

A HARD GOLD THREAD

First Fictions Series 1



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CATHERINE BLACK



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For Dad, in memory

The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) which we do not suspect.

—Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*

FIRST ARE the motes in the shaft of light, which now would be the skin of dead relatives or the dander of cats, something like daytime sparks, ascending. In the dark house, the park-light comes through the many small windows in precise beams and heats stripes of carpet where the lazy cats with flat faces lie, the Himalayan and the black garage cat who was a kitten in the damp embers of the garage chimney and lived in the engines of parked cars like a smudge of soot, a breath of burnt wire. There are five bedrooms for six children. I never know how to answer that. The driveway holds the grit of diamonds, pulverized by pestle in mother's cast iron mortar. The snow bank glistens too, salt or glass. There are silver taps that squeal hot water, and a sea sponge, warm and wet and heavy, that you can hold in your arms like a warm and wet, heavy baby. Above the window, the glass fish swim in circles, bubbles blown inside themselves. They swim all day in the beams of tinkling light, from the very ends of their thin threads. Circling, the stories we tell and retell become lies over time. In the conservatory is a one gallon fish tank. The Oscar never enters his grey castle. How large will he grow, will he bloat, capsize and float? First he chases the angel fish, till one day he eats her and she drifts in lacy filaments around the water. Her bones, ugly, rest on the blue gravel at the bottom of the tank, her spine, thin and chewy-looking. The boys have painted thick red stripes in

race track curves and U-turns all over their ceiling. They make movies with the Super 8 camera, movies about Godzilla and King Kong and skeletons in laboratories. Movies about disappearing. A fake moustache for the mad scientist. Filmed in stop-action: here, then gone. The record player zips and scolds when you touch its needle. Outside, we jaw snapdragons. They tell ridiculous stories with their pink and yellow faces, white fangs. Put your finger in and let the fierce petals eat it. The chattering of invisible squirrels in the highest branches. In the storybook, the squirrel works in the home, sweeping, making gruel. We build sandcastles and brother appears over the hill with his long legs and dinnertime shadow. The difference between shadow and ghost is depth of absence. He's home from school eating puffed wheat cereal. Then can't eat. Don't talk about it. The motes and the fish swim in circles around this, repeating it. I ask sister the name of the city where the puppets on television live. She says, "New York. Far." The black cat presses her body thin, so she'll fit between the costume trunk and the wallpaper. She stands all day, staring at a pattern of pink tulips. I envy this thinness.



FATHER GOES to work and comes home in his strong blue suit and gold watch. Neat and tidy. He is housed in a skyscraper. "Hello my little Chickadee." He sorts money

for a living, collects it, does magic tricks with it from sleeves and vaults. "Hello Daddy." I write on construction paper. It is posted on the wall. I crayon on white paper. It is posted on the wall. I paint flowers on paper. They are posted on the wall. I cut out a heart shape. It's posted too. On the drive to the hospital I look for the tree that looks like a monster that, today, might be a telephone pole covered in choking vines. Look at it. Later on, I will drive all over the city looking for it, but it will have vanished, and the streets will have snaked their circuitous routes in strange, new directions. In the waiting room, I look for the magazine with the picture of the orange monkey. Look at it. In the hospital gift shop brother buys things with mother's money. A dog-tooth crystal. A marmalade paperweight that swirls yellow and orange in the colour of far planet rings. You only see in glimpses between the bands, the striations, into its deep lava core. "Thank you Raymund." We will go everywhere together. We will swim in the cold lake until our lips turn blue and wear inflatable water wings and keyhole lifejackets that push our fat cheeks up, keyhole lifejackets that smell bitter or sour from the battery acid at the bottom of the boat. We will fly away to Mexico to ride donkeys. Shoo fly, don't bother me. At the hospital his head is wrapped in cotton. A tall white wig. The puppy we have bought for him is too rambunctious. A failed gift. Put her outside. We put names in a hat and his name wins. The game is rigged. The photographer has come to take our portraits. I have to wear a frilly shirt.

Stand to the left. Turn. Have him face this way so we don't see his shaved head. They say when he comes home he'll look different, don't be afraid of him. I sit on his knee in the chair he always sits in. He is home. Prodigal. Grandmother brings baskets of lollipops. I fall asleep with one in my mouth, rotting my teeth.



Too sick to come to your birthday. Trace memory. Frosting sugar. Powdered in blasts like the explosion of white stars in an otherwise lightless universe. Blastoma. The baking of a cake involves the insertion of coloured candles and the insertion of coloured candles flavours the cake authentic. The cake is authentic only once a year and cannot be moved to suit the coloured dresses of weekends or the smocks of illnesses.



IN THE conservatory, everything is green and the sun comes in lemon waves, not shafts, and there are no motes drifting in the light. The plants are rich with oxygen and they breathe out long and low over brother who has a little striped cat now, a kitten he's named Tilla. She's with him while he sleeps and rests, while mother gives him needles. Later on I will love men who do the same for themselves. He plays the guitar and I put my sour cherry gum into the

body of it, through the hole there. He laughs. Thinks it's funny. He makes things out of leather, precisely woven strings, a necklace with shells and plastic pearls to wear with a nightgown that looks like a queen's dress. He makes a guitar out of real string and cardboard, and colours it in, red and black. To be authentic. I have the evidence of these moments. I sit on the papier mâché hippopotamus. Evidence of travel. I pull the cord of the talking game with the arrow. "The cow says..." Aunt Nornie from California can see ants in the carpet, but there is nothing there. Just look. The roots and red tendrils where the carpet is pulled through the mesh in the back. Root around. Nothing. There are wooden hiding places in the house and radiators that scald you in winter. You turn a handle on the radiators and they drip water. You're bleeding them. I'm sent away and have a suitcase on wheels. It goes up the block with a pair of legs. I don't want to stay in the neighbours' small, strange house with the soupy teenage children, the strange music and the gerbils forever spinning on wheels. Halfway up the block someone changes her mind.



TIME TO say goodbye. Come on. Time to say goodbye. They've changed their minds. I go home. I'm told to say goodbye to him, or else I'm not. And he is talking in the bed, or else he is not. Or I disappear and say nothing at all. Or I'm behind one of the plants in the conservatory

and it has grown scales. Diseased. Or someone is screaming. Or else it is silent. I want to give him something and find two brass potted plants that will fit in the cup of my hand. They are dried flower arrangements on the shelf in the sound room where the sunlight is streaming in through French doors. "Thank you." There are manners. I've been stealing communion hosts from the top shelf of the pantry. They taste like ghosts and I melt them in my mouth the way you're supposed to, climb the counter and open the leaded glass door. No one knows I have sinned. There is a ceremony in the conservatory and I lick my fingers to draw tear marks on my face.



THE GREEN leaves the stalk. Draining to yellow. Then, weak, the leaf wilts into itself. Water and ice cubes. Toast. Ice cream in a bath of maple syrup in the middle of the night and the silver bowl of the cold spoon. Five bedrooms for five children. I never know how to answer that. In the dream the pin drops slowly, slowly, and when it lands, the sound of an atomic explosion. In the dream the boulder falls, slowly, slowly, and when it lands, the "ping" of a pin. In the dream a feather falls, slowly, slowly, and when it lands the sound of the end of the world. By the dining room window, the glass is streaked with car-light and rain. Awake again with three brothers or four. At school the other children are thieves, stealing the raw emerald from

father's trip to the raw jungle, stealing the sparkling pyrite. My desk is empty halfway through the day, after some circle where teacher was mouthing something about letters and colours. There's mother at the window, crying into her purse tissues, or else waving, or sitting, or watching, all day sometimes. I'm sitting at my desk when she appears in the classroom, someone coming through ice, like Lazarus. Like brother. I'm led by the wrist, mother furious and hard-faced. Teacher throws my hat and mitts after us. In the spring the worms stretch across the sidewalk from their mud homes. You can cut their bodies and they will still live. I crush ants in the driveway and watch their souls ascend. No one believes this in the kitchen. "Call your brothers for dinner." We have our chairs. One we do not remove, one we leave empty.



I WEAR a rabbit fur coat to school, and a rabbit fur muff. April fool. Not like the other children in their crayon-coloured wool. Toilets the height of us. The boys look over the washroom stalls. Someone in the playground takes apart a bee in sticky strings, revealing honey not blood. I eat macaroni from the craft-bin and wonder about the children who can sleep during nap time. I will be a nun when I grow up. Or else a geologist hacking into a vein of quartz, making my fortune in measurable substances: three pans of gold, an ingot of silver, a hatful

of raw emeralds, minerals tossed in a river. Or else I'll be an artist. She has buck-teeth and silk straight black hair and dry hands and a red leather jacket. Look at her. I take her by the elbow. We find an ant in the classroom plant. If we name it, it will be ours. The doll centre, where strange yarn-haired rag dolls live out their complicated lives. I'm afraid of their eyes. Happy-haunted. Today I will write the weather and the day on the flip-chart in front of all the other children. The marker squeaks and smells delicious, like vinegar. I draw a big, happy yellow sun, which is correct. I paint pictures to take home. Crayons at the crayon table. She asks, "What are you drawing?" I tell her, "I don't know, I'm not finished yet." We eat animal crackers at the zoo. The blonde-haired girl talks and talks and talks. Her mother calls her a blue jay, and me a swan. All day long I am a swan, not a duckling, and glide from pavilion to pavilion on legs of blue water. The monkeys stink and are rude, but are best to watch. They stick their heads through tire swings and chase each other, not quite on all fours. I close my eyes when I run up the stairs at home. Swan. Ghost. Mote in the stream. The black and white rabbit, if you press on his back, will make pellets. They look like his food. Grandmother calls him *messy* and scoops them into his food dish. I say nothing. In front of the mirror, naked, I am ugly. I block my face with my palm. Sister draws a caricature with a bulbous nose and fat cheeks, freckles. I cannot help being ugly the way she cannot help

being beautiful. I draw a caricature of her and give her a beak for a nose. Then ugly Sam asks me in the conservatory, "How did your brother get dead?" I tell him, "You say, *Die*." Sam is twisting his teeth, they are always clicking between his fingers. His mouth is a mess of big, crooked, loose teeth. "Cancerofthebrain." We only have the Oscar now. No angel fish. I tell Sam first about the bones, then about the filaments. How they drifted.



SHUFFLE THE cards and lay them face down on the bedspread. Turn one over. Cherries. Turn it back. Turn another over. A green turtle. Turn it back. Turn another over. Toast in a toaster. Turn it back. Turn another over. A green turtle. Where was the other green turtle? Where was it. Where was the other green turtle? Was it in a corner? Where was it. There was another green turtle. That might be it. No, that's not it. Where is the other green turtle? There was another green turtle. Where was it? Turn it over. Two green turtles, you smart thing!



THESE TINY successes mark a life. Amount to a satchel of exploding plastic games and monopoly money. Small successes shield me today. I am a smart thing, but my satchel explodes under pressure of time.

In this, her second book, Catherine Black weaves together the wonder, heartache, and “unlovely beauty” of a youth that is by turns charmed and disquieting. Straddling genres of memoir, prose, and poetry, A Hard Gold Thread delights in the layering of keenly observed moments, in the subtle play of remembering and forgetting, and in the shift in perspective brought to bear on memory as it is transmuted by time. Reverent, sensitively rendered, and sometimes tongue in cheek, A Hard Gold Thread is an unconventional memoir inviting the reader into a meditation on the engulfing beauty of the world and the compulsion to turn away from it.

Praise for Black’s first book, Lessons of Chaos and Disaster: “Her work in this debut collection is intense, imagistic and often inward looking. Black tends to write in direct, declarative sentences, but she achieves an incantatory urgency through repetition and a build-up of expressive images.”

—Barbara Carey, *Toronto Star*

Catherine Black has wandered her way back to Toronto where she was born and raised and now lives with her husband and son. Currently, she is an Assistant Professor of writing at OCAD University. Black is a graduate of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago’s M.F.A. writing program, and her poetry and fiction has appeared in various Canadian and American literary journals including The Fiddlehead, The Harpweaver, Scrivener Creative Review, Rhino, Preling and Palimpsest. Her first book of prose poetry, Lessons of Chaos and Disaster, was published as part of Guernica Editions’ First Poets Series in 2007. A Hard Gold Thread is her first prose work.