paintings, couch, and walls—all submerged in the liquid glow of television, which thins out, a few blue-white strands, ghostly ripples, the farther it travels from the source.*

*How come those Indians don't pull out they arrows? Hatch asks. Is they chicken?*

*Nawl, Cosmo says. If they pull out they arrows, then those cowboys will come back to life.*

*If Cosmo regurgitates the rat, will it come back to life?*

He scratches away spittle with a bladed fingernail, long, sharp, and shiny in the sunlight. Continues to squat, awaiting birth.

## III

A thick fuzzy night. Coming out of the hot street, made hotter by a golden low-hanging moon and hundreds of blazing streetlamps. Harch pushed the door open with his fingertips, the water pistol tight in his other hand. He entered and closed the door behind him. Wide-eyed in the darkness. Mamma was usually home to greet him when he made it in from school. On rare occasions Cosmo would arrive before her. At the far end of the room, French doors, open just enough for one to edge through sideways. A sliver of slanted light, a thin line of carpet luminous. The jacket still tight about his waist, Harch pushed his keys deep inside his pocket, then wrapped both hands around the water pistol and walked toward the beacon of light. The dark put a hand against his back and shoved. He fell heavy to the floor, hammer to anvil, chin-first, pistol still in hand, the weapon plowing a short path through the carpet, raking up fibers. He shut his eyes against the pain. Spun his head and laid his jowl against the plush springy softness of the carpet. Shook inside as if some strange force were gathering.

Sometimes you just irritate the shit out of me. Cosmo started round.

Harch raised his head and flicked open his eyes. Something stepped into the edge of his vision in the angle of light. He didn't move. Followed the something with his eyes. Blinkered in details. Old-man shoes. Sharply pointed. With whorls of perforation. Baggy pants with fine creases. Knee-length blazer. Silk polka-dot tie. Fedora. Harch's body trembled with something it could not let out.

Yo! In front of him now, glaring down.

The pistol was ice between his palms.

Yo!

I'm all right!  
I didn't ask if you was all right.  
So.  
Say what?  
He didn't say anything.  
Did you say something?  
Nawl. ;  
Cosmo flexed his soles, stretching the leather, talons threatening to burst out. I didn't think so. He threw the door wide. Shadows fled. Hatch waited until he was absolutely certain that Cosmo had quit the room, then squeezed his eyes tight.

#### IV

That's why I say, Mamma said, her voice a whisper, only what you have in your stomach is yours. She placed her spoon on the edge of her saucer and raised her cup to her lips, her face a smooth round tab of caramel candy.

What can you do? Dad said, head as bald as the chicken drumstick in his fist, torso constricted in a tight sports shirt, arms strong, with pronounced veins. What can you do?

They were seated next to one another at the long dining table, framed within the long window behind them, night pressing against the light within, the faraway rush and hum of occasional cars. On the opposite side, Cosmo sat beside Hatch, stretching out first one leg and then the other and feeling inside each trouser pocket. The smell of meat bent in the air, and Cosmo's cologne snapped in and out of Hatch's nostrils like a sporadic cloud of gnats.

Mamma glared at Hatch over the edge of her cup. He placed the water pistol on his lap, sat back. Cosmo was fussing with his tie, straightening it, smoothing out the wrinkles. Mamma threw her eyes in his direction. What's wrong? A hundred-dollar bill slip in there? Cosmo grinned. No, ma'am.

Well then.

Cosmo picked up his fork and started in on his dinner. Hatch mumbled grace—God good. God great. Let us thank him for food and men—and lifted his fork. The plates and cups and utensils were white from constant scrubbing. He studied his distorted reflection.

Poor man. To spend all those years in jail. And for nothing. Mamma sipped steaming liquid. Hatch admired the rhythm of her throat. Dad opened his mouth to admit corn bread. Cosmo did not look up from his plate. A splash of light from the small chandelier above the dinner table gave his hair an even greasier appearance. Mamma lowered her cup to the saucer. An innocent man. But God will tell.

Cosmo fumbled his fork.

God will tell.

Cosmo raised his head and stared fixedly, straight past Dad's shoulder and through the window.

Mamma took a cigarette—smoking was her only vice—from her pack on the table. Lit up, drew long and deep, blew out a stream of smoke. Such was her sustenance, for she put their hunger before her own, waited for *her men* to eat before she forked her fill. She wanted her men healthy and strong, and daily prepared each a tall cold glass of sulfur and water, flmed over with cod-liver oil, and watched and waited until each drained it in her monitoring presence. Now he's back with his family.

Cosmo stared straight ahead—out the window? at a precise location in the black distance?

Mamma drew on the cigarette, blew the smoke through her nose like a bull. Hatch considered applauding the miracle but decided against it. She set the cigarette on the lip of her saucer. And they gave him money. Millions of dollars. But what he had to endure! His eye poked out! Wir a red-hot poker!

Cosmo sat, transfixed.

Mamma took a sip of coffee—what Harch had been waiting for, that rhythm; he had to clamp his hand over his mouth to keep from screaming in delight—and lowered her cup to the saucer. But see, God will tell. They been tryin to put that company back to right. But they never will. Never will. Mamma shook her head in righteous satisfaction.

Now, that's my idea of justice, Cosmo said.

Mamma's mouth snapped shut. In one fluid motion, she surged forward and landed a sonorous blow against Cosmo's jaw.

Harch felt a curious stillness in the room, some invisible tent attached to the ceiling and overhanging the table. A bean dropped from Dad's raised stationary fork.

Thank you, Cosmo said. He scooted his chair back, rose quickly, and quit the table, creases snapping.

Something rolled coldly down Harch's cheek. He struggled to see. Mamma cut her eyes toward him. You want some? she said, still perched over the table.

No, ma'am. He wiped his eyes, darted a glance, swung his legs back and forth.

Mamma sat down. In counterpoint, Dad sprang up so quickly that he almost fell to the floor—as if the chair had been snatched out from under him. His sharp footsteps clipped down the hall. Mamma lit another cigarette and puffed slowly and deeply in another world, behind thin bars of smoke.

Shades drawn to prevent the moon from surveying him through the window. Cosmo lay flat on his bed, staring up at the ceiling, studying the heavens through the telescope of his dick.

## V

Yo brother retarded.

Don't talk bout my family.

Yo brother—  
My final warning.  
And he—

Harch punches the bastard in the mouth.

A crew of roughnecks on the corner spots Cosmo, his fedora bobbing on his head like a storm-tossed ship. What up, player. They laugh, throwing their heads back.

Go ask yo mamma! Harch shouts. Stank ho.

Cosmo looks at him hard. Jus mind yo own business.

You gon let them talk bout you?

Cosmo slaps him upside the head.

See the way that gump slap shorty?

Yeah. Picking on the lil guy.

We should kick his ass.

Give him a fo-real ass whupping.

Harch rubs his pain-blotted head.

Come on, Cosmo says.

Skinny motherfucker.

Stick in the mud.

Retard.

Gump.

## VI

Hatch sucker punches Dad in his hard flat middle and pleads for a cupla bucks. Dad watches Harch with large quizzical eyes. What? he says. A cupla bucks? Here. Dad hops once, twice, kicking his heels into the middle of his back. Grins. He tells Harch to rub his bald peanut-colored head for good luck. Lets Harch tug his beard. Then he digs deep inside his pockets—he sounds them with silver—and gives Harch three dollars. Stiff new bills, brightly inked. Vibrant, Dad's dress shirt glows like a movie screen. (Mamma

keeps his ironed tops in the refrigerator so they'll remain soft and wrinkle free.) He heads for the door, his trusty Leica hanging from a neck strap.

Sargent, Mamma says, leave that camera here. Some thug mistake you for a tourist.

I cant. You know it's the eye of fortune.

Well, at least put it in the case.

Dad complies, then folds his red silk handkerchief into a compact square and polishes the brass door knocker. Joyous in alligator shoes, stepping carefully down the street on tippytoes—the inflated balls of his feet—taking small steps as if avoiding shit-smeared concrete.

The sun kisses the street into light and color. Skyscrapers glazed in bronze, copper, and gold. Hard haze on the brick buildings, cooking all the folks inside. Ants fry in the dirt. Roaches explode like tiny grenades. Nothing settles or stays untouched.

Dad cannot bear a single finger of warmth. Year-round keeps on his person a portable battery-operated fan that buzzes like a miniature bomb. An air conditioner cools every room in the house, humming at all hours, around the clock, a high cold winter voice.

One telling day, heat rips out the power lines. Agitation at heart, Dad seals himself inside his Town Car, parked at the curb in front of the house. Hatch watches him from a high window in the two-car garage where Cosmo lives and studies and works.

Ain't you gon come?

Nawl. Cosmo tinkers with an engine. You go head.

What's wrong? Is you chicken?

Nawl, I ain't chicken.

Then let's go.

I'm fine right here. Got work to do. Plenty work.

Chicken.

Cosmo's hands move over the engine.

Chicken.

Punk, who you calling chicken?  
You. Chicken.

Cosmo looks at Hatch, fire in his eyes.

Hatch lowers his face. Backs off. Best not to push his luck. He runs, legs pumping, to the Town Car and finds Mamma standing on the driver's side, leaning over, face level with the window, her long heavy breasts hanging like rubber bands, a prim dress billowing about her sculpted calves, her high long heels sharp tools jackhammering the concrete floor, her rich behind raised for all the world to see. Hatch bites his tongue in knowledge. Eye to keyhole, he sees Dad bang her at night—Kiss me, my proud beauty—Dad's duty, bed swinging from side to side like a hammock.

Sargent.

When will the power be on? Dad says, neck stiff, veins bulging like electrical cables. He stares straight ahead through the windshield. The car's roof glazed in afternoon sun. The air conditioner wheezing against the glass.

I just called the electric company, Mamma says. It'll be at least a few hours.

Well, I'll just stay in here until they get it back on.  
Sargent, don't act a fool. I—

I'll stay out here. Rolling his eyes a little to raise the volume of his voice.

Bright sun forces Hatch to blink. Up and down the street, trees shake in a hot breeze, light dripping, sweatlike, from their leaves.  
Then I'll sit out here with you.

No. Sun on Dad's face, a small glowing window.

Sargent, let me keep you company.

No.

Don't act a fool.

Dad doesn't speak or move, eyes staring straight ahead. A feeling silence.

Well, can I get you anything? A nice cold glass of aloe vera juice?  
The sun hits Dad's bald head with a dull thud. His shaped  
goatee glows like vanilla ice cream. No.

*Why don't you drive around some,* Hatch says.

Mamma looks at him. Go in the house. Hatch doesn't move.  
Boy, don't make me use my belt. Hatch starts his legs. Mamma  
turns back to Dad, whose blank face gleams. Sargent.

He says nothing. Deaf. Oblivious.  
Open the door.

Narrows his eyes and clenches his fists on the stationary steering wheel.

## VII

Cosmo leans around the corner, cautious. He looks back and takes Hatch's hand. Come on. They move swiftly to the bathroom. Cosmo leans outside the door, takes another look around, face bunched as if a firecracker had just exploded near his ears. He straightens up, tears off a square of toilet paper, crumples it into a ball, and pushes it into Hatch's hand. Here. He gets himself some. He carefully places the balled-up toilet paper into his mouth, then chews like an old man. Go on. Hatch pops the white ball into his mouth. Cosmo tears another sheet from the roll.

Mamma touches Cosmo's hair, slick wonder. Grease glistens on her fingertips. She rubs them together like money. You think you Mr. Cool in that bebop suit. She looks Cosmo up and down. He keeps his head bowed, thumb and forefinger shaping the brim of his fedora. Look like a pimp.

I aint no pimp.

What you say?

Nothing.

Wait till your father hear bout this.

JEFFERY RENARD ALLEN

Cosmo stands there, head bowed.  
You know I'm gon tell him.

If you must.

Mamma scrunches up her face. Let me advise you. Dereest who you are. Build a better self.

## VIII

Six o'clock. The alarm trumpets. Hatch lies very still in his bed until he hears Cosmo's door shut. He throws back his quilts, leaps up, opens his own door, and tiptoes down the hall. Bends over slow and careful to avoid knocking his forehead against the doorknob. Peers, squint-eyed, through the circle of the keyhole. Cosmo throws his clothes into a bundle, onto the floor, picks up a book, and slides into bed, genitals swinging. Hatch had hoped for something more.

After a while, Cosmo puts the book aside, then slips beneath the covers. Squirms on his belly, reptilelike, to get comfortable. Imprisoned in shoe boxes under the bed, rats squeak like heels on a basketball court.

His room is sorely neglected. The garage is his domain, where he spends most of the night on a queen-sized mattress on a patch of floor clean of oil stains and gasoline. Space arranged in an order he works hard to maintain. Something about the colors and their careful placement suggests motion. Dozens of stacks of aviation books and technical magazines. Engines in various stages of repair. Mechanical refuse from the neighbors' trash and yards. On the regular he invites Hatch into his world, his secrets. Kodaks of a woman with two ass-holes. A six-titted dwarf. A man with a big fat titty where his dick should be. And other wonders: A glow-in-the-dark penis. A crystal vagina. Aluminum condoms. Specimens in fluid-filled mason jars. He offers these revelations with a straight face, hot sunshine pouring through the high single window. Hatch aims through the glass and shoots down flying saucers with his water gun.

Toilet Training

Want to hear something? Cosmo asks.

What?

This one time, I ate a whole bar of scented soap. For the heck of it. What happened?

For a whole week, my turds come out white and smellin like expensive perfume.

Seven o'clock. Hatch rushes to his door, parts it a little. Cosmo approaches from down the hall, underclothing tucked against his side, suit trailing behind his shoulder, old-man shoes untied, genitals swinging.

Fully dressed an hour later. Breakfast on the table. He eats in one minute flat.

Gon choke to death one day, Mamma says. Eatin like somebody crazy.

Yesin. He kisses her cheek. Leather satchel in hand, clean dungarees folded over his arm, he rushes out to greet the new day. Walks bent forward, like somebody pushing through slanting snow.

If you gon be a pilot, how come you tinkering with that H-bitty engine?

Cosmo cracked his knuckles, popping one at a time. Look, I ain't gon be no pilot. That's a lawn-mower engine. And, those there, Volkswagen. I'm studying power-plant mechanics. I overhaul air-cooled engines. He went on, sounding like one of his books.

Hatch kept his distance. Drew his water pistol and considered firing.

Cosmo looked him in the face, grinning at the threat, liquid danger. Opened his arms and gestured, expansively, his smile wide. These are machines for living.

Ain't you gon be a pilot?

I never said that.

What did you say?

Cosmo frowned into the bowl of his hat. I'm gon be a mechanic, a power-plant mechanic. See, they got this program at school that'll low me to get both my power-plant license and my body license. You got five schools offering you scholarships, Mamma said.

Cosmo snapped the brim of his hat.

Dad looked steadily at him, pulling his silver-streaked goatee with long strokes of his fist.

I like to fix things.

Where you go last night?

Mamam?

Are you deaf now too? Where did you go last night?

Nowhere.

Nowhere?

Drivin.

Drivin where?

Just drivin. Nowhere in particular.

Nowhere in particular smellin like cigarette smoke?

Cosmo keeps his eyes lowered, fedora in hand.

I don't know what path you're on, but I'll tell you this: don't swap horses in the middle of the stream.

The room shines with the shimmering of the street. Cosmo stands rigid, lean face in shadow, following with a blank look his pacing father. Though he maintains an appetite, eats his meals in greedy helpings, he has a polelike appearance, skinny arms, narrow shoulders, and no hips or buttocks. And that hungry-ass face. The only thing big on him is his hands. He looks like some mechanical figure from one of his aviation books.

*I don't understand why the boy so skinny. Look like somebody over in Africa.*

Dad quickens his pace. Hatch's skin grows warm with fear and

excitement. Dad halts and looks Cosmo straight in the face. They are watching each other, separate nightscapes of parked vehicles and moving traffic flowing across each face.

Cosmo.

Yes, sir.

Either shit or get off the pot.

;

IX

You know where babies come from? Cosmo's feet make no sound on the garage floor.

Uh-huh.

Where?

Our they navel.

True. And don't let nobody tell you different.

It was a lot like sighting through a hole made by your thumb and forefinger, the metal door lock cold against your brow:

Dad lay facedown on the bed, arms around his pillow. The blankets heaved powerfully. Soft morning light painted on the shaded window. His scalp glowed with the strength of the approaching day. Mamma put her cheek on his shoulder.

I'm an angel, she said. I could dance on the head of a pin.

Hatch crawls into the bedroom and hides at the back of the closet with the door slightly ajar. A wedge of vision. Mamma rushes out of the bathroom, fully dressed. Halts before the full-length mirror, body shaking with the shock of the sudden stop. Screws her tam down well over her forehead, checks her bangs. Straightens out the things in her purse, lifts coat from the bed. Exits, buttocks seesawing.

Sargent, how come you ain't dressed for church?

I don't think I can make it today.

Sargent.

I am perfectly serious. Sincere. My joints are stiff. He demonstrates.

Sargent, please stop actin a fool. We gon be late. Don't spoil my one day of the week.

You don't understand. My joints are stiff. From the cold.

Mamma stands there with something flickering hot behind her eyes. She spins on her heels and quits the house, door slamming behind.

The batter hits a pop fly into center field. The camera tracks another player as he moves into position, glove at the ready.

I hope he misses it, Hatch says.

Why?

They always catch it. Why can't they miss sometime?

Cosmo rises from his seat next to Hatch, his audience his run-down collection of engines. In his brother, Hatch sees a prophecy of his physical-self-to-be. Mamma has dressed them like twins for church. Tall skinny Cosmo and short plump Hatch, his ventriloquist dummy.

Rest assured, Cosmo says. He flicks off the television, baseball in permanent flight. Anything you think of has happened.

What?

Anything you imagine in your brain has happened, sometime, somewhere.

Anything?

Yes.

Really?

Yes.

A woman of biblical proportions, Sisrah Turner turns her back to the class and begins to chalk a lesson on the blackboard. Cosmo, in a low voice: Look at that fine ho! Hatch and fellow students double



over in their seats with laughter. Sistah Turner spins. Scans the class. Cosmo casts a few mean looks to silence would-be traitors.

Sistah Turner summons the students to her desk for punishment, one by one. Sign your name on her licking stick, then assume the position. Discipline, Sistah Turner says. Say it. Harch says it. Sistah Turner's hard paddle works on his soft butt. Later, when he arrives home, he brushes to the john, shuts and locks the door, slips down his draws, and cranes his neck, trying to see if his name is emblazoned on his behind.

Much weeping and wailing. Harch, bottom tender, watches Cosmo angrily, contemplates betrayal. Cosmo sits with his eyes firmly shut, tightening in and out of dreams.

After class, Mamma takes her sons into a dark corner and tests for recalcitrance, extending one thin knuckle before each boy's forehead and letting it hover there, humming, seeking the necessary evidence in their eyes. She raps the guilty party with the knuckle, force and number of raps fitting the crime.

They follow Mamma into the church, her white ruffled dress billowing about her legs, waves. They glide down the red thickly carpeted aisle. Harch steps carefully, afraid his feet will sink into the raging floor. He stumbles. Recovers his balance. A classic delinquent, Cosmo whispers to Harch: Satan fell. The greatest disaster in the history of world aviation.

They seat themselves on a hard wooden pew, brightly polished, like a canoe. Harch's feet dangle above the carpet's red bloody waters. Cosmo sits beside him, jaw rigid, face flattened, as if pressing into glass. Words cascade from the preacher's wine-aged lips. Harch searches for something firm to grab on to.

Sit up straight!

That bitter and poisonous apple, that hot coal of lust in Adam's belly.

Cosmo's fingers twitch, the urgent pulse of awakening life. Cosmo whispers into Harch's ear, I drank from a jawbone.

Harch takes him immediately for what he seems.

The collection plate comes around for the third time—Harch doesn't remember sitting on the pew for so long, but he has—coins like sparkling eyes, fish scales. A repetition of images, mechanical proliferation.

Out of the eater come forth meat, and out of the strong come forth sweetness.

Cosmo jerks as if to sneeze and spills his half-digested breakfast into the collection plate.

## X

We discussed it. Mamma holds Cosmo in her gaze. Don't use the car no mo on Saturday nights.

What? Cheek black.

Cosmo has devised a new trick: he can hoard air inside his lungs, then blow it toward tight lips, causing one cheek to expand while the other remains flat. That paradox matched by his gait, neither a walk nor a run but a clumsy advance, leaning forward a little with his chin thrust out, straining to see something in the distance, the inflated cheek black with the heat of the straining engine inside his jaw.

Harch watches Cosmo through the garage window. Cosmo circles about from corner to corner, crashes into the walls, bug to glowing lamp.

## XI

Harch entered through the kitchen, trying not to make any noise. He raised the water pistol and moved on. What he hoped to avoid awaited him. Cosmo was standing to one side of the chandelier,

facing Hatch but staring through Hatch at some vision that Cosmo alone could see. His physical appearance confirmed what Hatch had long suspected, that a strange new life was flowering inside him. One hand jerked as if shaking dice, while the other squeezed and relaxed like tweezers opening and closing or castanets snapping.

Hatch spun and rushed back in the direction from which he had come. He bounded down the back-porch steps, almost crashed into the corner of the house as he turned, stumbled through the lawn area, cut sharply again, and leaped onto the front-porch steps. The porch light made the darkness strangely comfortable. The water pistol warm in his hand.

## XII

He could feel something cold rising up in him and thought to turn back. The house taking shape as he watched from his command post in a tangle of bushes and hedges on a low hill. The darkness his shelter. Then he realized he was actually seeing an expanding architecture: the house, the garage, the street, the church, the neighborhood, the jagged-leaved trees that are the horizon. With this small but significant finding, he felt a new confidence. In time he would face his brother.

You think you grown? What time was you sposed to be in the house?

But Cosmo been aggravatin me.

You a tattletale now?

## XIII

The sun is a silver penny pasted onto the sky. A slow rain descends indifferently. Cosmo and Hatch race down the street, their speed a

challenge that the sky accepts. A steady downpour. Hatch catches water on his tongue and drinks it. Cosmo hops off the curb into puddles, splashing his pointed old-man shoes, frenzied sharks.

The rain comes in gray swaths. Hatch and Cosmo cut into a doorway where others have also sought refuge. Hatch's soggy sneakers fart whenever he wiggles his toes. Cosmo turns, faces the crowd from under his fedora. Spreads his arms wide, greeting the rain. We are gathered here today . . .

Rain transforms the streets into angry rivers, swirling eddies. Hard wind slaps hats off heads. Hair flattened into a flying wave, Cosmo ducks under an awning, shoves others aside to squeeze in, create his own little bit of space, elbow room. Together they stare out silently into the street at a curtain of performing rain and a swollen gutter. Police officers wrapped in plastic direct almost stationary traffic. Cosmo shivers, building up energy for an illumination, which does not come. A full hour before the rain eases. A mocking peck of blue sky.

Morning light fell slant upon the couch, where Cosmo lay under several layers of blankets, feverish—throat clogged, eyes shut in pain—and holding his stomach like a pregnant woman.

You may be sick, but you better keep an eye on yo brother when he get home from school, Mamma said.

Sure.

Make sure he eats his dinner.

Sure.

And don't aggravate him.

Sure.

The moment the door shut, he rose from the couch, red robe and slippers flaring about him, and stood rigidly in place, the sole of one foot clamped behind his knee, and the palm of his hand

masking his eyes. One cheek black and puffy, the other, colorless and tent taut. The morning opened around him and he stood erect in its center, a stramen.

A ripe day. The sky so near that Hatch drew back from its heat. The sun blinked a drunk's red eye. Red clouds stumbled. He withdrew into shadow, band upon band, bar upon bar. His hands crimson wings.

Constellations as pale as milk. Stars banged against roofs. Hatch passed the lit windows of houses, perhaps a face or two looking out from them. Then home. The porch glowed with light and softened the darkness. He moved cautiously upon the black stairs. Opened the door. Fire shot through the back of his neck.

The hard wooden floor sagged under his waterlogged spine. He squeezed back burning tears. His legs stiff. His neck stiff, caught in some unseen bear's honed teeth. How long had he been here? He turned his head and the bear bit harder. Two spotlights gawked down at him from the ceiling. A third fixture cast a cone of light on a large white sheet draped along the long window like a sail and flapping freely. The room was completely bare, all furniture gone. Punk, get on up. I ain't got all day.

He could not see Cosmo, only hear him. He explored the back of his neck with cautious fingers, trying to pinpoint teeth, triage physical damage.

Forget yo neck.

My neck is fine!

The unseen bear teeth clamped down.

Then get up.

I ain't.

Get up.

No. You play too much.

I aint playin. Cosmo moved somewhere in the room. He stepped into the cone of light wearing a robe and slippers, the same red robe and slippers from earlier. Eyes wide. Skin taut like burns freshly healed. And the swollen cheek, an unwanted growth. His shadow shimmered against the sheet.

Wait till Mamma see what you done. The furniture.

Cosmo stood there, eyes wide spotlights. He spread a slow grin.

I'm tellin. You gon get a whupping when Mamma get home.

Cosmo watched him for a moment. Then he tightened the cord of his robe. We got some business to take care of.

I ain't doing no business with you.

Shut up.

You can't make me.

Cosmo moved across the room with his new walk. Didn't I tell you to shut the fuck up? Bones creaking. Hatch raised himself to hands and knees. The bear marched his resistance, lodging its teeth into the bone, asserting claim. He tried to rise but found that his legs too had come under new allegiance, chained and posted traps around his ankles. He dragged himself backward into the corner, the most he could do. Cosmo reached him, slapped him upside the head.

Hatch collapsed. I'm gon tell Dad too. He covered his head with his hands.

Whar! Cosmo flashed a look of pure hatred. His puffy cheek expanded, ready to explode. He leaned forward and slapped repeatedly at Hatch's wrists.

You retarded—peeping up. You really are.

Cosmo smacked him again, short and sharp. He seemed to calm. And he leaned away from Hatch, slowly, and righted himself, his eyes minus their fierce light, and withdrew back into his empty fixed look. You shut up, or I'll give you some trouble.

Hatch lowered his hands. And if you do—

Cosmo readied his hand. Look out now.

Harch guarded his head. He breathed like someone who had been running. He remembered the water pistol. Maybe if he had it now . . .

Cosmo lowered his hand. Touched the cord of his robe. Let's get this business outta the way.

Harch could no longer feel the bear's teeth in his neck, but he knew it was there, still found it hard to move his legs, impossible to take his feet.

Cosmo moved back to the other side of the room, slippers clapping, and leaning so far forward that he might have fallen flat on his face. He entered the cone of light, turned, and faced Harch. Spread his arms wide. Welcome brother—speaking with his new impenetrable expression.

Harch rolled his hands over his chest, searching, certain that the bear was tired out from all of the struggle and activity and had gone into hibernation.

Cosmo squatted on his haunches, the low position propelling more air up into his rising black cheek. He fingered the sheet. Come over here behind this sheet.

I see you, Harch said. Don't think I don't. But the bear had settled into a deep slumber, and his brother watched him, a fading glow, even dull radiance, some unclaimed and impatient skin shape summoned by dim regret—a singular desire to look deed and aftermath stonily in the face and move on.