

Letters from The House Between

Formerly *Notes from Toad Hall*

Issue 4 **Winter 2015**



Dear Friends,

Drought – now there’s a word. Drought. Like California. Like now as I try to write. It’s been like trying to cough up fish bones from a dry throat. I’ve stared at the screen for hours. I’ve looked up the word venal. I’ve eaten a piece of Irish soda bread. I left my office to buy pumpkins and white mums only to find they cost too much. I mean for my current budget. So I bought a spaghetti squash instead because it’s something we can eat and there is this recipe in *The Smitten Kitchen* cookbook called Spaghetti Squash Tacos. Sounds gross, doesn’t it? [I made them later and they were delicious.] While I was out, with a huge gap in checkbook logic, I bought a latte. But this will help me feel better and I will be inspired, I reasoned.

Denis, Mr.-Idea- Man, tells me to write about our trip to California. About the redwoods I'd always ever wanted to see and touch. I did! And our friends who live in a cool apartment for seniors. And how well the retreat went. And how many people I talked to who are miraculously standing after living through terrible loss – people who've looked at death and chosen to go on living. I could write about the California Drought which is heartbreaking the countryside. But I want to quit writing, because it gives me a headache. I want to read my book, the one I supposedly only allow myself to read in the evening after my "real" work is done. *The Cuckoo's Calling* by Robert Galbraith aka J.K. Rowling. A detective story that is already a #1 National Bestseller. I am so depressed! The first thing I said about it was "She's begun a series!" Denis says, "She has. I already have her second book. Same detective." I knew it! You know she really didn't write the Harry Potter books as a series, she had the whole thing already done planned out in her head before the first one ever hit the market. More to admire. And now Denis walks in and



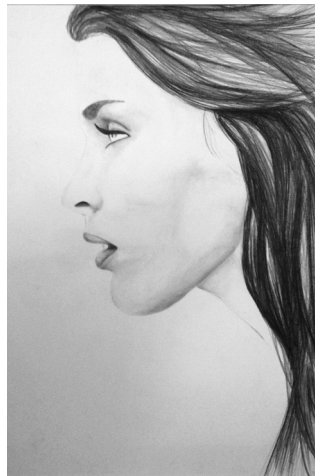
Picnic among the giant Redwoods

announces, they've released her third Cormoran Strike novel. I am so depressed!

I'm a little ashamed of myself, but perhaps there are reasons to be more depleted than I allow?

Besides death and funerals – the Great Aunt and Ed Hague went Home – we are parenting our oldest granddaughter and glad to do so, but it was no one's number one plan for how she would spend her senior year, least of all hers. Nor was it quite what we imagined for the stable, calm writing life here at House

Between. It's almost laughable. We are into driving lessons, (only nicked one mailbox so far) parent/



Pencil drawing by granddaughter Manessah

teacher conferences and watching *Scrubs* reruns. Our appliances have continued on a path of self-destruction, Denis had a medical scare and our granddaughter fought off an internet catfish that frightened and angered me more than Donald Trump's comments about women.

That life we want. The one without sickness and suffering and financial hardship and everyone we love happy and safe is something we can imagine, but it isn't ours to have yet. Christianity teaches us that "no matter what precautions we take, no matter how well we have put together a good life, no matter how hard we have worked to be healthy, wealthy, comfortable with friends and family, and successful with our career — something will inevitably ruin it." (*Walking with God through Pain and Suffering* by Tim Keller.) Indeed.



Giant Puffball mushroom found in the woods

On the Sunday afternoon I went for a walk, it had been five days since Ed died. Three weeks since the Great Aunt passed away. It is odd to me that some people do their best thinking and praying while walking. I can't do anything except walk in a cloud of whatever current emotion I'm feeling and maybe look for mushrooms. That day I asked if God would show me something in creation that reminds me to be happy. Any little thing would do. When I got back, I sat on the deck to watch birds come to the feeders. That's when a small revelation flew to the rain gauge and sat atop it with a sunflower seed. Chickadees are one-at-a-time grabbers. They snatch a single seed, fly to a perch, clutch the seed in their claws and hammer it open with their beak. Usually they land on a branch, but not even a bird can get purchase on the rim of a glass tube. After



Chickadee at feeder

the first peck the seed fell to the bottom and she looked baffled as she stuck her head down the tube trying to reach it. When that didn't work she hopped down



"Make me hear joy"

beside it and pecked at the glass wall. She could see it right there, but it was totally out of reach. She didn't waste more time over this puzzle, but simply flew back to the feeder, snatched another and sat on a more hospitable branch to crack it open. It was a humble, ordinary thing that felt joyful and full of God.

Elizabeth Elliot writes that "No matter how far along our spiritual pilgrimage we may have come, we need to be shown time after time that humble ordinary things can be very holy, very full of God. We may hope for visions and revelations and wonderful experiences, forgetting that the context of the revelation of God to each one of us is, exactly where we are – here on earth, in this house, this room, this work, this family, this physical body."

Tim Keller notes that "while other worldviews lead us to sit in the midst of life's joys, foreseeing the coming sorrows, Christianity empowers its people to sit in the

midst of this world's sorrows, tasting the coming joy." Ed would have liked this quote. It's what he did so well the last three years of his life. He sat in sorrow and suffering, and found that God met him exactly where he was, right square in the middle of cancer, and he sat with it tasting both sorrow and joy and a love that he lavished on everyone in his orbit.

This year I've included a book in my gift list that I hope you read. Many things stood out, but there was a paragraph I loved in *Just Mercy* where Bryan Stevenson describes his black pastor who, as the organ started and the choir began to sing, would spread his arms wide and call out to his people: "Make me to hear joy and gladness that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice." (Ps. 51:8 KJV)



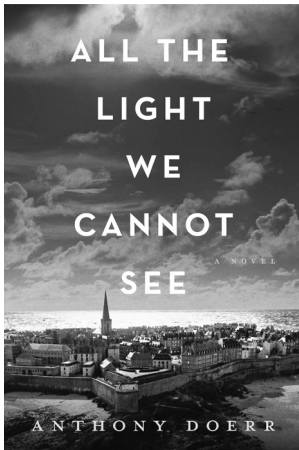
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Christmas Gift List 2014

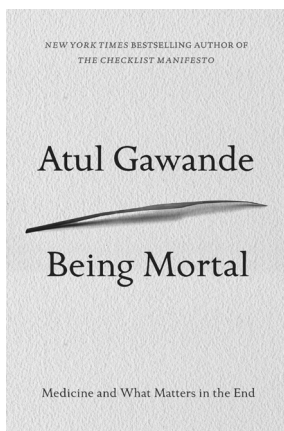


All the Light We Cannot See

by Anthony Doerr, Scribner, 2014
(Fiction)

A reviewer summarizes the book this way: “Does the world need yet another novel about WWII? It does when the novel is as inventive and beautiful as this one by Anthony Doerr. In fact, *All the Light We Cannot See* – while set mostly in Germany and France before and during the war – is not really a ‘war novel’. Yes, there is fear and

fighting and disappearance and death, but the author’s focus is on the interior lives of his two characters. Marie Laure is a blind 14-year-old French girl who flees to the countryside when her father disappears from Nazi-occupied Paris. Werner is a gadget-obsessed German orphan whose skills admit him to a brutal branch of Hitler Youth. Never mind that their paths don’t cross until late in the novel, this is not a book you read for plot (although there is a wonderful, mysterious subplot about a stolen gem).... This is a book you read for the beauty of Doerr’s writing.” (Sara Nelson) Against all the darkness layered over the world we find characters whose desire is to live in ways that bring goodness to those around, and yet often they must decide on what to sacrifice; morality or survival. It isn’t clear to us at first what or who will deliver the light we can not know or imagine in “the light we cannot see,” and yet it comes pouring out of the brokenness of humankind. I didn’t want this book to end.



Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End

by Atul Gawande, Metropolitan Books, 2014 (Non-fiction)

What happens as we age? What questions should we be asking about the end of life? When both our physical and mental spheres narrow, where and how do we live out our final years? What does the medical field want for us? Are there better options than the ones that seem inevitable or most popular? This book is written with expertise and compassion. Gawande is an excellent resource for thinking through an emotionally charged and complex issue. This year we’ve lost two people we loved dearly. Denis’ beloved aunt lived until she was 94. The last twelve years she suffered from Alzheimer’s. The other was our friend Ed Hague, who lived three and a half years past a diagnosis of stage IV prostate cancer. Very different situations, completely different approaches to dying, but both caused us to ask how can we die well? What do we need to have in place to help ourselves and our

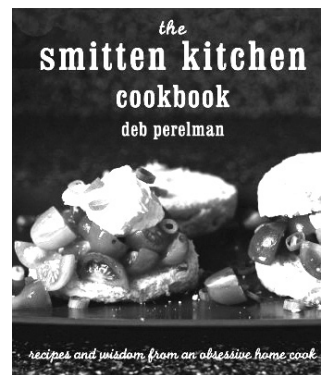
loved ones navigate “somewhere near the end.” This book is filled with thoughtful illustrations, suggestions and compassionate observations about medicine and our institutions. Gawande doesn’t give final answers, but points us in a direction.

“...two kinds of courage are required in aging and sickness. The courage to confront the reality of mortality – the courage to seek out the truth of what is to be feared and what is to be hoped. More daunting is the second kind of courage – the courage to act on the truth we find.” (p.128)

The Smitten Kitchen Cookbook

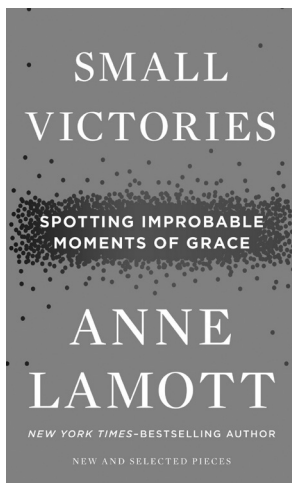
by Deb Perelman, Knopf, 2012 (cookbook)

With the logic of a robot, I was done with cookbooks. When we moved to House Between a year and a half ago, I got rid of half my cookbooks. It was time to pitch the 1968 *Betty Crocker’s Cookbook for Two* and a myriad of other useless books I never pulled off the shelf. I didn’t think I’d ever be tempted to add to my collection again. Ya, well, logic has never really been my specialty. In our first months of unpacking and settling in, my niece brought over several dishes all of them from *The*



Smitten Kitchen. I was smitten from the moment I tasted her Mini Meatloaves with Brown Butter Mashed Potatoes. I am picky about meatloaf and I don’t even like Swedish meatballs, but these! This tender, little individual loaf was exquisite! And when you make the recipe, if you don’t eat them all at once, the unbaked loaves can be frozen and pulled out for a quick, delicious supper. These days

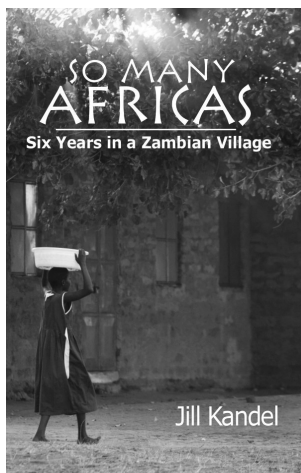
nearly everything I make is pulled off the internet or out of my old recipe box. But this book had me intrigued enough to lay down money. I love that the recipes are a little different, a bit vegetarian, all scratch with beautiful photos (what’s a cookbook without them anymore?) This week I am going to make Spaghetti Squash & Black Bean Tacos with Queso Fresco. Sounds awful, right? But, ah, you’ll be wrong. They’re going to be amazing.



Small Victories: Spotting Improbable Moments of Grace by Anne Lamott, Riverhead Books, 2014 (Personal essay)

Lamott writes about faith and its intersect with real life in funny, brutally honest and unsparing self-examination. But amid what could be a justifiable lament about the darkness of life, she spawns a glorious hope. Her theology makes me a little twitchy, but she always points us to Jesus and for that I love her writing. This book is no exception. From the very first sentence I was exposed. Unmasked right where I was hoping to hide. I knew then I must read the book. She writes, “The worst

possible thing you can do when you’re down in the dumps, tweaking, vaporous with victimized self-righteousness, or bored, is to take a walk with dying friends. They will ruin everything for you.” Far more than entertaining us, she leads us to turn toward love in the most hopeless situations. Not only then, but when we have surges of murderous intention toward the bureaucrat in whose line we have stood for hours so he can serenely reject your papers for the fourth time. If forgiveness is not your strong suit and you like holding grudges and you need to say every several years, “I think I might need help,” then you will certainly appreciate this book.



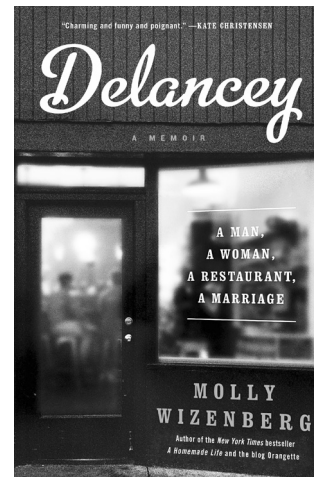
So Many Africas: Six Years in a Zambian Village by Jill Kandel, Autumn House, 2015 (Memoir)

This book aroused complex reactions, but it is so compelling and unusual I must recommend it. It is beautiful in its description of rivers, wildlife and people, but disturbing in what life was like for Kandel as a young American bride living in a Zambian village. She shatters any romantic notions of what it’s like to live in an isolated village and to love it for all its wild beauty, to love its people and their histories of suffering, to survive in a harsh climate, and yet be devastated by the lack of infrastructure, the disease, and

constant nearness of death and war. Surely, she thought, life would be challenging and risky, but not that hard. She didn’t speak the language or know the culture. Her husband was away much of the time immersed in his work for agricultural research. From the bat guano that seeped brown liquid through the ceiling, bathing the shelves and floor during the rainy season to the loneliness and longing for the familiar, nothing was easy. (Life there would reduce me to a quivering puddle.) After six years and two children she couldn’t do it any longer. Now, after years of living with memories of the grief and failure that Africa was to her, in this book, she recounts the story, ponders its meaning and reflects on the glory Zambia was and still is to her. [This book maybe ordered directly from Kandel at www.jillkandel.com or from Hearts and Minds Books.]

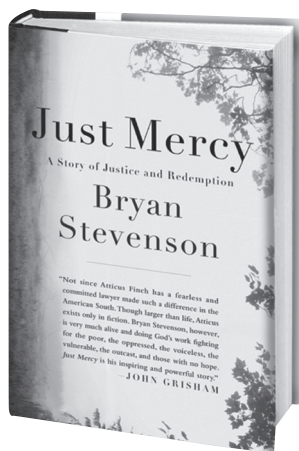
Delancey: A Man, A Woman, A Restaurant, A Marriage by Molly Wizenberg, Simon & Schuster, 2014 (Memoir)

My favorite fun memoir of the year! The story of a young couple learning to give in and let go in order to grow together. When Brandon decided his dream was to open a pizzeria, Molly was supportive. Together they



renovated a space, experimented to find the best recipes, hired staff, and worked like dogs. All was fine until Molly realized the pressure of running a restaurant was killing her. Honesty in a marriage can require challenging changes. What I like best about the

book (along with the recipes and details of what it takes to open a restaurant) is that she finally understood what her calling in life was to be: food writing. We may feel guilty comparing ourselves to one who tutors disabled kids while we are *only* plunking away on a lap top about crème fraiche. It doesn’t save lives. Should you be doing something you love (as in Eric Liddell “feeling God’s pleasure” when he ran) when the world needs a cure for Ebola? As she makes it past depression and doubts she rightly concludes: “But there is something about *Delancey* that ... matters. We get to make people happy. We get to give people a good night. We get to spend our days doing work that we can be proud of, and when we’re done, there’s all the pizza you can eat.” That is plainly God’s common grace poured out for everyone.



Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption

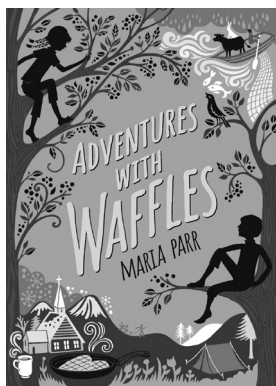
by Bryan Stevenson, Spiegel & Grau, 2014
(non-fiction)

Walter McMillian was Bryan Stevenson's first case, a man on death row for six years without supportable evidence because of collaboration between corrupt law enforcement and the court system. Time nearly ran out before he was exonerated and released. From that time Stevenson knew his calling was to represent people unfairly traumatized by our criminal justice system. He was a young lawyer when he began

Equal Justice Initiative, a legal practice dedicated to helping the wrongly condemned, and defending the poorest of our society – prisoners without voice or power – among them women and children. A book well-written, minus bitterness, but filled with passion and factual evidence. I understand better what the following statistics represent:

The US has the highest incarceration rate in the world. We represent 4.4 percent of the world's population, but house around 22 percent of the world's prisoners. 2.3 million people are in prison. 6 million are on probation or parole. One in every three black male babies born this century can expect to be incarcerated. We've sent 250,000 children to adult prisons to serve long terms, many for life.

These are heartbreaking stories in a country that *prides* itself on equality and justice for all. Despite overwhelming odds, Stevenson has followed his calling to see justice and mercy achieved for the powerless. His organization has had successes along with many failures, but EJI's purpose remains the same: to bring joy to places of sorrow and suffering. Stevenson writes that as a college student "... at a certain point in the service I would play the organ before the choir began to sing. The minister would stand, spread his arms wide, and say, "Make me to hear joy and gladness, that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice."



Adventures with Waffles

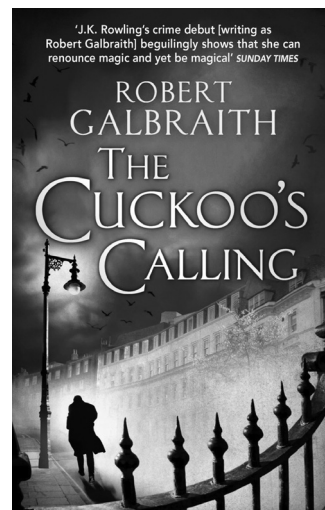
by Maria Parr, Candlewick, 2015
(juvenile fiction)

Parr's book, *Vaffelhjerte* (Waffleheart) that has been translated from Norwegian to English is a humorous, heart-warming chapter-book for young readers. The setting is a small settlement on a beautiful Norwegian Fiord – foreign to most of us – but filled with familiar human stories we know from the heart. Lena is Trille's best friend, even though she's a girl – a spunky girl whose risk-taking adventures lead them into all sorts of trouble. So while this book is filled with hair-raising schemes and hilarious episodes – who would

think of coaxing your uncle's cow onto a little fishing boat in an effort to recreate Noah's ark? – there is also a universal language present that touches all peoples - the desire for friends who never give us up, for beloved grandparents who we wish would live forever, and for fathers who never leave. Throughout the story, waffles, a mouth-watering Norwegian treat, bring that bit of sweetness that lightens life and helps us face the dark days.

The Cuckoo's Calling

by Robert Galbraith, aka J.K. Rowling, Mulholland Books, 2013 (crime novel)



If you've run out of good detective novels then you will be very happy to begin this highly acclaimed series with Cormoran Strike, Private Eye. It is gratifying to find a mystery crime story you can appreciate – one that's

not so dark and cynical you want to join the protagonist in a downward spiral of suicidal depression or turn to whiskey for solace. Or one that isn't so formulaic and cliché you are bored. As a war veteran, Strike may be wounded both physically and psychologically, but beneath his rough exterior he has such resolve for living despite his difficult circumstances and such an endearing sense of what is right that you can't help but root for him. The story is immediately compelling as a client pulls Strike's detecting into the superficial world of the very rich and famous when a supermodel falls to her death from a balcony and it is assumed to be suicide. Galbraith's carefully constructed backstories have enough depth and details to make us want to know more about Strike and Robin Ellacott, his newly hired side-kick, the young woman who has taken the position despite its lack of pay and prestige. You end up caring not just about the case getting solved, but wanting to know more about the main characters.

RansomNotes

PRAYERS & THANKSGIVING

For Denis as he co-teaches a class on the Biblical basis for art at Church of the Cross in Hopkins, MN. As he gives a lecture at Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Minneapolis on “Movies through the Eyes of Faith.”

For both of us February 12 & 13, Rochester, MN, we will be giving workshops at the L’Abri Conference.

That God would give creativity and wise words as Denis and I continue work on our publications and writing projects. Lately, due to much happening on our home-front, we’ve had difficulty finding the headspace to write.

Ransom’s financial needs have mounted as the mid-year slump continues deeper and longer than usual. Thanksgiving for those who support with prayer and donations. Without your love, we wouldn’t be here.

Pray for wisdom as our whole life now includes parenting our teenage granddaughter, who is a delight to have around. We’ve just attended parent/teacher conferences – our first in twenty years!

Pray for Ed Hague’s family as they adjust to life without him. Ed was a member of Ransom’s Board of Directors for many years. I am including his obituary written by Himself. I know. Who does that? I hope it will encourage you to live large and die well.

ED HAGUE AUGUST 18, 2015 **Swallowed up by life!**

Ed Hague was born April 12, 1957 in an ice storm in Indianapolis, Indiana. He spent the rest of his life thawing out. As a young boy, he learned to hide his heart in a family that was abusive, unsafe and, frankly, pretty crazy (his sisters are absolutely amazing, however). His grandfather, Jack, helped him through some of the roughest years, though, gently pushing him on towards manhood.

In seeking to assist in this project, Jack tried to take Ed out one night to see (God forbid) “Bikini Beach” starring Annette Funicello. Sensing trouble, Ed’s grandmother, Helen, stopped the two of them at the door, forbade the outing, and gave Ed a Bible to read instead.

The Bible reading must have stuck as Ed ended up spending over 30 years in the ministry, but he never truly got over Annette, and he never forgave his grandmother for the emasculation. As for the missed movie, he soon figured things out, though, going on to have four beautiful and intelligent daughters.

These daughters came through his marriage to Betsy Snapp when he was 17 years old. Ok, he was 22 when they married, but for those preceding 5 years he really wished he was married to her. To the countless men who wished they could have been married to her, Ed says, “You lost. I won. Deal with it.”

The church and Ed had a troubled, love-hate relationship. He put in many years of service in different congregations, but like an ill-fitting suit, it never seemed a good match for him. He met a lot of great people, though, who helped him heal and thaw out some. He is incredibly grateful to all of them.

At the end of his life, Ed fulfilled a lifelong goal. He left the pastorate and started his own business. His son-in-law, Drew, who is doing a much better job of it than Ed ever did, now runs it. It’s called FloridaPro Computing and is located at Midtown in Tallahassee, FL. They service and support all brands of computers and love caring for their clients. They are also the only Apple Authorized Service Providers in Tallahassee.

Here’s the most important thing to know about Ed, though. God loved him and made sure that Ed knew it. Hiding from love all of his life, after his cancer diagnosis, God turned the love firehoses on him.

It was as if He wasn’t going to let him die until every dried up and hardened part of Ed’s heart was showered and soaked in His love. He used an army of people to do this. Ed is certain they are all angels in disguise.

Ed being loved by God? He has no explanation for it other than grace. It was grace that put God’s Son on the cross for Ed’s sins (of which there were many – see the attached list) and then forgave him of those sins – the greatest being his damned self-righteousness.

God then, through Christ, gave Ed another undeserved gift. He took off Ed’s tattered cloak of self-righteousness and gave him the perfect robe of Christ’s righteousness. If you were wondering, that’s how Ed entered the presence of God without being stopped at the door.

Ed, amazingly, is now who he was meant to be when God created him. He’s not hiding, he’s not afraid, and he’s even gotten things worked out with his grandmother. He is now fully and completely Ed. If this scares you, he wants you to know he understands, but that you should get over it.

Death has lost and, thanks to all of you, love has won in Ed’s heart – forever.

And Finally...

I want to leave you with Elizabeth Elliot's full quote, appropriate as it is to Advent.

No matter how far along our spiritual pilgrimage we may have come, we need to be shown time after time that humble ordinary things can be very holy, very full of God. We may hope for vision and revelations and wonderful experiences, forgetting that the context of the revelation of God to each one of us is, exactly where we are – here on earth, in this house, this room, this work, this family, this physical body.

Think of the revelation of this divine life to the Bethlehem shepherds: the sudden appearance of the angel of the Lord, and the glory of the Lord, the song of high praise sung by the "the multitude of the heavenly host" – certainly a most wonderful experience – but it came while they were faithfully doing their usual job, just where they belonged.

And think of this – how did the divine life come to Mary? While angels were singing for the shepherds, she was sweating and straining in the darkness and discomfort of a stable. Reality was being given to her through agony and blood. Her mind could hardly have been filled during those painful hours with pure exulting. It was a baby, a human baby, helpless and squalling, that she must attend to. She was the "handmaid of the Lord" carrying out her task in squalor, neither seeing (as far as we know) the glory of the Lord, nor hearing the angels' song.

- E. Elliot, *The Music of His Promises*

I think of how I wrote a book and titled it *The Exact Place*. Elliot reminds me, once again, that God uses these ordinary exact places in our lives in a way that actually helps us "hear gladness and joy that the bones which thou hast broken may rejoice." (Ps. 51:8 KJV) Last year about this time I broke my ankle in three pieces and received a literal lesson in waiting for healing and joy to return.

And so, centuries after the shepherds heard the angels, we wait to hear once again for the announcement that Jesus has come.

And all our bones will rejoice.



Noel,

Margie Haack

About Letters From the House Between

If you drive through western Kentucky where two great southern rivers – the Cumberland and the Tennessee – come together, you pass over the dams that bind them and a land emerges bordered on all sides by water, simply called The Land Between the Lakes. As we drove, we thought about the changes coming as we aged and needed to move from Toad Hall, our home of thirty-three years. We needed a place where certain features were on the main floor so as body parts fail one doesn't need to climb stairs to reach them. We thought of that place as "The House Between," a place bound on one side by years past where we raised children, continued our ministry and grew older, and on the other side, a place in heaven where God holds a perfect place of restoration yet to come. Our new home is a reminder that this is only a "place between" what is now and what will one day be true Home forever. Thus: The House Between.

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