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THURSDAY'S CHILD

SONYA HARTNETT

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Published by arrangement with Penguin Books Australia Ltd

First published in Great Britain 2002 by Walker Books Ltd
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

This edition published 2017

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Text © 2000 Sonya Hartnett

Cover design © 2017 Walker Books Ltd

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This book has been typeset in Fairfield

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:
a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4063-0852-5

www.walker.co.uk

For Henry M. Saxby

Now I would like to tell you about my brother, Tin. James Augustin Barnabas Flute, he was, born on a Thursday and so fated to his wanderings, but we called him Tin for short. He wasn't my youngest brother, because it's right to count in Caffy, but I never saw Tin an old man or even a young one, so he stays just a boy in my mind. Tin's bound up in childhood forever, as far as my recollection goes, although the last time I saw him he was wizened and looking ancient as the hills. Memory is eccentric, how it stalls when it wants to. The dogs that we owned – I don't remember a single one of them ever being a puppy. They were born antiquated and rickety, those hounds, whelped under the veranda with their prime well and truly past them. Da when he was in his moods would sometimes threaten to shoot the lot of them, but Mam would put a stop to that. Mam had a heart too soft for herself – her heart got put in the wrong body. Her heart wanted to do its living somewhere clement and florally. Her face would crush as if

that misplaced pump of hers was agonized and she would say, "Don't you touch a hair of their heads, Court Flute. God loves old dogs."

"Now, Thora," he'd say, contrite and holding his hands in the air, "you know I never meant to."

So the dogs got away with being dozy and good for nothing and never bailed up so much as a possum with the excuse being their venerable age, and Tin got away with being young, though wizened, and something of a curiosity in the surroundings, and never had to answer for being grown-up and sensible. God loves old dogs and children and kept things, at our house, the way He wanted them.

It's proper I mention Caffy because Caffy was born the day Tin learned to dig and everyone says that if it hadn't been for Caffy coming then things might have been different, though no one really believes that's so. Everyone knows Tin was born to burrow, he was born to the task like a hare or one of those white blind hairless moles that comes into the world itching to get its claws into the safety of the ground. And what that means is that, if Caffy hadn't come, if I hadn't taken Tin to the creek, if it hadn't been such wet weather or we'd lived some other place, things would have started an alternative way, but started nonetheless.

Mam had been groany most of the time Caffy was getting up to be a fully fledged baby and on the day he was finished and ready Mam was groaniest of all, and the mood in the

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house was dire. My brother Devon took off for help with having the delivering done, my sister Audrey was locked away attending Mam, and Da looked worriedly down at little Tin and me. He scooped Tin to him and gave him a kiss. Tin wasn't mad for being caressed, he was never as fond of anyone as everyone was fond of him and you could see poor Da would have liked to hold him forever, as though Tin were comfort or a shield. But Tin turned his cheek and with a sigh Da freed him: "Harper," he said, "take your brother and go to play."

I didn't dispute, just did what I was told. I was glad to get away. Tin, he was too young to know what was going on. He was only four at this time. He came uncomplaining, although at that age he didn't usually like to go far from the shanty and would fret and whimper if its roof went out of sight. He came that day, however, quiet as a mouse. I took his hand, which was a clenched flowerbud. I felt a touch sorry for him because it might be his last day of being the baby of the family and his coddling days could be done. He was too small and knowledgeable to know it, though, so I guessed the loss couldn't hurt him. Besides, his being born was what put an end to the coddling days of my own. "Come on, Tin," I said, and gave his arm a bit of a yank, for vengeance.

I didn't know where to take him nor how long Da wanted us to stay away and I was worrying, too, about Mam, who'd been gasping and muttering back at the house. When we reached the crest of a lumpy hill I turned to look behind me

and saw the shanty with the dogs lying in the grey sunlight and Devon's summer bed folded on the veranda and no grass, just earth and slime, in a wide circle all around the building, and beyond the circle the grass began and you could see where Tin and I had stomped through it, patches of it being trampled. Our house had two windows and one of them looked into the bedroom where Mam had been pacing all morning but I had no hankering for going and peeping through. It felt like something dangerous was going on in that room. I knew a fair amount about babies, being almost seven years old at this time. I knew that delivering meant coming into the world, not arriving on the doorstep like a package. And I'd experienced my share of newborns: there'd been one arrive between me and Tin, which I had seen and didn't remember, and one between Tin and this latest, which I hadn't seen and did. The first lasted only a moment and the other not even that, so I reckoned babies coming shouldn't cause all that much trouble. They either came and stayed, or came and didn't. Only a baby, but everything seemed dismaying somehow, everyone was so grim. I didn't want to be anywhere near the place.

The land where we lived was by nature dry and dusty but that winter there'd been more rain than a duck would have dreamed of and when I glanced at Tin the mud was seeping up between his toes and he was sinking into the earth, shivering and half-asleep. I shook him wakeful and hurried him along. "Where will we go, Tin?" I asked, not expecting any answer

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because he was generally reticent. "Will we go fishing?"

I had him moving at a trot and his head was joggling up and down, which I took to signify his agreement. There weren't any fish in the creek but he was at the age where you can fool them. He was certain to start whining sooner or later anyway, no matter what we did, and the best I could do was stall that commotion as long as I could. I had a pin in the hem of my dress and I stopped to unfasten it and give it to him. He examined it carefully before looking at me quizzically through tangles of dandle hair. "You can spike a fish with that," I explained. "That's your hook."

I could see he liked that sharp reflecting thing. It was half a mile to the creek and I put him on my back and hiked him most of the way, he being light as a feather. I talked to keep him distracted, telling him it was callous to stab my throat with the pin and what would the baby be, a new boy or a new girl? We had two of each already, not counting Mam and Da, so things were pretty equal as they stood and it would be a hard blow to the side that came away the minority. I thought it was a shame that only babies could be born, whichever it turned out being. I could think of plenty of other things I would have preferred to get for nothing.

The creek was typically a drool of a waterway but that afternoon it was running high because of all the rain and the bank was soft and oozy: Tin's feet disappeared to his ankles and he was covered in mud before he even reached the water. He was

a dark child anyway, so it didn't look too bad on him. I set on a rock and left him to his devices and looked around, bored. There were white-trunked trees on either side of the creek and you could see where the rain had washed away the earth that had hidden their roots and the roots poked out knotted and naked, groping. It was that quiet, cold kind of day when the birds are surly and refusing to sing and the leaves on the branches aren't moving and seem like they never could. The creek was sluggish, hardly rippling, made from something thick and heavier than water. I was hungry, and could hear my stomach rumbling. I would have exchanged a new baby a hundred times over for a plate of something warm to eat.

When I looked again at Tin he was crouched staring and musing in the shallows with the seat of his pants drenched black, so I crawled forward to see what was diverting him. There was a fish there, swimming in his shadow. There was a whole crowd of fishes, when I looked harder, stranded in a pocket of rock as if the creek had splashed them there for safe-keeping or for Tin's amusement alone. "Oh!" I exclaimed. The fish were the length of Tin's thumb, each of them, and not worth the hooking, but they were pretty and silvery, they looked like that hem pin come alive. Tin was sucking on the pin so I took it from him and stirred the rockpool's water and the fish spangled and flashed in agitation. I put a finger in the water and the whole crowd darted and tapped and knocked and nibbled. Tin's teeth were clickering with the cold now; he

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crossed the stepping-stones to the opposite bank and from the way he tugged despondently at a handful of tree root and looked mournfully in the direction of home I could tell he was pondering the practicality of crying. He wandered a distance upstream, clutching the bank to steady himself, hoisting his knees so silt and water came pouring off his heels. "Tin," I said, "come and look at the dainty fishes."

He wouldn't: he turned his face to the mucky wall of the creek and stood there, up to his knees in water. I wasn't about to pander to his childishness so I took no notice of him. I caught a fish in the bowl of my palm and it lashed about while the water drained between my fingers and then lay flat on its side, heaving like a bellows. I petted it with a fingertip and touched it to my lips. It didn't taste like anything. "Look, Tin," I said, but he went on masquerading to be deaf. So, "Look, Tin," I said again, this time making my voice full of wonder and amazement which he could surely not resist, same as a cat can't resist investigating when you suggest there's something hidden she might like to see. If it works on a cat it should work on a four-year-old, but it didn't. Tin stayed where he was and when I glanced over my shoulder full of annoyance, he wasn't anywhere. And the creek bank looked different somehow, with clots of dryish earth rolling down its flank and plinking into the water and the ground all about torn through with a great cleave, and I could hear the dog-scratch sound of tree roots tearing. The creek bank had caved in, right on top of Tin.

There was not a spot of him left to be seen. That tiny fish I had in my hand went slithering into the water.

I pounced through the creek to where he'd last been standing and started scrabbling at the dirt, yelling out his name. The earth was heavy and sticky: my fingers left slick gouges behind them but hardly took anything away. I screeched to him over and over, thinking if he could hear me he'd be comforted, all the while thrashing at the mud, spattering it into my hair and eyes and spitting it out with my cries. I dug and dug in a frenzy, my arms moving like legs running, but I couldn't get a decent grip, I was staggering and slipping and weighted down with the cold, I was gasping and choking and the earth slid into the places I'd dug clear and spat clammily into my face and blinded me from what I was doing but not doing, changing but leaving the same. I tripped in the water and it went over my head, dashing the muck from my eyes but alarming me anyway because the water shouldn't be that deep, and as soon as I was on my feet I realized why it was that way. The creek was damming around the landslid earth in its midst, it wasn't getting past the way it wanted to and each minute was raising it higher. In rage I splashed the water and kicked it, as if a beating could drive it away. There was a full-grown stringybark looming on what was left of the bank and it let out an ominous crack like lightning can and I wailed at it and pleaded to it, knowing what it intended to do. My arms were going and my voice was going but everything in me was off and running; the water was rising

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and the tree was falling and dirt was tumbling more and more into the places I'd just that moment cleared. I saw this water and how heavy the mud was and how useless and slow were my efforts and I knew that Tin wasn't alive under there, he'd been drowned or flattened by the weight of that terrible sludge, so I turned and fled after the rest of myself for home. I ran like a bird flying. And while I ran, shrieking inside as I was and hollering for Da aloud, there was a voice clear as a bell in my head that said I was glad to be running, and getting away. If I found help, it wasn't going to be only me who couldn't get him out.

The door of the house was open and Devon was standing alongside the threshold but I charged straight past him, making for my Da who sat slouched with his head down and I was sprawled across his lap before he even knew I was there. He hauled me up by the armpits and shook me out like a sheet. I remember how wide and round his eyes went as I babbled out the thing, how the mud from me jumped onto him, how when he dropped me I was already sprinting for the door.

And then the three of us were bolting through the paddocks, Da overtaking me and Devon just as though the bullet in his foot had never even happened though we'd all seen the scar, never asking me where we were going but heading right for the exact spot as if Tin were reeling him in. Some of the more sprightly dogs were loping along beside us but soon gave up through exhaustion.

Da he splashed through the creek and threw himself

against the dark face of the mudslide and set to work like a madman, using his arms to tear away sloughs of earth that slopped into the creek and smeared the water green. The stringybark was moaning and splitting, holding its place for dear life. Da looked at it once or twice without stopping digging. Devon and I were digging too but it was Da doing most of the work: he hacked away at the mud in a fury, kicking great hunks of it aside, and when he stumbled in the slickness he didn't pause but ripped off handfuls of the stuff as he clawed his way upright. Devon and I were screaming but Da was saying nothing, his teeth jammed into his lip; after a time he started hissing and I made out he was hissing words. He was saying, "Take the new one instead. Take the new one instead."

And the water was rising so Da was standing with it to his knees and Devon to his thighs and I to my waist, the three of us twice our thickness with the freezing mire that we couldn't make any less of and the tree was creaking pitifully, its leaves weaving a shuddering waltz, and it is the horriblest, loneliest, saddest memory I own. I wanted to say we didn't need to hurry, there was nothing to hurry for any more since Tin had been entombed for easy half an hour, but I knew Da would clout me if I said a thing like that. I stepped away because I didn't want to be the first to touch him, to catch a lock of hair in my fingers or scratch his soft cheek with my nails. Da and Devon didn't notice me. Da's fingers were clubs and he stooped to wash

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them and make them useful again and that's what I remember best – that Da's hands were clean and white when it happened. He hadn't touched those hands to the mud when another hand, a small and grubby flowerbud, a tiny little lost doll of a hand, broke through the earth and landed flat in Da's glistening palm.

Da had him out in a second and there was Tin, shiny with slime with his curls plastered to his head and his clothes clamped close as a second skin, dripping dirty water and blinking at the light. He was juddering with coldness but he wasn't crying: he gazed at us through eyes as blue as sky, them and the whites of them being the only bits left coloured as they should be. Da hugged him to his heart and burst out weeping – noisy weeping, that shocked me – I never saw my Da, before or afterwards, do anything like that, and Devon and I were riveted to the spot. Weeping and clutching Tin, he turned for home, ploughing through the water and up the opposite bank. Devon and I lingered where we were, panting from the effort and twitchy with the shock of it all. I reached a quaking hand into the depths of the mudslide and put a cautious eye to its wall: why hadn't Tin been drowned or flattened, is what I wanted to know. By rights he should have been. And you could see clearly why. That old tree had saved him. A chunk of earth had been sucked away from its roots and had left behind a cave that closed Tin up and kept him snug and safe as a nesting bird, if slightly damp and tickled.

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“Have to chop it down now,” said Devon, considering the tree.

Marks from Tin’s fingers were preserved in the gunge: “Look!” I said, impressed by the sight. “He did more digging than we did – he dug his own way out.”

“He’s only a kid, Harper. How’s he going to dig himself out?”

Devon was scornful, so I didn’t bother explaining. We had hardly made a dent on our side of the mud, I knew; if any useful digging had been done, it had been done by Tin alone. Devon wouldn’t believe it, so I kept the knowledge to myself. We splashed through the water and ran to catch up with Da. He was off in the distance and I could see Tin’s small face with his chin on Da’s shoulder, staring back steadily at where he had been. I knew I wasn’t wrong, and Tin knew what he’d done, all right.