

Remembering My Childhood at Woodlawn

by Samantha De Trinidad

When I pull into the visitor's parking lot at Woodlawn, the first thing I notice is the slow, hard crunch of gravel beneath my tires. In an instant, I am ten years old. I loved that sound. That sound meant we'd driven somewhere far away from the paved comforts of the suburbs. When our green minivan crept slowly up the long, gravelly driveway, when we bounced in the backseat with the bumps and dips in the road, it meant we'd arrived at my grandfather's farm in Forestville. It meant we were about to get dirty.

If you follow the ribbon of highway that cuts through Sonoma County's Russian River Valley, seventy miles or so north of San Francisco, past wineries, orchards, and farm stands with quaint names like, *The Palace of Fine Fruit*, if you remember to take a right at the gas station, and your first left past the fire house, you made it. But today, with a few more decades behind me, I am no longer in California, and the gravel is not so much a reprieve from the suburbs, but an anchor outside the city.

Woodlawn makes itself immediately known by its tree cover. Monumental trees in every direction offer their own unique relief from the July sun. Each with bark completely unlike the other, some is jagged and peeling, and others, like the Crepe Myrtles, smooth like tanned porcelain. Some branches curve upward at the end, like elf shoes. Others, like the Tulip Poplar, stand in near-perfect symmetry. Some coil themselves around one another, making their trunks a single braid.

One day, on an aimless walk past the Pope Leighey house, down a road that bends and curves at the will of the trees, I notice a spider web spun remarkably between the tips of four or five branches. Were it not for the spotlight the sun shone on the web at just the moment I nearly walked through it, I would have missed the geometric prism with its owner proudly surveying her masterpiece from the center. Like a visitor to an art museum, I examined it from all sides, trying to decipher her use of lines and space.

When I was ten, I used to run past the vineyards directly behind the main house. The small green grapes which I now know to be varieties of chardonnay were too tart to enjoy and not worth the time. I learned early on that the good stuff was in the back: blackberry bushes taller than I could imagine, and dizzying rows of apple trees. In the fall, there were fat, orange pumpkins and other funny shaped, bumpy gourds. Beyond the compost pile, just down from towering hydrangeas, was the wine shed. I ran past that too, in search of the generous raspberry bushes. The vintner's relic stood proud long after he passed away, even if I never paid it any attention before.

These days, I don't do much running through farms. I take my cues from the spoils of history and greenery around me and go slowly. I notice the little things I surely would have run past as a kid: the hooks that still hang in the meat house, the lattice siding atop the dairy. I wouldn't have given Nelly Cutis a second thought, the legend in southern ladyhood that oversaw this estate. I would have breezed past the shed with flower bouquets hanging upside down to dry: actual history in the making, if you think about it. Where once I hurried to fill old coffee tins with berries, plums and peaches, on this particular Friday morning while harvesting vegetables with the other volunteers at Dogue Farm down the road from Woodlawn, I take note of the prickles on the young cucumbers, and the scratches they leave on my wrists as I pluck the ripe ones. I marvel at the silvery-green hue my fingertips turn after nestling dozens of tomato plants in their trellis. While I may not leap frog across tree stumps like the children at the nearby farm camp anymore, while I bathe in SPF and need no stern reminder to drink lots of water, as it turns out, I still like to get dirty on the farm.

