

Threads of Iron

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**Shearsman titles*

Threads of Iron

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Part of this volume originally appeared in
Cut Memories & False Commands (London: Reality Street Editions, 1991)
and the rest appeared in *Switching and Main Exchange*
(Kentisbeare: Shearsman Books, 2000).

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Author's Note

A comment on time sequence to avoid confusion. I wrote a group of poems, in 1980-1, called *Threads of Iron*. For format reasons the book was divided. Part came out as a book in 1991 (*Cut Memories and False Commands*) and the rest in 2000 (*Switching and Main Exchange*). They are now put together for the first time. The poems are not all related to each other except that they came out of the situation of one person in one stretch of time. They are designed to complement each other. They are presented in the form that they reached slightly later, around 1986, when Paladin were interested in the book for their poetry series (about to be discontinued).



Threads of Iron

A House on the Endless Highway

The house which furbishes images like skins
The house in which texts
Clings to the ceilings and partitions
Like bats or winter butterflies
The house where lies drip off the eaves

The house in which the rooms dream
In which people's images are dismantled behind closed doors
And mirrors hide distorted faces
Where the wardrobes are full of old clothes, dissolved bodies
The house where each gaze rejects what it sees
The house near the Greek Church
The house near the New River
The house near the Jehovah's Witnesses' hall
The house near the Pentecostals
The house on the Endless Highway

The house ruined by fantasies, the inexistent house
The house whose outline is denied by music
The house made of dead skin, a shell
Of ragged flesh, seethed
Into tatters of grey leather, heated up
Too many times: the brew of a shared table.

The house of debris years old
The house of compacted filth

The house
Where Helena is happy in the afternoon
To be drunk and feel the evening coming
But takes valium so she can cook her old man's dinner
And do housework for one room, three people.
Night brings the family together,
The feeling stretches out from the window to the wall.
The light is dim, the room replaced by music,

Its every line effaced by blue smoke
So you kick your child lying sleeping on the floor
And he wakes and cries.

The camera eye sweeps from wall to wall
It's a slum it's a room
It's a cave a hearth a flame
It's a being
It's the frame defining events
It's a forest, a green dell, a silver screen
It's a room it's a home
It's a childhood

The house of the Drunken Sages
The house of the Ascetics who refrain from thought
The house
To whose geometry we are adapted

The house where there is an ageing man
I see by day
With a doddering step and a vague expression
In a dirty lab coat testing printed circuits
In the factory down the road,
In a dingy humming corridor.
He sits alone in an upper room
Listening to the police frequencies.
A family? that's like a second job.
The bright parts of machinery
Replace the body and its personality, turned low.
He observes unseen
In the room full of alien words,
Motorway stories.

In the front room where the traffic noise
Soaks the air like water, the two gays,
Back from the BR line gang,
Clinging to the rim of the motorway

Shout at each other lively with rage;
Where every anguish is reduced to words
And pure freedom is the power
Of causing somebody pain; the surface
Of the loved object is shredded and smeared and gouged.
They drink so as to tell the truth without blocks
And the truth is just a wish
And the wish is to wipe somebody out.
The cordon of loathing which extends between us populates
The house, as lying versions of each of us
Are tortured in slight slow fictions in the next room
And rebroadcast to become the strings of consciousness,
The words that push through the sill. Jammed frequencies.
Other people's lies constitute a household.
At four am I lie awake
Waiting for work
Listening to the men shouting in the next room
And seeing my curse already come true.

The house
For those who can't afford a home
For those who can't afford a family
To crawl at the end of the day
Shut the door
And think about doing a more difficult job.
The house where motion is replaced by the traffic.
The house where we count from one to a thousand
And from a thousand down to zero.
The house where I span out four years.

The house where each morning
My shaking hand shaves tatters off my face
The blood flows in the heart of the mirror
And I haul on a rope of empty spaces

I sit up in my room

The room where I stage my artistic triumphs
The room like a mouth reciting us as lies
The room of unrequited love, the empty
Space where I talk about want and am found
Wanting. I talk about literature, she talks about
Property. I live alone in a paper house.
I hang a thousand paintings in the house
And each day I change one detail.
The devices unfold forever.
I talk and talk. It's like someone coughing.
Whatever is not the case
Is what I fill the room with.

White Block

I cross the bridge into the white block
The train jumps straight as a shell
The train wails like a lost cry
Bent by velocity.
Under the eye which empties all it sees
I drift in the sea of numbers.
My eye crosses to the opposite blank façade
And sees another blank eye staring out at me.
My gaze skips up the ornamentless cliff of windows,
Paranoid architecture,
Three thousand gasps of dead light,
And casts on off-white my next three thousand days.

Three thousand frames of arrested motion.
I watch myself as if from a great distance.
Rifts open in the wall,
I try to close them.
A green flash shoots across the building
Fleeting
A flaw in my brain.

I look at the pictures of memory.
The mechanism is broken, the recurrence
Caught in its onset.
My limbs at night are untwisted, slack.
I could be ten thousand people just like me.
In the morning, whose body wakes up?
This fool? this unstrung flesh?

Probing each crack in the flags of the White Block,
I go over my nerves until my fingers bleed
But cannot find the spark whose track I saw
In the firmament.

I put microphones into the walls and floors.
A micro pickup poked into the bone
Sends back miles of textural noise,
A gigantic slow shudder, an Atlantic surf.
I play the tape in the hope that years will pass.
I subtend tangents and freeze out clusters,
I draw the arcs of the White Block.

I shred and shred
The images of the past
But nothing moves, no pattern rises.
I tear skin from skin
I tear face from face
I tear thread from thread
There is no sustenance.

A white shadow flits along the wall and the train wails
The cry which metal tears from metal
In the mutilation dirge of its parting
And the greenness of its velocity
Like a street singer howling a murder ballad
And like the lost voice of this place.

A Flock of Deer by Moonlight

We moved together through the blue snow
The night was classic
And the landscape was from my childhood.

Around the ripe moon, sacred to the triple goddess,
Was a vast corona, a gem spun from cosmic dust,
A shape so perfect over so many thousands of miles
It showed a door into the stellar reaches.
This light created space to move through,
Sculpted blocks out of the quarry of darkness;
The asphodel-light whose journey has made it pure,
The owl-light of the shattering hunter and of thought,
Wheels and crowns manoeuvred in the pale day.
The light we parted, creating our own space,
Was not the golden, molten birth of things,
But the light of plans, architecture, hard edges,
Once the notes are tuned and the world is cool to touch.

Its forces stir the liquids.
Like a stake caught in the breaking sea
I part the tide and the green fury piles on me.
I'm dowsed in energy and I can't move.
The moon tugs at the masses of earth,
The fine dusts and herbs toss up and disperse,
Doors stir on their pivots. I'm shaking.
I know the light, it falls too swiftly and is
Lost; but like an image fitfully obscured
The infinite room of the night
And the endless force of my emotion
Vanish each second to recreate themselves.
The moon poured down like silver, burning
Sadness away. In the smooth black mud,
Deserted by the sea, a buried door opened.
She touched me. The memory and the
Face of tenderness

Drained my illusions.
Writing, for an instant visible,
Shining in the December moon.
Tells me what to do and what to feel.
Days, worked out in city walls,
Light, shining out of other people,
Corrupt the memory.
How can I say anything to you?
How can you share in the life I lead?

You touch me
The malevolent city crumbles into dust
The ranges of years start up like mountains
The chains of fear and loathing shiver
A metre deploys across my mind.
A thousand fancies stir, shake out, and sift away to wisps.
Animals rush across a blue space
The stars fall and their clear voices ring as one
Calm and imperative.

In that city
Where monkeys hang weeping
From the forest of inexistent trees
And a rat
Sips at the spark of sweet water;
Where I hang my face behind the door
And count from a thousand down to zero;

Where a sordid sight
Tracks across a cold eye;
In that city where my death
Drinks itself into insensibility
Sends a postcard to a former self
And wears one of two cheap suits;
Sweeps out the boarding room,
Sits in the canteen and talks small talk;
Coughs dark air out of its lungs

And sends poems to small magazines;
When I wake to see it slumped beside me
I hold it in my loneliness.

In the Urbs of interlinked immurements
Where documents track out the numbers of confinement,
The prisoner, haled in a cage before screaming judges,
Is accused of the construction of the City;
Every square yard is someone's debt
And you are born without a shelter.
Surrendered to the clashing clauses of logic
Arraigned in the due course of Justice,
In its millennia of commentated falsehoods,
Its pillars of dust and pits of cruelty,

The attainted man must only memorize
The imaginary stones of the imaginary prison.
When the Law has had its pulverous course
He says, this is my life.

But the feeling flocked like snow, it filled the sky
But went on falling, the flakes fragile as glass
Took up all the shapes here as if the earth
Was a snowflake sliding through someone else's sky
And the snowflakes were earths draped in white.
Its motion would not cease.
The feeling tries to find a way out;
But I tremble and dissolve in it.

The snowflakes melt in my hand
And I freeze in the sky as a net of stars.

The sky falls onto the barren hills
And my skin tears to let my soul out.

The sky is a sluice filled with a million holes
And a million points of light fall through my skin.

The moon makes one world visible, shakes
Another into ruin. Memory is a lie.

I wrap the blue skin of the snow around my heart
And my flesh is purged by the fires of cold.

I remember what love was
And I fall as far as the light
Eddying down on its raft of snow
Like memories poured down and melted away.

In the night of damsons and magnesium
In the night like whitecurrants pouring into my palm
The city of slag and degradations falls away,
Memory slipped from my skin and fled splashing snow.

Lit by the moon I fell in love
With a strain as if lifting a wall upon my back.

Time came back to me
The body floating in the river woke up
In the night of grapeskins and crystal nails
I washed my garments of bitterness.

I washed the dead images from my eyes
I tore down the city of unnatural shapes
Time came back to me full of your face.
My blood burst into my veins, my crushed throat opened,
The animals of memory tore my nerves and my lungs.

We came upon them sleeping, in a hole in the winds.
Their legs seemed not to swing but to leap, straight up:
The earth is slow, they are fast, the moon is fastest.
The stag turned to outface us as his herd fled
Past the fragments of the Great Forest
Across the metal hillside and towards the silken lake.
Some things are only visible by moonlight.

When the dead season is over
The Spring shoots on the trees
Must taste as clear and sharp as wine.
We move through this glimmering parkland.
Where else can we find such a free expanse?
The king of beasts sleeps hungry on a bed of snow.
Where can we lay our heads in safety?