QUIET AT WOODLAWN PLANTATION

“Most of the old trees at Woodlawn are species of oak. In the park we have white oaks, black oaks, red oaks, pin oaks, willows and a Spanish oak. Here are some old species of tulip poplars and buckeyes. A grove of Kentucky coffee trees tower over the smoke house. These I think can be related to the foliage indicated in the early lithograph of Lafayette on the lawn.”

From the files at Woodlawn Plantation
Intraoffice Memoranda
National Council for Historic Sites and Buildings and National Trust for Historic Preservations.
November 6, 1953.

On the closed-to-the-public gravel delivery road to Woodlawn Plantation, alongside Arcadia Farm, where the sunflowers daven in the August humidity, on land gifted from George Washington to his nephew and step-granddaughter, Major Lawrence Lewis and Nelly Parke Custis upon their betrothal in 1799, and under the root-tangled trees lining each side of this road, you waver in the near-quiet of a weekday morning.

The historic plantation is approximately two miles from its more famous forebear, Mount Vernon, in Alexandra, Virginia, and you stand there listening to the trees. They are old, but perhaps not as old as the mansion. Still you think: the trees are witnesses to over two hundred years of American history. As a writer-in-residence, you are here to mediate and reflect upon such things.

However, you expect more silence, a historic peace and quiet. What you get is the scat and honk of cars and trucks down nearby US Route 1, passing fast food and check cashing and title loan and pawnshops. US Route 1, our nation’s first highway, spans the original thirteen colonies, and is jam-packed, today, every day, yesterday with horse and buggy.

You make every effort to receive the rustle of trees, which you can’t identify, oak perhaps, though the leaves are evergreen, the bark, papery, brittle, and the trunks roped like woven baskets. You’d do better at classification if you were local. Bees buzz over the sunflowers and the hum of the Potomac River, a mile or so down through the woods.

Down the road toward the mansion, workmen clunk in and out of the side door of the federal-style mansion, working on plumbing and restoration, and joke and jostle one another in the way men like this do awkwardly loud and confident, and you got to admit, lovely.
The Marquis de Lafayette slept in these rooms, stood on this lawn in 1824. 

You look up through the branches, expecting birds.

Blackhawk helicopters from Ft. Belvoir arc above the crown of the trees, (perhaps they are tulip poplar or buckeye trees?) and whir—Whir like one of your son’s videogames. Earlier, you met a remarkable docent at the other famous house on the property, the Pope-Leighey house, a Frank Lloyd Wright creation, who shared that her husband is a captain of a Blackhawk helicopter, which is how you can identify them. You let her know that your seventeen-year-old son is worried about war, and even more pointedly about the draft being re instituted, not in some theoretical way but because it could affect him, and you don’t know where to go with this thought. At twenty-one your Pop fought in the Korean War. He spent a year on an unmarked mountain with dysentery and hyperthermia, and you crave some reassurance from her, but she offers none, she is here to give tours, she is a volunteer.

Ambulance and police and fire truck sirens burst through the wood, and among the persistent pandemonium, you spot a gang of wild turkeys. They perform their turkey sounds, which aren’t gobble, gobble, but more like a discordant brass horn section. Benjamin Franklin, who never visited Woodlawn Plantation, advocated for the turkey over the bald eagle as the national bird.

You think how quiet should be: Quiet. Silent. Ahistoric.

You want to shout, “quiet on the set,” like it’s a movie, and you’re the director.

Construction backhoes back up with a beep, beep, beep. More Blackhawks wing off the treetops. A fluttering of birds descends from one set of intertwined branches to another, beckoning to one another to hurry against the heat of the day in a flurry of urgent calls.

All of America seems to be on alert. Across the state, in Charlottesville, a Confederate monument is slated to be removed and there are violent protests. The current President reminds everyone that George Washington owned men, women, and children, and while this statement is true, it is out of context from the white supremacists, who marched with torches, who with their hateful salutes and chants, want to put all of history into their same bucket of muck.

You are standing where Washington, his family, his estate’s enslaved men, women and children toiled, and you can not excavate description to it all, this sense of being inside and outside history, from your anxious gut. The cicadas cry out. The sunflowers daven, murmuring their prayers, bending their stalks, their petals, dropping the last of their seeds, both the history of the plant and its future in the soil.
The trees demand to be heard too: *Here, we have witnessed revolution and wicked slavery, Quakers, and a war to end slavery, and the coming of artists and playwrights and novelists and their patrons with their picnics and jazz and their ideas about freedom and equality and justice, which are still being debated even in this new century. Nevertheless, we have bound our roots to this land. We have witnessed renewal in times past, and we will so again.*

You break your own silence with the scratch of pencil on paper.

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