

*T H E I N N E R L O O P ' S*  
*W O O D L A W N A N D*  
*P O P E - L E I G H E Y H O U S E*

*W R I T E R S - I N - R E S I D E N C E*

Summer 2018



# Writers-in-Residence 2018

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Cover art inspired by the Frank Lloyd Wright's Pope-Leighey House, a site of the National Trust for Historic Preservation in Alexandria, VA

## *The Inner Loop Summer Writing Residency at Woodlawn*

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## 2018 Summer Residents

Samantha De Trinidad, In-residence July 9-15

Whitney Pipkin, In-residence July 23-29

Andrew Tran, In-residence August 6-12

Gwen Van Velsor, In-residence August 20-26

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## *The Inner Loop, Introduction*

The practice of writing is not at all dissimilar from planting a garden: just as you carefully select the seeds that will grow in a given soil, decide how far they should be from one another, plan what they will look like if and when they bloom, know when to trim them back, or pull them altogether, so too do we writers -- when we're doing it right -- sow words into little beds of sustenance and beauty.

The idea of merging the two practices such that one might pollinate the other had been swirling in my mind for some time. How can our minds be free if our bodies have never been exhausted by work, if we have never felt dirt in our hands? How do we write about the world, talk about the human condition, without knowing the land, the place where we stand?

Wanting to create a space for writers to do both of these things, *The Inner Loop* approached the Woodlawn Estate and Arcadia Center for Sustainable Agriculture. Woodlawn embodies a multitude of stories about the development of American history, agriculture, literature, and society that continue to educate and inform the public today -- one part of that history even included the Woodlawn Literary Society, which existed in the 1800's.

*The Inner Loop's* focus is on making local voices heard. But we are also interested in the (hi)stories of local places. Thus, Woodlawn seemed the perfect place to bring a local writer's residency to life. Targeting early to mid-career writers with an established commitment to using writing as a means to build community, to bring awareness to critical social and environmental issues, and as a creative force of empowerment, we put out the call in spring of 2016.

Three years and three cohorts later, we have been spellbound by the discoveries our writers have made and shared, and by the words they have left echoing through the walls of Woodlawn and beyond. This year, in particular, was a special one. As in summers past, powerful pieces were daylighted through the process of spending time on the grounds, and with its people and its ghosts. But the bond that our 2018 residents formed was an equally powerful and provocative testament to the value of dialogue: This zine is very evidence of not only this cohort's craftsmanship, but their sense of community and exchange of ideas.

We are grateful to Woodlawn for cultivating the space to make this happen, and we are proud of you all for embracing place, discovering history, and writing the stories of here, now -- and for sharing those stories with each other, and with us.

Courtney Sexton & Rachel Coonce

*The Inner Loop*





## Samantha De Trinidad

Samantha De Trinidad is a writer, medical cannabis cultivator, and food equity advocate. Her original recipes can be found on Celiac.com, while her poems can be read in The Alaska Quarterly Review, Transfer Literary Magazine, Cipactli Journal for Latino/a Art and Literature and also heard on The Inner Loop Radio. She holds a degree in English from San Francisco State University and is currently working on her first collection of poetry.

Samantha hails from Northern California and currently resides in Washington DC with her partner where they tend their vegetable garden. During her residency, she will expand upon a series of poems which focuses on women, domestic violence, and resiliency across multiple generations originally inspired by her time spent in Nicaragua.

## *Remembering My Childhood at Woodlawn*

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 Custis a second thought, the legend in southern lady-hood 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.



## Whitney Pipkin

Whitney Pipkin has been writing about food, farms and the environment as a freelance journalist since moving to Northern Virginia in 2012. She also is a staff writer at the Chesapeake Bay Journal, covering the nation's largest estuary and getting to know its historic places in the process. Her freelance work appears nationally in The Washington Post, NPR, National Geographic, Smithsonian Magazine and Civil Eats and in regional publications such as Virginia Living, Northern Virginia Magazine and Arlington Magazine. Pipkin served as guest editor for Edible DC's summer 2016 issue focused on how to eat with the Chesapeake Bay in mind, and she is currently working on the magazine's fall 2018 issue. She lives with her husband, 3-year-old daughter, 1-year-old son and mischievous dog in Springfield.

## *The beauty of the heavy things*

The rain has barely quieted its rat-a-tat-tat as I exit the car and head across the pea gravel path to Woodlawn. A blue heron traverses the somber sky from one tree-lined edge to the other, heralding the end of the morning's downpour, for now. The sky is still heavy, though, holding back the drops that are sure to fall all afternoon.

It's the first day of my Writer-in-Residence week at Woodlawn and Pope-Leighey, and I've been watching the forecast for days. Rain, rain, rain, and I wonder if I'll make the most of the former plantation's enchanting woods and winding walkways. The grounds around me are drinking up the droplets, thirsty after weeks of sun, and I am left looking for the bright side.

I lower my chin from taking in the leaden clouds—and catch a glimpse of the pink lipstick-colored crape myrtles before me, branches bending beneath the weight of waterlogged blooms. Dripping with lush clusters of petals, the trees are a pair of bouquets, picked at their peak, that have just made the long trek home in a child's sweaty palms. I am their happy recipient.

After settling in, I make my way to what will become my second-favorite room of the early-1800s home: the one with the archives. I decide to call it this even though the space is shared with the catering company that feeds guests for weddings and events at Woodlawn. Metal file folders covering one wall of the small corner chamber are filled with papers worthy of rifling through: letters from the home's residents are interspersed with photocopies of paintings and newspaper clippings and a copy of George Washington's will. I am elbow deep in the details of bygone lives, and I could stay for hours.

When my head starts to spin from the small print, I look at the room's small oval window, marveling at first at the intricate panes laid out in the shape of a spider's web. When I look through them, I see the front lawn's crape myrtles have followed me here. From this vantage point, they don't look weighed down by the weather, but more beautiful for it, as the raindrops turn their delicate petals into a deeply-pink carpet on the gravel below.

The room I'm in is humid, breezeless, but I can't pull myself away from the file cabinets just yet. I'm thinking of Nelly as the privileged, adopted, chosen granddaughter-cum-daughter of George and Martha Washington. I'm reading the letters in the folders and in the book, *George Washington's Beautiful Nelly*, and the

childhood version of her is coming into focus. An American princess of sorts, doted on, educated, beautiful and rubbing elbows with society's greatest thinkers as a country, freshly birthed, was finding its earliest form.

...

I leave the letters for a tour of the Pope-Leighey house, a break in the rain, and return in the afternoon to find the weather gloomy again, fittingly.

For the next couple days, I get stuck on the year 1799. It's a heavy year in Nelly's life, one that would have made those early, exhilarating ones feel like a mirage. It's the year it all seemed to be coming together, yet began falling apart. And it's the first of a nearly four-year lapse in the hundreds of letters that pass between Nelly and her dearest friend Elizabeth. I decide to write a letter, between the friends, to fill in the gap.

I spend the rainy days thinking of the loved ones Nelly began to lose that year: the grandparents that adopted her as their own, the first of the seven children she would bury out of the eight she birthed. I come home to my own pair of children that night. My daughter is sick, throwing up, back pain. I fall headlong into the brand of anxiety Nelly writes about in her heartfelt letters.

I think of the remedies laid out in her housekeeping book, the "mercurial ointment"—which we now know is poisonous—that the doctor used on her daughter Frances' skin infection. It's a wonder she was the one child who outlived her mother. I am bouncing between thoughts of the past and present. I call our modern-day doctor and make an appointment, hoping whatever cure she recommends won't be debunked by future generations.

I return to Woodlawn and set up shop in my favorite little room between the bedrooms overlooking a back balcony, featuring views of yet another crape myrtle, this one just ripening into light-pink blooms against an otherwise leafy-green landscape.

Mount Vernon is off in the distance, though I can't see the plantation for the trees from here. And Nelly's past, the record of it at least, is in those file folders a few rooms away.

...

The next day, the sun finally peeks through, and I'm not sure how I feel about it. The crape myrtles beg me to take photos of their heavy blooms, half spilt in a half-circle carpet below, dewy petals sparkling in the newfound light.

I make my way to the Pope-Leighey house and sit, uncomfortably, in the stillness, feeling the weight of it. The verdant forest outside the windows is almost motionless but for the occasional leaf fluttering to the forest floor. The sun rests on a blood-red flower whose name I do not know, spotlighting, then moving again. Natural light plays a similar game inside the house, cascading in a dinosaur shape on the bench and then the carpet as its source crosses the sky.

I feel like I am breaking a rule being here, though the groundskeeper let me in. It's too still, nothing like my life outside. I have snuck into these sacred spaces, peoples' *homes*, where they lived their lives in curtained privacy. I enter cautiously, to wander and wonder.

What was it like to have a cup of coffee here on a similarly sun-dappled morning? To wake to the brightest sun pouring into the bedroom, the rat-a-tat-tap of Frank Lloyd Wright's urgency, built into the fabric of this outside-in structure: "The day has begun, and so must yours."

I feel the stagnant serenity this place is intended to conjure, yes, but I also feel its earnestness. Rather than resting, I am as itching as its creator to create *something new* from all of this, to mimic its beauty in my own small way.

## *The Lost Letter*

*“I wrote to you in July a long letter, which I fear you never received...”*  
— *in a letter from Woodlawn on March 23, 1806*

Much of what we know about Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis is gleaned from the nearly 200 letters she wrote to her lifelong friend in Philadelphia, Elizabeth Bordley Gibson. During my time as a Writer-in-Residence at Woodlawn—the historic plantation gifted to Nelly by her adopted parents, George and Martha Washington—I could hardly look away from these letters.

Many of them are transcribed and bound into a book titled, *George Washington’s Beautiful Nelly*. But I relished the chance to read the transcriptions fresh from the archive files I had access to in an upper room of the house now owned by the National Trust for Historic Preservation. If I could have made them out in Nelly’s own “miserable scrawl,” I would have. (Penmanship seemed to be the one ladylike characteristic Nelly let slide, writing words “crosshatched” across the lines she’d already written to save paper.)

As I read and reread these letters, I marveled at the dramatic change in Nelly’s disposition over a short period that was marked not only by her transition to wife and matron of her own mansion, but also by intense suffering.

The earlier letters reflect a young girl—as beautiful as she is educated, by all accounts—writing of an idyllic upbringing from Mount Vernon. In 1799, she writes just two letters to her friend: One details her plans—after “cupid took me by surprise”—to marry Lawrence Lewis, George Washington’s nephew, a few days later in February. The other, in November of that year, recounts the who’s-who of a whirlwind wedding trip and Nelly’s recent union to the “one who is in every respect calculated to ensure my happiness.”

But then the letters stop. There would not be another for nearly four years. And those four years would be the hardest yet of young Nelly’s life.

A month after her last letter to her friend in 1799, George Washington would die. Nelly would be bedridden when he breathed his last following the birth of her first child, a daughter who would be the only one of eight children she would not bury. Two years later, Nelly would lose in the span of a month her beloved Grandmama, Martha Washington, and her cherubic 10-month-old daughter while

recovering from measles away from Mount Vernon. At the time, Nelly would be six-months pregnant with her third child, a son named after her husband Lawrence, who would die shortly after birth.

As I read the startling timeline of trials in this season of Nelly's life, I was overwhelmed by the sorrow she must have felt. I know that many children did not survive to adulthood in Nelly's days, but that doesn't diminish the weight of these events—or the way they would have shaped her character. I thought of the year I lost two grandparents and a baby back-to-back, how one traumatic event seemed to bleed into the next, making the grief stretch out like a long shadow.

I think of how hard it would have been to pick up a pen and put these events to paper, even if it meant letting years lapse between the letters to your closest friend.

Here, I attempt to fill in that gap with a letter Nelly might have written in those in-between days. I chose the weeks following the double-loss of her grandmother and baby, just before she would lose another child, as the setting for this letter.

It's worth noting that, following Martha Washington's death, Nelly and her family were suddenly no longer able to live at Mount Vernon, which would be inherited by another of George Washington's nephews. The Lewises had been gifted 2,000 acres at Woodlawn for a home not far from Mount Vernon, but the house was far from completion and Nelly was about to give birth again. For these reasons, the Lewises left Mount Vernon and stayed in temporary lodging at her sister-in-law's home, Western View, in Culpeper County, Virginia. The author of *Nelly Custis Lewis's Housekeeping Book* describes what this intense period of transition, intermingled with grief, likely felt like for Nelly:

“Nelly found it almost impossible to recover from her grandmother's death. From birth she had always lived with Martha Washington and considered her her dearest friend and wisest counselor. Even though she had married and had children, she continued to live at Mount Vernon as her grandmother's child. [Now], for the first time she had to face an independent life.”

After this period of silence, Nelly's next letter to Elizabeth would come in December of 1804, from Woodlawn, the home where her life and the many others that inhabited it are now interpreted. She would begin that letter by saying that

“neither time nor the variety of changes I have experienced has diminish’d the sincere affection I have felt for you.” But the time and changes had, indeed, changed Nelly.

Nelly would continue to write her friend for the rest of her 73 years of life, penning her last letter a month before her death in 1852. I found in the archives a letter Elizabeth wrote, presumably to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, shortly after Nelly’s death as her own addendum to the obituary that had run about her friend in the paper. It is a beautiful chronicle of the depth of their friendship and a tribute to Nelly’s character. I gleaned from this writing insight into Nelly’s beliefs, inherited from her grandmother and made her own through the tribulations of life. Elizabeth writes that it was this “doctrine of redemption” that she “clung to... with increasing delight” and that “gave her strength for the occasions that required it.” I try to reflect the seedlings of that faith, amid trials, in this letter as well.

Over her long life, Nelly writes often of the overwhelming love she feels for her children and grandchildren and admits, poignantly in places, how the losses that occurred between the letters impacted her. Nelly writes shortly after her hiatus, by way of explanation, that “sickness and sorrow are not very favorable to epistolary communications.”

In the same letter, she tells Elizabeth: “I wrote to you in July a long letter, which I fear you never received.” Her unique letter-writing style often avoids the encumbrance of punctuation, capitalizes any references to people and deploys the “&” symbol and italics liberally, a style I tried to mimic here.

Western View, July 25, 1802

My Dearest Friend,

How often I have begun this letter never to send it. Even now I am unsure of whether I shall, I need only to scrawl these words somewhere, however miserably, & to feel that they are to someone. It has been nearly three years since I wrote you last, and I fear the woman I've become—or at least am presently—would be unrecognizable even to you, *my dearest friend*. I pray you still think of me as yours, though I have let time pass as it has. I think of you constantly & fondly, often wishing for your company in the darkest of nights, of which I have had many.

Dearest Betsy, I wonder if you have had any marriage proposals or whether cupid will surprise you as he did me once in what seems a long while ago now. Would that the surprises had ended there. For I have found myself surprised by marriage as well, or by the life that has come with it perhaps by coincidence.

When we married on the birthday of our *first president*, I thought Lawrence did look frightfully like a young version of Washington himself—you surely would have thought so too. Perhaps that was why I loved him so, & still manage to.

They are indeed both serious in nature, but my Spouse is not much like his uncle in any other way. On our wedding trip, his joints were overtaken by gout for several days, causing us to visit the mineral springs for healing rather than continue our arduous trip—a change in plans of which I cannot complain—but the disease, followed by an eye infection and many others, has plagued him on several occasions since.

I hardly knew the General to be sick—& certainly not *ill*—until the dreadful day he died. Oh Elizabeth how I longed for your company that day. My perfect and presently only child [Frances Parke Lewis] was but three weeks old and full of vitality, though I was *not* after the weeklong labor that brought her to us. I could not rise from bed, neither to say goodbye to my dear adopted Father nor to comfort she who has been more than a Mother to me. The babe and I but wailed together, separated by frailty from our family in their time of need.

I am afraid this was but the beginning of the hardships that have befallen me since undertaking marriage, though I cannot say that one has caused the other. I had

resigned myself, even happily, to be devoted to the domestic life as My Grandmother instructed. Perhaps I would be pursuing them cheerfully if life would allow, but it has besieged me with one tragedy after another. Dear Friend, I am nearly breaking under the load. *How can I ever send these words to you?* Writing them threatens to pull be back into the darkest of days, still unabated.

I have my dear daughter and yet am bereft of another, a cherub of a Girl not yet a year old, lost to the One who giveth and taketh away. My only solace, Dear Friend, is in the words Grandmother taught me to read and to pray from childhood, and in the thought that the Giver might give me another child soon.

Even now I am but days away from it being so, miserable with the heat and the roundness of being with child again. I pray it will be a son, but my anxiety overwhelms me. I can think of nothing else but fear of losing another and I know not whether I could withstand it.

Martha Betty was her name, my precious Girl. The measles that took us both away from My Blessed Grandmother took my daughter too and nearly took me. I have been in decline ever since, wanting at times that the disease had taken me also. Mr Lewis says I should not dwell so on what is no more, and I know he has enough to mind with the care of Mount Vernon and his lands out west and the building of our home—if it will ever be completed—at Woodlawn.

I long for it even now, to be in the pieces of it already constructed, were they suitable for living with a child and another on the way. I want not for the bricks of the new place but for the promise of it, & for the views of Mount Vernon that is no longer ours but home still to my fondest memories.

Dearest Betsy, I remember the times we had there almost as fondly as our girlhood days in *Philadelphia*, when I would play harpsichord for the crowd or—on those rare bless'd occasions—deliver a line that would make the General bellow with laughter.

If you read this letter, especially after so long a lapse in correspondence, do not think me utterly melancholy. At times, it is true, I have been and even now the tears are close at hand but I trust my mood & disposition will change for the better soon. Our time here at Western View has been touched by every conceivable source of sadness but Mr Lewis's sister Betty ensures I am under the best of care, hot and round as I am. The cottage here is far from many of my friends and relatives,

desolate even, but the land does produce the finest & juiciest of plums. I cannot be sure which I enjoy more, eating them myself or watching their nectar run down My Frances' cheeks.

Would that we were at Woodlawn already, My Friend, and you and Mr Gibson & all of us could take a long dinner together after we harvest all the goodly land that will soon be ours. I long for it as I long for this child in my arms, sweet succor for my sorrows.

My Husband and child unite in most sincere affection for you. Please send word and tell me how you and your dear family are.

Ever more truly yours,  
Eleanor Parke Lewis

## *Sisters in sorrow*

*A found poem*

*Composed of lines from Nelly's letters to Elizabeth*

*Author's Note: Nelly mentioned "lines of verse" and poems she and Elizabeth sent back and forth with their letters. Though I have not found any, I see poetry throughout her writing. I have woven one of her own words, on the topic of sorrow, here.*

Ah my Beloved friend,  
how sadly times are changed to us all,  
but to me more than anyone,  
deprived of those  
Beloved Parents  
whom I loved with so much devotion

loss can never be repair'd  
I have lost two children  
I have two charming children  
remarkably lovely  
healthy  
to whom my life is devoted

I must ever love and regret  
I look back with sorrow  
& to the future without hope.

I feel like a shipwreck'd mariner  
on a rock in the midst of the Ocean  
wave after wave  
breaks over me,  
& I remain

It appears to be a dream  
long passed away

so heavily has time passed to me.  
but neither time  
nor the variety of changes  
has diminish'd the sincere  
affection  
felt for you  
my Dearest Elizabeth

## Andrew Tran

Andrew Tran is an avid reader from the DC Metro area. He used to teach at a local Jewish Community Center. In his spare time, he performs standup comedy at dive bars. He has graduated from Virginia Commonwealth University and has received honorable mention for Creative Nonfiction at the VCU Writing Awards. His fiction and poetry has been published in Whurk Magazine, Berfrois, Borfski Press, Five: 2: One Magazine, Spinebind Magazine, Queens Mob Teahouse, Defenestration, and The Virginia Normal. Follow him on Twitter: @AndyT187 and Instagram: andyman1900. He also has a website: [andrewtranwrites.com](http://andrewtranwrites.com).

## *for Hanson*

Black bodies buried beneath this fresh and Black soil can no longer speak. and their names are jotted down, but their stories haven't been told. in the courtyard, by the fountain, pen in hand, rear in chair, i ponder about whether i have the right to write and tell

the stories of those bodies. i breathe in the quiet and chill air, hoping Hanson, the enslaved cook, will guide my hand as i write notes on his recipes onto my crumpled pad. the woodlawn estate looms over me and it scares and excites my imagination when my fingers crack and tremble from dragging my black pen across the white pages. the Black ink seeps into the white notepad, blotting out the plainness.

i stand up and stretch my hands, i put my headphones on, press play, and listen to "Coffee Bean" by

Travis Scott— "Feel like someone's readin' your horoscope/some shit only me and the Lordknows/SOS, that's for those who hear

this in morse code/Too many doors closed..."

i turn the knob and open the white door

to the woodlawn bridal suite. i sit on the couch and check the internet for information on Hanson.

*google Hanson into the search bar. click:*

william cook hanson is the first name that pops up as the first result. the rest of the results are white names and white faces. barely anything can be found

on Hanson. the ac unit rattles and the brilliant light from the lamp dims, as if on cue. Hanson was the cook, which made him pertinent in the lives of the white family who lived at the woodlawn estate. because he cooked, created, and cultivated the food, Hanson resided in the kitchen, meaning he slept there after he labored for hours, baking bread in a beehive shaped oven, next to a fireplace that burned all day, every day. there's a cook book that features two of his recipes in a book of over

90 recipes. this is **Hanson's recipe for Breakfast Biscuits**: "Take a quart of dough, add butter the size of a hen's egg, work it up very well so as to mix the butter & dough well, roll it out 3 or 4 times cut it in small pieces, roll them up like an Egg, just flatten them a little with the rolling pin, set them by a few minutes to rise, & bake them in a slow oven." i borrowed this recipe from *nelly custis lewis's housekeeping book*, which was edited with an introduction by patricia brady schmit, to show how many of the recipes in the book were most likely "borrowed" from Hanson. to segue, i eat my meatball sub and drink my orange soda. i think about food. i think about traveling to get food. i think about food and travel. i think about Anthony Bourdain. i think about Hanson; i think about Anthony Bourdain. i think about Hanson; i think about Anthony Bourdain. i think about Hanson; i finish eating and open up the white door and walk outside. on sunday, i work at the arcadia center's farm and maneuver a wheelbarrow around the bumps and ridges of the damp grass. as rain plummets onto the green land, i take a moment to reflect, my knee bleeding from a cut. i remember my residency week and wander, lost in thoughts. there i am again. i sit back in my chair and stare at the white tarpaulin where they host the weddings. i wonder if Hanson was married. i wonder if he had children. i wonder if he was ever happy. i pick up my pen, my hand shuddering, as i scribble words onto the page. it feels strange to write about the Black bodies buried beneath this rich and Black soil. but I want to honor Hanson and the slaves who lived, work, and sacrificed their hands, feet, arms, legs, eyes, faces, teeth, and minds to build this estate. these Black men and women toiled to create this establishment for white families while their families lived outside in slave quarters two miles away from the property.

tell me if i have the right to write the stories  
of those Black bodies buried beneath  
this fresh and Black soil.

## Gwen Van Velsor

Gwen Van Velsor writes creative nonfiction and pseudo-inspirational prose. She founded Yellow Arrow Publishing, a project that publishes and supports writers who identify as women. Her major accomplishments include walking the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage in Spain, raising a toddler, and being ok with life exactly as it is. Gwen wrote food and travel columns for The Big Island Chronicle and The Summit Daily. Her adventure travel memoir, *Follow That Arrow*, was published in 2016.

## *Shells for a Hermit*

As I pull into the gated driveway leading to Woodlawn, I laugh. A solid two hour drive from home in Baltimore, it turns out I've been here before.

Two years earlier we'd made the drive to Ft. Belvoir several times in preparation for my husband's deployment overseas. We were able to stay on base while he worked during the day. My daughter was only a few months old at the time and we strolled the shady lanes leading to armed exits and through empty soldier housing units.

On our final visit before he left for the Middle East, I'd already stopped three times to soothe a baby who strongly disliked the car seat. She was finally, finally asleep as we drove the last few miles and I badly needed to use the restroom. If I pulled into a fast food place, she would wake while trying to take her from the car seat, and I didn't know if I could hold it long enough to get on base. I spotted a narrow road behind a church that led to some bushes in a grassy area near a whitewashed house. Pulling over, I took advantage of this area of privacy off the highway. Now I realize, this is the entrance to Woodlawn.

Those old feelings of desperation rush back. Of needing just a few more moments of silence, of being willing to do anything not to wake her up. As the months ticked by after my husband left, this only multiplied. The responsibility weighed me down like clouds full of ice. Every diaper change, every feeding, every long teething-disturbed night, was all on me. I was turned inside out, a fragile shell of my former self.

Looking back at this season, now from inside the Woodlawn mansion, I reflect on getting here from there. During my residency week, I busily work on a book of nonfiction vignettes called *Freedom Warrior*. At its core, it is a collection of stories and snapshots on finding freedom in situations when I felt trapped. The work was inspired by the deployment year, when the experience of motherhood drew me further into isolation, sent me into a state of despair and a longing for freedom, searching for inspiration and a way to escape. *Freedom Warrior* describes how I found it.

Writing here at Woodlawn is the perfect setting not only because it takes me back mentally to that time, but because this old mansion was once a shell just like me, waiting for someone or something to move in to bring it back to life. Today,

Woodlawn, Pope-Leighey and the Arcadia Farm bring freshness to this old estate. Art fills the rooms, visitors bring wonder, and trees and plants bloom and grow.

Maybe it's because I'm from the city, where my life is full of marble stoops and angular skylines, that the natural world at Woodlawn seems more vibrant than your average historic home in a bucolic setting. The drizzling August rain keeps me inside some days, writing by the window light upstairs, or imagining having tea with Nelly in the sitting room. One afternoon I hustle down to the Pope-Leighey house between downpours and sit under the carport scribbling. This surely fits in with Frank Lloyd Wright's vision when he created this space to be seamless with the natural world.

Several non-human beings visit me throughout the week starting with a jumping spider who made his way to my keyboard. Urged by this little fella, I made many trips outside daily to clear my head and stretch my fingers. Out there, a hawk soars high above the trees cascading down the original front entryway. A plump turkey, followed by two doe, dash into the woods. On a sunny morning, the biggest butterfly I've ever seen nurses from the purple flowers outside the Pope-Leighey house, opening his orange and blue wings wide for my examination. A hummingbird flits along the outside strings of lights while a walking stick finds a seat on a bench. While I snap photos of the main entrance, a bald eagle swoops low, and then high, over the house. A clumsy groundhog scurries in through the fairy door of a great white oak, most perplexed by my presence.

This now inhabited and vibrant shell inspire me to create a create a selection of prayers influenced by various aspects of the property from quilts on the beds, to people who lived here long ago.

## *Request to Enter*

When approaching a place not their own, inhabited by either humans or *nā akua* (Gods), ancient Hawaiians would sing an *oli* (chant) created for that place in order to ask permission to enter. I offer this prayer on behalf of myself and those who come or will come to Woodlawn, before and after. May your time here be filled with love and light.

*I do not know this place  
It does not know me*

*My footprints  
Your footprints  
Our footprints  
Cover this place in millions of marks, each with its own name*

*May the power above, who gives life and takes it  
Welcome us to enter this place, to take up space here, to leave our mark  
May we accept knowledge as it is offered*

*May all those who have come before  
All those here now,  
And all those who will come after  
Accept this place as it is  
And may they be accepted as they are*

*I request to step forward with an open heart  
opening my eyes to the unseen  
my ears to the the unheard  
My soul to the unknown*

## *A Mealtime Prayer*

A common moment of shared prayer is before a meal. This blessing, written in the dining room at Woodlawn among Williams' installation "Layers," is meant to honor all of those at the table, including those who birthed, grew, prepared, and served the meal. After reading this prayer at a volunteer potluck at Arcadia's demonstration farm, it took on a vibrant life of its own among the toiling squash vines and freshly weeded soil.

*Bless this bread*

*Touched first by the ground as it was born*

*Torn from its mother at harvest*

*Crushed into flour*

*Molded into dough with living yeast and living water*

*Baked with fire*

*Served by hands*

*Bless this wine*

*Touched first by the ground as it was born*

*Torn from its mother at harvest*

*Crushed into juice*

*Fermented with living water and never ending time*

*Bottled under pressure*

*Poured by hands*

*Bless this meal*

*Touched by many souls*

*Transformed into sustenance for our living bodies*

*Bringing together our hands in gratitude*



**For More Information:**

[woodlawnpopeleighey.org](http://woodlawnpopeleighey.org)

[arcadiafood.org](http://arcadiafood.org)

[theinnerlooplit.com](http://theinnerlooplit.com)

[YellowArrowPublishing.com](http://YellowArrowPublishing.com)

