

Ann Stapleton

THE HONOR FARM

This is the Honor Farm, so called because the prisoners of this little patch of beans and tomatoes walk around with their heads in the blue sky as if they are free. They have bent their backs to the plow of their own deliverance and have agreed to things as they are so many times that it is assumed they will forever. This is the garden of reparations to the past and of tithes to the future. Here green beans and red tomatoes are barter for an hour or two, or the rest of a life, of freedom, such as it is and may be. World, you understand me.

Here the ceiling is painted like clouds, and the face of the earth resumes its original beauty. But the men by now know enough not to fall in love. They know enough not to want to grow beans and tomatoes. The men want to grow whiskey and cigarettes, and this signifies, though the Honor Farm continues to plant and harvest its tons of should without regard to the activities of want, tunneling lightward under the unsuspecting days. The men want to grow whiskey and cigarettes. And wire cutters. Want and should come at each other with homemade blades carved out of the long afternoons. The sun shines on them both.

Ann Stapleton is a freelance writer in Logan, Ohio. "The Honor Farm" is her first published work of fiction in a national literary magazine.

The men are all scheduled to get out soon. That is how you arrive at the Honor Farm in the first place, by having one foot out the door already. Rangell is to be released in three months and seventeen days, all the others within a year's time. If you have ever seen a man let go from prison, you know that it is not the joyful thing you might imagine – it is a little more complicated, freedom. A few men will hold onto the bars till they have to be hauled out by their ankles into the street. Some men will sink down quietly on the curb as if that had been their plan all along and wait for their ride from the future until the sun goes down and finally put out their hand to their old enemy the stars and ask them what in the world should they do now. They used to give a man a brown suit in which to reenter the world. Now the man himself is the brown suit with its too long arms and its too short legs and its thinness in the cold or its heaviness in the heat and its scent of his own life and its old itch, and no matter how he pulls, he will never be able to get it off.