

AUSTIN SMITH

Aerial Photograph, Glasser Farm, 1972

From here, the silo is seen as being
open to the sky: the black grain it contains
is a new moon, newly minted, ready
to enter the circulation of the air,
tonight, maybe, but for now simply coined there.
Roofs also, damaged by those few storms
of hail that come through in the ancient
boyish game of throwing-stones-at-glass:
and speaking of, there's the old Glasser house,
its windows dark from here, though whether
from angle or abandonment it's hard to say.
But it's easy to imagine there's someone
in there, leaning over the porcelain sink,
who raises his head at the sound
of the copter chopping the crop of the air,
the sink beneath him like the cast
of a death mask that didn't take,
while in the same moment and in the air
above him the picture of his farm
is taken as if from him (afterwards,
which is always parenthetical, he dries his face
with the torn towels of his hands).
But it's impossible to know whether
someone is living there. We could visit
the Stephenson County Historical Society
and consult the old ledgers of land claims,
turning the brittle shale of their pages
while the unpaid volunteer hovers over
our shoulder chopping the air with her eyes,
but we must trust the photograph we have
before us, by which I mean was taken

before us, before I, at least, was born,
and maybe you. The photograph is all we have.
The fields are open, so this must be March.
Or should I say may be rather than must,
for it's hard to tell, the black-and-white
offering no clue as to weather, as to whether
what we are looking at is earth open
before or after summer, for when it comes
to fields there are two dates in the year
that are parallel, the firsts of March and November:
in black and white, they appear the same
from the air: and so it could be the fields are
open in preparation for planting, or open
from fall plowing. What do you make of this
washed-out lane that looks as if it may
have been paved with shells
brought inland with great difficulty?
Why does it gleam so whitely
and flow through the buildings
like a river conscripted for the commerce
of mercury? Upon it a white car
I'm sure buried hence in one
of the many middens of junked cars
one glimpses through the trees of the Midwest:
it is also sheer surface, as the lane is.
But if you look closely, there are moments
of depth here, where the eye of the camera
plunged through the missing shingles
of the barn roof to show us the darkness
of the baled hay, and here the tunnel
in the haymow hill, and here a little light
glowing through the slats of furrows.
I can see down the chimney to the nothing
that burns there. I can see through the gauze

of the woods the wound of the well
that allowed them to live here. I can see
through the scattered teeth of the family
plot the light of the names, each letter set
like a lantern on the sill of stone.
I don't want to descend and not be
aware of these rifts in the world.
I want to hover up here forever,
in this moment when the light
is frozen and the farm is still theirs,
but I know that somewhere in time
we are descending and that he,
who we cannot name, who I can barely bring
myself to mention, will spend his evening
in a dark room, and at the same moment
that he lifts the soaked sheet out of the sink
of chemicals, Glasser will lift his face
out of the sink of porcelain, mirroring one
another the way the iron bookends of those firsts
of March and November keep the thin Book
of Winter and the thicker Book of Summer
upright between them. But it should console us
that we are looking at this photograph
more closely than he ever did, he who will,
the next day, so close to the ground
it will make him nauseous, drive down
that same lane, into the photograph that,
framed, rests on his lap, and knock
on the door. Glasser will, of course,
rise and answer. How will he be able
to refuse when to do so would be
to refuse his very life, no matter how tragic,
for the photograph is proof that they *were*,
that someone, no matter who,

had looked down upon them from that place
that for so many years had been the source
of all grace and all pain and she will nod
and bring his sodden wallet to him
and he will take the damp bills out
and buy his farm back from the man
who has taken it, will set it down
upon the table so that the photograph
of the Glasser farm is framed by
the Glasser farm. Then he will wait
until the man leaves, and wait
until even later, until evening when, ready,
he will steady a nail against the plaster
of a blank wall and at the sound
of the first knock the man in the photograph
will raise his face from the death mask.