At Mrs. Leihey’s Table
    Sarah Ann Winn

If the phone rings,
Don’t answer. Let
the disorderly world wait a bit. Here, the pleated
walls are ladylike, cross ankles and sip morning --

as burnished as cedar,
cider sweet. And if the rings
someone else made also bear the beloved’s mark,
there is room in this jewelbox. Enough. Plenty.

A life ground down to diamond
scale. You can call and anyone
who matters will hear, tucked around some corner.
The angles sprout prisms, the clarestory windows cut

your memories all the same
shape. You can keep them,
bring them out into their setting, shining. Clarity, hand
crafted. Love with light, both placed high on the shelf.

Hidden hinged, everything
opens quietly, reverently.
Hosts forests unseen, a tribute without fanfare. When
she said I come with the house. The song replied So stay.
I’m alone with history. I mean, alone if you don’t count the quietly whirring staff of people coming and going, part of the nearly invisible machinery it takes to smooth the way behind the scenes, so that the past is held up to the light. Mostly, I’m a pebble dropped in a pond. I sink to the bottom, and if I don’t become part of this historic ecosystem during my time here, I have only myself to blame.

On tourless days, Woodlawn’s hall is quiet enough to hear July’s hot breath gasp through the gigantic keyhole of the front door. It may storm, according to the weather report I heard on my way to Alexandria. The weather report reminds me that I still haven’t asked about the tree that fell onto the roof mentioned in the tour. Which tree? I can’t plant the orderly forest in my mind, or imagine the scale of the timber that the Quakers must have cut. Their placid ghosts join me in the second floor schoolroom. If they know, they’re not saying.

If I crane my neck, I can see the river, a tiny triangle of blue hedged by green. How strange it must have seemed to Nelly, first lady of this house, young hostess for George Washington, first Host, the Host in Chief. How strange to come here, away from Mt. Vernon, as a new bride. When she and President Washington’s social secretary married, it must have been a love match between two people thrown together by occasion over and over again. This a quiet place, when it was new, was probably far less troubled by the steady stream of guests and busybodies that
plagued Washington from his presidency til his death. The sudden stillness must have been like a second door closing behind the grandfather who raised her, who gave the couple Woodlawn as a wedding gift, who died before its completion.

Perhaps she was the one who first thought of the ghost of Washington, riding on his white horse up her driveway. How she must have longed for him to enter her parlor. To catch glimpses of his profile in marble, or on the faces of her children, some of whom apparently resembled him, according to their portraits. The tours reveal his face everywhere, even on the bedclothes on and around her wedding bed. I can’t argue with the guides, who leave the impression that she directed everyone’s attention to her famous grandfather. I think it probably was in part to bask in his reflected glory, but surely it also must have been that she missed him, daily inviting his ghost over and over by invoking his name.

I’m told the glass of many of these window panes is a historic reproduction - cylinder glass, blown in tubes, cut and flattened/unrolled, then cut to fit. The scratched-in signature of one of the house’s many occupants is highlighted in a pane. The other occupants, their stories storm-taken, are even less visible, reduced to letters and family trees, waiting around me to be pieced back together, or replanted, to grow and thrive alongside Arcadia, revitalized with the rest of this house’s historic gardens. Nestled in the velvet green hills, beside the Potomac, this is a place that does not forget promises made to dear ones from the past, a place we can help haunt.