IRON,
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II

For my friend Tom Geue, whose pledge of friendship in a moment of crisis – '*We think of you having to labour for your iron … We swear we are your supplements*' – set the rhythm of this poem, and whose reading of Hesiod gave my study its timely background and hellish future.

> The first form which the 'experience of social crisis' assumes in public consciousness, then, is the *moral panic*. The second stage is where particular moral panics converge and over lap: where the enemy becomes both many-faceted and 'one'; where the sale of drugs, the spread of pornography, the growth of the women's movement and the critique of the family are experienced and signified as the thin edges of that larger wedge: the threat to the state, the break down of social life itself, the coming of chaos, the onset of anarchy. Now the demons proliferate – but, more menacingly, they belong to the same subversive family. They are 'brothers under the skin'; they are 'part and parcel of the same thing'. This looks, on the surface, like a more concrete set of fears, because here social anxiety can cite a specific enemy, can name names. But, in fact, this naming of names is deceptive. For the enemy is lurking everywhere. He (or, increasingly, she) is 'behind everything'. This is the point where the crisis appears in its most abstract form: as a 'general conspiracy'. It is 'the crisis' – but in the disguise of Armageddon.†

†Stuart Hall (with Charles Critcher, Tony Jefferson, John Clarke and Brian Roberts), 'Living With the Crisis', *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*

III

When I am low in iron I dream of drinking the blood of my enemies – involuntary, nighttime dreams as well as waking fantasies in which a large, warm pint glass appears in front of me and I take it. This poem will not go into the matter of my enemies, though the subtext to this and every poem is a list of enemies annotated with grievances caused by them. Instead, this poem is about my body as its own enemy, or about how I come to figure my body as a certain kind of threat: for the poem if not for myself, iron is a straightforward object of study. But if the poem begins with me, it does not end there. Once it fixes on the problem of iron and the desire to find it in dreams and veins and in the cracks of concrete, it moves as it must and finds, ultimately, the kind of thesis that could only belong in a poem: Iron, that impossibly tiny material that moves in and out of the body, belonging and returning to the world outside, traces a network of relations between us, acting as a variable grammar that takes on different images of reality. Iron is the constituent element. To consider the peculiar transit of iron through rock, blood, and ideology, I follow it as its own kind of body, as a figure or dog whistle, as a metaphor that captures enemies charging each other with the same description. Like all stories it begins in the mouth and passes through the Cold War. And like all stories, its prehistory is land and its future a solid brick.

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IV

Some people recommend cooking food in a cast iron pot to increase the body's store of a metal that makes a protein that is required to carry oxygen around in the blood supply. Let's first acknowledge the strange alchemy through which metal becomes protein in which oxygen finds itself transported; acknowledge as well the profound experience of having oxygen available to the body and the hideous feeling of its absence. To imagine tiny particles of iron mingling in a ratatouille and then finding themselves transformed into haemoglobin seems far-fetched, even if we know, in some mythic sense, that food turns into blood, and vice versa, as my dreams betray. Other people recommend swallowing dense pills of iron that squeeze the guts and lead to tar-black, desiccated shits. Others suggest very mild iron capsules that concentrate the juice of infinite beets and that the body welcomes into its blood as if consuming a friend through an embrace; others still say that meat – by which we get the blood and therefore oxygen-loaded proteins and therefore tiny particles of iron of another body – is the only solution. In fact there's no clear way to turn the body in its enemy mode (refusing to absorb nutrients, eager to bleed) towards iron. And so the dream of drinking blood endures, arrives without invitation, turns a revenge fantasy into a fantasy of containment. (One enemy will read this and imagine themself in my pint glass, or inside my body having left their own.)

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Others suggest a yearly infusion of iron via intravenous injection,
a procedure that pumps a massive dose of elemental iron – bound
to carbohydrates for ease of absorption into the body – in one go.
Such a sudden shock of iron can cause an allergic reaction, and
so the procedure carries with it a ritual of vigilance and measurement:
a nurse stands by to check blood pressure and bodily response as
a drip feeds copper-coloured liquid suspended in saline down through
a narrow tube and into a cannula. '*You will feel a coldness inside your vein*,' explains the nurse at the outset, as if such a forewarning could offer
protection against a horrifying new sensation from the inside of the body.
The infusion comes with side effects, like nausea and headaches and
staining and bruising and lightheadedness as the body accepts the iron;
after two or so weeks, the iron finds its way into the blood, and so oxygen
finds its way through the body, and so the body finds its way out of lethargy,
despair, breathlessness, and crisis, at least temporarily. This transformation
is nothing short of religious: one wakes one morning and can suddenly scale
a wall, take an enemy, sprint up a rock face. The ecstasy of an infusion is
the perverse abundance of a straight shot – the quivering surprise of it, the
sheer density, the feeling of approximating a molten stream, the identification
with the rusty saltwater, the sensation not of filling the body with metal
but of passing the body through metal and living.

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VI

Whatever way one finds iron, a crude economics prevails. The simple fact is that incoming iron must be equal to or greater than outgoing iron (an inverse of this relation drains the blood of oxygen and the face of blood). My awareness of this equation leads to another fantasy: alongside the dream of drinking blood is a dream of removing the uterus, a speculative hysterectomy that involves not a surgery but the impossible reality of waking one morning to a different body, a body in which a network of capabilities have been neatly packed up and taken out without anyone knowing, like walking into a library after the little cubicle with a VCR player and television has been discreetly decommissioned. There is a footnote to this fantasy that cannot be written yet, a note that traces the history of this feeling against the force of gender and across the body's memory of childbirth – a history that has no way to classify the conviction of a future edited by desire. In contrast to the feeling of iron's abundance is the pitiful knowledge of its scarcity, or worse, the background sensation of its expenditure and the slow decline of the body as it fades to silver, appears as if a shadow or half-breath, levitates at the edge of warm water or vaporises on the top stair. A logic of extraction prevails: If more iron returns to the world than what arrives inside the body to huff oxygen, the basic sensation of living becomes proportionally reduced, the body becomes cool, slow, and lizardish, the chest becomes tight, the little buzz that animates becomes a soft drone, veins brittle up like tussocks.

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VII

History, too, is written by iron and enemies. Winston Churchill's famous speech, 'Sinews of War', delivered at Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri in the wake of World War Two, is known for its popularisation of the term 'iron curtain' and for marking an official start date for the Cold War. '*From Stettin in the Baltic to Trieste in the Adriatic*,' he announced, '*an iron curtain has descended across the Continent*.' By 1946 the iron curtain as a figure of speech was already well established. On the one hand, it denoted a solid wall (likely deriving from a roller door used to lock up a shop) and on the other, the end of an era (likely deriving from a fire-proof safety curtain installed in theatres). The curtain marks, therefore, the division of space, for example, private property and the publicness that surrounds and threatens it, as well as the division of time, that is, a performance and its irreversible rupture by catastrophe. Seemingly uniting the two different meanings of the same metaphor, the Russian philosopher Vasily Rosanov wrote in his 1918 screed *The Apocalypse of Our Times*: 'With clanging, creaking, and squeaking, an iron curtain is lowering over Russian History. "*The performance is over.*" The audience got up. "*Time to put on your fur coats and go home.*" We looked around, but the fur coats and homes were missing.' Churchill harmonises with his own dual meaning: the iron curtain stands for a division between territory and ideology as well as signalling the end of a wartime alliance and the passage from friend to enemy.

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VIII

Decades later, iron would return to the West in the form of another ambiguous metaphor. A Soviet journalist is said to have been the first to refer to Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher as the Iron Lady, a term which she happily appropriated as if to show humour as proof of an immunity to ideology. '*I stand before you tonight in my Red Star chiffon evening gown*' she announced to Finchley Conservatives at Selbourne Hall, who roared with laughter, '*my face softly made up and my fair hair gently waved*'. '*Yes I am an iron lady … yes if that's how they wish to interpret my defence of values and freedoms fundamental to our way of life*'. Thatcher's consent takes the form of a joke: Her freedom affords her the ability to wear red chiffon against the Red State, to speak openly of the appearance of a woman in public (soft and gentle) against the force of her own power. What could signify freedom more than a woman holding history like a man, a woman showing femininity to be a performance as well as a benign material fact? The iron of Iron Lady was surely intended to disqualify Thatcher as both a leader and to qualify her peculiar womanness, that is, to point to the ambivalence with which her conservatism afforded an uneasy identification as mother or wife. But in her canny take-up of the charge she both neutralises it and reveals the metaphor's truth: iron is ideology itself.

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IX

'*To a significant extent*', writes Stuart Hall, '*Thatcherism is about the remaking of common sense*'. '*Common sense shapes our ordinary, practical, everyday calculation and appears as natural as the air we breathe … The hope of every ideology is to naturalize itself out of History into Nature, and thus to become invisible*'. In her response to the Soviets' nickname, via the speech now known as the 'Iron Lady' address, Thatcher shows her common sense at work. The echo of Iron Curtain in Iron Lady is revealed as an effect of the same ideology that Churchill gravely forecast and that separated the Continent in a clean split between liberty and bondage. The curtain is iron so that nothing may pass through or escape; Thatcher is iron only when seen from behind its shroud. Iron, says Thatcher in her red gown, is an image borne of Soviet perception, not the object of its analysis. As a complex semiotic system, the Cold War sought to decode ideology as an operation of the enemy. But as any enemy knows, the grammar of war breaks down at the moment of translation. '*As Volosinov remarked*,' says Hall, '*the ideological sign is always multi-accentual, and Janus faced*'. The contest for common sense against rank ideology turns on the same phrase, competes for the same solid-seeming ground.

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Another of Thatcher's nicknames, Tina, derived from the slogan There Is No Alternative which she leaned on to point towards and away from ideology. For Raoul Vaneigem, member of the Situationist International, Rozanov's post- (and counter-) revolutionary lament was the perfect definition of nihilism: *the show is over*. Nihilism arrives, for Vaneigem, at the collapse of myth: '*When a mythical system enters into contradiction with economic and social reality a gulf opens up between the way people live and the prevailing explanation of the world*.' Of course the question is what is done by and with nihilism, itself a certain kind of contradiction. What happens after the iron curtain cuts the stage from its public? Thatcher's motto makes the promise of a straight wipe: no alternative means no future and no history, just the clean surface of demolition. The promise names its own threat by claiming to eliminate it, for the very idea of an otherwise shadows the denial. Tina's realism offers the future of a death sentence, just as underneath every fur coat draped across a chair lies something obscured, something covered which at the point of contact obliterates the coat and its terrible portent. There is no future for Rozanov, Thatcher, and the symbolic coat – only the misery of the present and its promise of memory as property. To defeat the enemy, the principle of Tina goes, one would do well to destroy the friend, the comrade, the bare relation itself, the soft pelt of fur in full animation.

XI

Stalin figured the iron curtain from the inside, claiming it served to hide Soviet achievement from the west. What can be seen from either side of the metaphor is nothing at all. Its commonness as a Cold War material speaks to an anxiety about the role of metaphors in securing a natural-enough representation of reality, wherever it may be constructed and towards whatever requires protection. But if the Cold War cheapened iron as a metaphor and metaphors as an alibi for ideology, it only strengthened the power of the enemy: official enemies, to be sure, as well as the enemies who emerge to turn the future to dust, to deny the promise of revolution, to shape the possibility of freedom into its opposite. Love itself can turn on a word, flip like a snitch into enemy mode. The very idea of the commune can turn on its heel, slide into a state. We pick the edges, kick the sides, jimmy the lock, wedge a heel of wood into the gap; the wall is a door, blocking the passage of fire. The wall is a door, blocking the passage of chips. The wall is also a small motor, moving its division across the grass or water. The tool, the weapon, the shackle; the history of iron before the Cold War (before its metamorphosis) traces a line from the body to commodity, holds a key to its own rusted lock. Thales, it is understood, held that iron's animation proved the soul of a magnet – but his insight ought to be inverted.

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XII

Before there was a metaphor, there was a myth. The age of iron, Hesiod wrote, described the wretched world (his world, this world) in which labour and misery ruled. The cause of both was iron, which makes the tools that call for labour and the weapons that call for war. In the age of iron, he writes, '*Father will not agree with his children, nor the children with their father, nor guest with his host, nor comrade with comrade*'. Hesiod's prediction: Zeus will end this mortal world when its children are born already silver-haired and exhausted. Millenia later, scholars would come to describe a world transformed by iron and its capacity to make steel, which in turn could make ships and railroads, which in turn afforded the extraction of iron ore to become an unfathomably enormous operation, which in turn required the living labour of innumerable people, which in turn constitutes a considerable volume of iron. Our world, like Hesiod's ill-omened vision, is a world both drawn and ruined by iron, a world in which the neverending work of turning the raw material of earth into the phantasmagoria of capital is also the neverending work of bodies that live and die. Iron's figural capacity before it became a soft metaphor was nothing short of naming the world itself as a social relation predicated on the flesh of the earth and rendered by labouring flesh. If the metaphor fails it is because it arrives on a scene already set: iron was always history and its failures.

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XIII

When Thatcher said '*There is no such thing as society*' what she meant was that we should not pick up the metaphor and throw it at the window; we should not consider that iron's function is not symbolic but actual; that if we considered the common material as it passed from the crust of the earth through our blood and into each other that we might find a reason for tracing its association, for understanding solidarity as carried in the blood but against possession. What she meant was that a cheap metaphor is as good as it gets, that there is a danger in asking for or dreaming of otherwise. When Thatcher willed us to unimagine the social, she demanded that iron remain a punchline and a red dress, a regrettable dust mote passing under the curtain; she demanded not that one take our friends against the enemy, but that we take our friends as a different kind of threat, take the self as a manager of domestic and foreign enemies, internal and external dangers, a model for austerity. Iron, she – like Thales – intuited only half correctly, points to the ambivalent spirit of what holds us together and what divides us. But is not enough to respond on behalf of our common iron; iron itself indexes the variable economy of blood and flesh. What is social is the shared weapon and not a shared enemy; history's contingency can tell the story of what weapons become necessary; the shadow cast by desire protects the image of its object; bodies shake loose, come together, turn into clots of speech or despair.

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XIV

In my fantasy, the blood I drink is nothing less than a drug. I sprint up an endless flight of stairs, gathering sweat like a cloud, dragging voices upwards. The voices echo as the air gets thin, the sweat changing to rain that falls downwards. Nothing prepares you for the newness of iron, the sensation of each cell inflated. I try to focus on what the voices are calling, moving between the sound of my own blood and the music of a crowd. My hands swell and thump like percussive grubs, my cheeks burn and crust up with salt. The voices are clear enough to understand the general principle of a chorus: the unlikely trajectory of a rock into metal, metal into blood, blood into energy, is one half of the story (or, in reverse: inside every gesture is a glass or so of blood, inside every glass of blood is a variable quantity of metal, and inside every atom of iron is a ledger of the earth's transactions). The other half of the story is more interesting. At a point in time, the same metal that carries oxygen in our blood, that turns up in tools and structures, suddenly became a fixation in a confused war of political imagination, and its easy status as a metaphor for the impossibility of translation – a metaphor against metaphors – determined several generations of enemies, each equipped with a perverse inheritance of signs to describe a proxy world. I finally reach the top step and look down. The view suggests its own analysis.

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