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## *From the Iron Chair* by Greg Glazner

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## **From the Iron Chair**

Greg Glazner

New York: W.W. Norton, 1992.

\$18.95; cloth.

Reviewed by Joel Friederich

The poems in Greg Glazner's first collection, *From the Iron Chair*, do not step back from forms of violence such as bitterness, hate, television, deconstructionism or heroin. Nor do they plunge so headlong as to wipe out regret for the humanity that is inevitably lost. Rather, these poems approach the violence of their subjects with a steady, open-eyed awareness of what is shattered beyond recognition, sometimes risking that awareness in order to touch the open nerve, to follow, as Glazner puts it, "like a sleepwalker / deep in an instinctual violence, stalking / the white rush of my breath." Glazner's poems are a white rush of breath, and the poet within them often finds himself walking the razor-sharp edge bounding contradictory conditions, between sleepwalking and stalking.

Chosen by Charles Wright as winner of the 1991 Walt Whitman Award, *From the Iron Chair* divides its material into four sections. The first gathers the collection's most personal poems, reflecting on the death of the poet's uncle in "New Stars," the opening poem, and in "The Seine." These two are the most successful of the section, finding and holding the taut lines between opposing impulses. In "New Stars," when the death was reported to the family, the poet understood for the first time:

something was settling into us, a constant  
silt in the veins my father couldn't stop,  
and I knew we would be filled completely.

Without lessening the bitterness and despair in this realization of death's inevitability, Glazner makes a song of strength and praise:

Another voice seeps through me  
steeped in bits of gnashed teeth and salt water,  
. . . a voice useless to bring rain  
or give the dead their old eyes back,

and I sing with it often, bitter-tasting and strong,  
and it wakes the sky. . .

The second section begins and ends with powerful extensions of Glazner's "bitter-tasting and strong" voice to a vision of nature as a violent indifference that owns equally the souls of ants and humans, "something running loose out there, hunger / way past anybody's knowing or control." In "The Constant Upward Spiraling, The Cost," the section's final poem, Glazner takes the benign, meditative fishing poem and turns it on its head, gutting out all the lovely, delicate inspirations emanating from our muse, the Trout: "By half-light, even the last cutthroat's / red-streaked thrashing didn't rouse me." This is difficult and complex honesty, that even in our most sublime pursuits and killings, an indifference lurks, reducing the frailty of thought and feeling to nothing but dumb gnawing, "butchered clean of value." "The Constant Upward Spiraling, The Cost" is placed directly in the middle of the book, and rightly so, for its material is central to Glazner's poetry.

In the last half of the book we find Glazner's most ambitious, far-reaching pieces, "The Metaphysician's Weekend" and the title poem, "From the Iron Chair." As longer poems, they attempt to find and develop large themes striking at the heart of present-day experience of culture. At issue in both poems is the empty falsity of an abstracted, modern sensibility that can find no ground, no crucial reality for itself beyond the self-reflexive seeking of pleasure. In "Concentrating on Photographs: The Vatican," a section of "The Metaphysician's Weekend," Glazner focuses overtly on this issue. The poem's speaker, dazed in the head-splitting pain of a hangover, is allowed for a moment to recognize that his modern consciousness has been amputated from the genius of the past. While the past has died, the speaker has "simply failed to live." For a split second, this disembodied speaker returns to the human form, pictures himself lying back "in the Mother's arms." But in Glazner's world, and ours,

such returns can be only momentary before the pain of alienation swells back. The problem is finally one of vision—our age's inability to hang on to one: "whatever vision might have sated me / decays."

Less powerful poems in the collection occur, not so much because of flawed language or structure, but because their material is not fully charged with Glazner's sharp probing, his sense of crisis. In a poem like "Fishing: The Late Wish" (from the first section), the language gives only sparks where later poems, like "The Constant Upward Spiraling, The Cost," burn your eyes. A clue to the development of Glazner's art is found in "The Valley," written for the memory of Glazner's teacher, Richard Hugo. The conscious influence of the late poet can be felt in Glazner's lines, and one understands that the power of the book's later poems comes from moving outside that influence. At one point in "The Metaphysician's Weekend," Glazner enters a conversation with his teacher, rhyming with a phrase on Hugo's gravestone ("sing tiny and wise"). Glazner writes,

... Are we the heirs  
the old ones built for, tiny and alive,  
our breath rising into a hull

of symbols? Could mere presence  
assure that, even in the casual  
chattering of our awe and unbelief?

Glazner's question conveys a doubt that we own any claim to the cathedral of hope built by people like Hugo—whether, in the stupefactions of contemporary unbelief, anyone can eat stone and go on.