

*What the guys at Pickaway Correctional tell me about*

Nellie Croy Smith

Cucumber planting. The planning of feasts. The “someday” barbecue. The outside barbecue, with pork ribs, sweet sauce. Babyback. Baked beans. Baby boy. Old numbers. New numbers. The bids. The bits. The kids. The stacks of books. The prison blues. The first day. The last day. The last try. A family ride on one of the last Ohio trains. A gift. A garden. Green peas. Squash. Cukes. Hooch. The hooch you can make with tomatoes. The hooch you can make with potatoes. The okra, which cannot be used to make hooch (although, doubtless, someone has tried). The ball team. The victory. The first visit in twenty years. Lean, dry meats. How it feels to be free on a motorcycle, dust in your mouth, following America down a long, thin road. How it feels to follow. To front. To free. How it feels to watch someone die. How it feels to be caged, waiting for someone free to die. The pet squirrel. The parole board hearing. The denied parole. The “four more years.” The “ten more years.” The *God-knows-how-many* years to go. The tears. The grief. The hole. The pet praying mantis. The praying. The prayers that go up to God. How we are all (all of us) part of God. That huge God, with a moon for a mouth. The seeds that sprout in a shadowy room, with tiny, cupped leaves as if they are praying. The rain. The rain. The out date. The income. The first meal. Bad soup. Skipped meal. How Applebee’s sells T-bone steaks for \$19.99 on a torturous television loop. The lack of pets. The lack of relationship. The “establishment of relationship.” The establishment. The system. Solitude. The same food over and over. The same word over and over. The monotony. The moon. The mother. The rain. The rain, again. (And yet even more about the rain.) The sheer avalanche of lack. Bad library. Bad guidance. Bad information. The bad decision, made too quickly. The good decision, made far, far too late. The bathrooms full of unspeakable smells. The microwaves stuffed with commissary food. The precious, taken microwaves. The line for the microwaves. The microwaved soup. The soup that somehow takes three hours in a microwave. The memories no one wants. The memories no one forgets. Imaginations. Images. Escapes in the mind. Egypt. Iraq. Swirls of sand. Plume. A family kitchen, with peeling paint. Cold pop through a white straw on a clear morning. A friend in a red ball cap. The din of the subway, passing on. The days and days. The endless numbered days. A day, long ago, when it could have gone differently. A day, long ago, when it went the way it did. The fear. The pictures seen in the mind. The inability to see pictures in the mind. How hard it is to get someone to see them as human. How hard it is to get someone to see them at all. The cucumbers. The years. The rain. How hard it is to see.