

# Notes from TOAD HaLL

Issue #4 ~ 2013  
Winter



## **T**he Mountain Ash Went Down

This past summer we lost our mountain ash. For three years it has shown signs of sickness. The first year I was hopeful. It was just my imagination. It was a dry year. Leaves were withering and falling in mid-summer. When I looked closely at the bark, in places it looked like it was giving up the trunk, loosening like a roll of paper towels ready to unravel. The next year I noticed dozens of small, even holes drilled in such perfectly straight rows you'd have thought a tiny engineer with a miniature drill was at work, but it was woodpeckers going after wormy invaders. Normally, the tree produced clusters of bright red berries each fall but last year they, too, were sickly looking. The crowds of cedar wax wings that visited once a winter to feast on them did not come.

In hopes of stopping the spread, we cut off the worst-looking limbs. The continued yellowing of branches at the ends of main limbs sent me googling on arborist sites. It was useless, like chemotherapy for stage IV pancreatic cancer. It had fire blight, an incurable bacterial infection.

Sadly, we cut it down. The cross section of the trunk showed dark streaks, evidence of the secret disease that ran up its vascular system plugging its only way to get nutrition.

Mountain ash is a northern tree that likes cold winters. I planted this tree ten years ago in memory of my Frolander Grandparents. Mountain ash thrived on the resort Grandpa and Grandma owned on a remote island on the Canadian side of Lake of the Woods and at their winter home in the town of Warroad, Minnesota. Mountain ash don't need rich soil, they efficiently pull nutrients from rocky, cold earth. They often grow up clump-like, as birch do, sending up several strong leaders from the ground that eventually become trunks. Their branches bend in graceful arcs especially in fall when berry clusters weigh them down. However, the farther south they roam, the more susceptible they are to fire blight. So Rochester is a trial for them.



Mountain Ash Berries



North Shore of Lake Superior

This past fall, as we often do, we headed to the North Shore of Lake Superior where a friend owns a cabin about fifty feet from the water's edge. Here is where we've been fortunate enough to land for a restorative week now and then. The south-facing windows give a full view of cold, rocky shoreline and glorious sunrises and sunsets. One week here can make up for months of city-living bounded on all sides by neighbors and trees. All along Highway 61 we passed mountain ash glowing wildly, bent with scarlet berries. They shone among forests of yellow birch leaves, white trunks and dark evergreens.

### More of This, Less of That

Mountain ash poignantly remind me of my Grandpa and Grandma who loved me well as a child. Now, it is odd to think that I am a grandparent yet I still miss them. I've reached their time of life. We have eight grandchildren, and beyond wanting to love them well,

we are becoming more familiar with the changes and limitations this age brings. Here we are, Denis and I, just passing 65 and entering this inevitable stage of life that everyone slides toward. We aren't ready to retire yet, but we are actively considering the changes knocking on our door.

The auto-immune issues I live with can sap my energy and fog my brain. There are days when lifting the lid on my computer eludes me. I cancelled my October trip to Alaska for a women's retreat because at the time, I didn't think I could manage it. More often now I hear Denis say, "Let's just have a quiet evening at home, please?" I can't do hospitality at the same pace as I used to and everything else about Toad Hall that we've loved doing for years. Not anymore. We couldn't have done the past five years without help from Anita, our assistant. I've wondered, apart from the physical,

why can't I accomplish more here? I think I know. God seems to be leading us in a little different direction. We've concluded we need to leave Toad Hall.



Over the Rhine CD

In a NPR interview, the music duo *Over the Rhine* recently talked about their latest cd and some things that resonated deeply with my heart: Karin Bergquist said, "We lived in the city for a long time and we loved it. It just became more and more obvious to us that we needed a change when we would get home from tour, traveling city to city; we started craving something else. And so, this last chapter, the last eight years of our lives, have been centered around this farm. [Nowhere Farm in Ohio.] It's about an hour outside of the city. I

wanted coffee and birds and dogs and silence; I just needed that for a change. There's a line in there [from a song titled "Meet me at the Edge of the World"] about how we're standing on this cold concrete, we're performing on this stage and we're so, so grateful for the audience that is here — but there's still that calling, that craving to be alone and to be someplace where we can sort of collect ourselves and plug in and rejuvenate and recover. That's where the songs come from, that moment of recovery."

I don't think of my life as being on a stage where I perform or pretend to love a life filled with people and all sorts of urban things. I have loved it for all these years. But for thirty-two years it has been something of a public life. Now, it seems that rather than just being off for a few weeks during the year, I need a more permanent place where quietness and rejuvenation happens almost daily and allows us to write not songs, but words.

### Somewhere Near the Edge with a View

All my life I have longed for a more rural setting, but heeding God's call has meant living in the city. So we created a place of shelter and discussion and hospitality and writing. We made a small garden in the midst of sirens and helicopters from St. Mary's, garbage trucks, and buses that course by Toad Hall.

That farm I grew up on had its difficulties, but its long horizons and starry nights have never left me. It still calls to me in a way I hardly recognized

or owned as a younger woman. I've always said to Denis that when I am old, all I want is a "Room with a View." Remember that movie? Of course, I've amended that a little. Now I add: hardwood floors, a burr coffee grinder, a comfy bed on the main level because some days I haul myself up the stairs like an old goat with a cane.

A country setting is not where we plan to do NOTHING, but more a place where as long as our battered brains hold up we will write and include some thoughtfully chosen travel gigs. Lots of folks have asked if there would be a next volume of *The Exact Place*. It's somewhere in my head, but I need to get there fast as memoirs flee from me. My editor would like me to (kindly) get off my duff and pull together a collection of *Notes*.

My heart longs for the horizon — a place where my eyes rest somewhere beyond my desk, where I sit with a Mac, a cup of coffee — looking at that distant place where the sun rises and sets. I'd like to see a field with wooly animals, fainting goats, and a little coop with five or six barred hens. I'm sure those creatures

will help me remember who I am and what God made me for. Perhaps then the refreshment I seek will turn into fruit that God might be pleased to use in my final run down to the end of the garden.



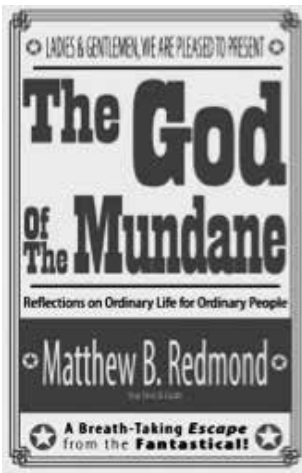
*This is NOT me.*

So, this is, perhaps, the winter of our lives. Or at least late fall. There is still lots to be done. I'd like to keep going with *Notes From Toad Hall*. Denis wants to keep writing *Critique*. I'd like to keep on letting you know how this aging bit goes. Is it possible to serve God well with failing body parts, Social Security and Medicare? We plan to lean into this and listen and learn new ways of being faithful in the midst of our ordinary. We'd like to be signposts of encouragement to others. We are going to avoid

the advertisements of our culture that insist "You can do ANYthing you want no matter how OLD you are." Bah. Denis jokes that we're not quite ready for assisted care, but with a play on words, says, "perhaps we will name our next home "The Out House," referring to the last place we will own somewhere out there on the prairie on our way out of life. And, Bonus! he suggests I write "Sheets from the Outhouse." Maybe. Maybe.

**The righteous will flourish like a palm tree,  
they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon; planted in the house of the Lord,  
they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age,  
they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming, "The Lord is upright;  
he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him. Psalms 92:12-15**

# 2013 Christmas Gift List



## **God of the Mundane: Reflections on Ordinary Life for Ordinary People**

by Matthew B. Redmond, Kalos Press, 2012 (Nonfiction)

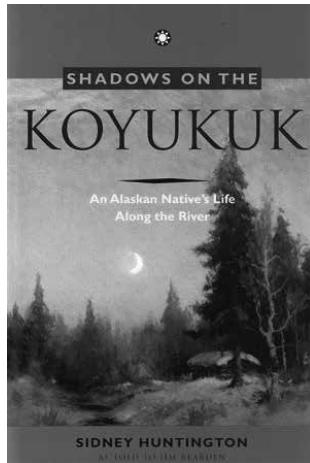
We've all heard the sermons and read the books: "if you really loved God, you would be radical. You would sell your belongings. You would become a missionary and move to another country." As a young couple, Denis and I did that – sold *everything* we owned in order to become evangelists living out of suitcases and sleeping on the floors of church basements. It was not fun, and I don't remember converting a single soul through our sacrificial living. We might have detoured around this stage of life if we had had a Matthew B. Redmond around at the time. He is uncompromisingly critical of the idea that you, being such a special person, must do and be something spectacular for God in order to prove you are serious about being a disciple. No one ever urged us to live a quiet ordinary life, faithfully serving God as Paul urges the Thessalonians. This book would have watered my weary soul back in the day. So, I pass it on to you. Listen to this message of how to love and serve God in the ordinariness of our everyday lives.

*"The need is to go full bore, with wild willingness, into a life full of the mundane, armed to the teeth with the belief we are featured in the Story God will forever be telling with joy. We are all just bit players, sure. But that is why we should be fine with being nobody special in the story being told."*

## **Shadows on the Koyukuk: An Alaskan Native's Life Along the River**

by Sidney Huntington, Pictorial Histories Publishing, 1993 (Memoir)

This was my favorite memoir of the year. Highly recommended. Sidney Huntington's remarkable life of growing up in the



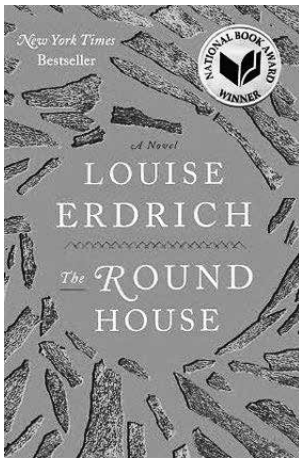
1900s (born 1915) was riveting from the first page. His stories of *making a life*, not just surviving, but making life in places we call wilderness are deeply engaging. He speaks humbly and truthfully so as not to make himself into some sort of iconic figure. Learning survival in the Alaskan wilderness from his Koyukon mother and learning how to work and trade from his white father, for him, naturally translated into caring about creation, not just exploiting it as many have done. Surviving storms, cold to -70 degrees, floods, changes in the animal populations that supported them, education in a mission school, rearing seventeen children, learning new skills to support his family, fighting alcoholism, and finally, living long enough to receive an honorary doctorate from the University of Alaska for his knowledge and work in conservation, all this and more make him a fascinating, heroic man. I loved this story.



## **I Want to Show You More** by Jamie Quatro Grove Press, NY, 2013 (Short story collection)

Quatro writes short stories like a post-modern Flannery O'Connor. Delving into infidelity, faith and family, she exposes the vanities and heart sicknesses of her characters, leaving them naked, exposed to our own wonderings: Could this ever be me? Is this the person who sits

in front of me in church every week looking so put together in an American-Christian way? Her stories are well-crafted, fine and have such a note of authenticity about them, you *know* they represent what exists around us more than we dared to imagine or confess. Often when you think one of her characters has hopelessly disappeared into whatever darknesses they have created, she gives them a lightning strike of insight and grace that sears and shocks her readers awake. The most powerful fiction I've read this year. I'm pleased to recommend these stories from a writer who is getting serious acclaim in the secular press but none among Christians. (Note: for more on this Denis reviewed it in *Critique 2013 Issue 4*)

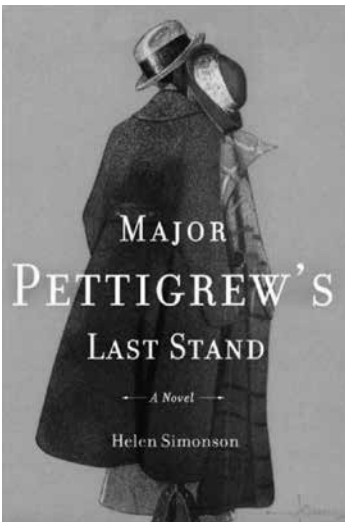


## The Round House

by Louise Erdrich, Harper, 2012 (Fiction)

North Dakota. An Ojibwe reservation. A sacred lodge. A violent crime. A tribal judge who cares for justice. A thirteen year old boy searching for who hurt his mother. Brilliant and entertaining. Erdrich embraces tragedy, the comic and a spirit world very much present in the lives of her characters. This is a tale of injustice that is, unfortunately, an authentic reflection of the jurisdictional muddles that exist in our country between federal, state and tribal governments.

*"The shadows were long, the air was cooling off, and we were hungry the way boys get hungry. Irrationally hungry so that everything we saw looked tasty and all we could talk of on the way home was food. Where we could get food, and eat food, a lot of food, and quick. That was our concern. Zack's mom would be at bingo. Aunt Star was either flush or broke, never in between, and it was a Saturday. By now, she'd have spent what she had and probably not on food. Things were lean that week at Cappy's house, though his dad possibly had stew. Does's bachelor stews were a crapshoot, though. Once he added commodity prunes to his chili. Another time he left some bread dough overnight and a mouse burrowed into it. Randall got a slice with the head and Cappy got the tail. Nobody could find the middle ... Our other prospect was Grandma Thunder. . . She'll make frybread and meat, said Zack. She always has canned peaches, said Angus. His voice was reverent..." (p. 69)*



## Major Pettigrew's Last Stand

by Helen Simonson, Random House, 2011 (Fiction)

A first book from an author whose style reminds me of a P.G. Wodehouse-Jane Austin mix. English wit and comedy that pokes at class-consciousness make this a good take-on-vacation or read-aloud book. The widower Major Ernest Pettigrew tries to lead a quiet, dignified life, caring most about a good cup of tea and classical literature until his brother's death sparks an unexpected friendship with Mrs. Jasmina Ali, the Pakistani shopkeeper. To succeed, their relationship must survive the Major's racial bias and the scrutiny of small village life with its many expectations of conformity to tradition.

I haven't enjoyed a literary romance this much since Elizabeth Bennett met Mr. Darcy. Here is a sample of Simonson's descriptive powers:

*"A well-upholstered woman with a wide, smiling face and a flowing mustard-colored shawl stood waiting for them in the glass doorway. Her feet in high-heeled shoes were so tiny that the Major wondered how she managed to balance, but as she tripped forward to meet them she carried herself with the lightness of a helium balloon. She waved a plump hand full of heavy rings and smiled." (p. 115)*

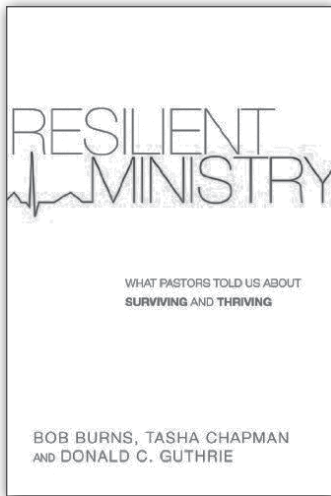


## Bringing Nature Home: Floral Arrangements Inspired by Nature

by Ngoc Minh Ngo, Rizzoli Press

*"Flowers show that a home is cared for and truly lived in. While furniture can remain the same for years, flowers speak to the present moment. And yet they are a talisman, a reminder of the world beyond our doors, of growth and change, and the passage of time. They are fleeting pleasures."*

This book was very inspirational to me because the absolute simplicity of Ngo's minimalist arrangements made me take a walk around the yard and think outside my usual flower box which is normally a big, meadowy, flower-bouquet box. There is so much simple, graceful beauty we can bring inside at no cost at all. Weeds, branches, bark, stones, a single flower, moss, leaves, herbs. Often when I see a form of art or craft I think, oh, I could do that. But really, I can't and never do. In this case, you don't need to be a professional to make the unusual and the beautiful from materials right outside your back door (in the fall, a single branch loaded with crab apples will do) and containers right off your shelf. The gorgeous photos will definitely prime your creative pump with plenty of fodder for using what you have available. It is no small thing to bring flowers in and to love their glory. This book would make a joyful gift to anyone who loves their "fleeting pleasure."



## Resilient Ministry: What Pastors Told us About Surviving and Thriving

by Bob Burns, Tasha Chapman, & Donald Guthrie, IVP, 2013 (Nonfiction)

This book contains much universal wisdom that applies *not just to pastors*, but to anyone in a position of ministry or leadership. I was particularly struck as I read and reread the chapters on self-care: “Burning On, Not Burning Out” and “Pacing Our Lifestyles.” The authors drew on five years of research and extensive interviews to learn what pastors could do or are doing to nurture life (not just survive) over the long haul. Some of their practical suggestions might have sustained better health much longer for myself. Often,

I have not practiced the very things I insist others learn to do for themselves. It took some trouble and some stern thinking to begin to change my own thinking and habits.

*“Self-care requires limits and rhythms. It does not come easily. It begins by recognizing that we are finite creatures who rebel against the reality of our limitations. This rebellion is fueled by a culture that often pretends there are no limits in this life. But more fully embracing our limits allows us to accept what God is doing in our lives and ministry.” (p. 99)*

Whether you are a professional working in an office, an artist, a student, a mother managing a family, whoever, consider this could be a wonderful gift to yourself or to someone whose life is serving others in any capacity.



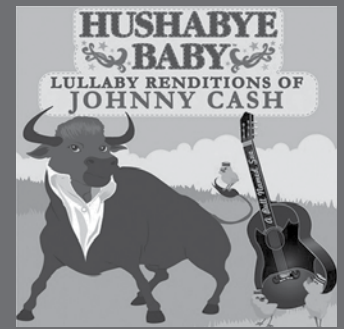
## The Christmas Crocodile

by Bonny Becker (Author), David Small (Illustrator), Simon & Schuster, 1998 (Children’s Picture Book)

We have a collection of Christmas books that I have gathered over the years. Many of them feature the Baby Jesus or The Advent Story, but this is one is about a greedy, lovable crocodile. I owned it for one year and then my oldest granddaughter took it home because she liked it so much. Each year as her family grew from one child to five this book joined other Christmas books as one of their read-aloud favorites.

*“The Christmas crocodile didn’t mean to be bad, not really. Alice Jayne found him on Christmas Eve under the tree. He wore a red bow around his neck. It was lovely. But he ate it.”*

Thus, begins his trail of destruction through the holiday house with suggestions and pot shots from eccentric relatives on how to get rid of him. “Send him to the orphanage!” “Turn him into shoes!” “The zoo!” Despite his sins Alice Jayne wants him treated with tenderness and care. (How do you be tender to a crocodile?) Small’s beautiful water-color and ink drawings reflect the humor and chaos of a Christmas gone awry. I recommend this book for ages 3-7 and for adults who can’t stop buying children’s books.



## Hushabye Baby: Lullaby Renditions of Johnny Cash, CD

Who knew Cash songs like “Folsom Prison Blues” or “Ring of Fire” could be weirdly and sweetly set to slumber-y lullabies? If you are looking for a baby gift or even something softly lulling for yourself, try this quiet CD. It’s a little crazy when you hear these instrumentals softly strumming in the background, but once you get past laughing about “hotter n’ a pepper sprout” being plucked with gentle percussion, you actually might like it. I know one thing, babies will love it and so will moms and dads who’ve had enough of Raffi or Baby Mozart or whoever is popular these days.

# Ransom Notes



## 2014 A year for Change? (See p. 1-3)

Would you please pray for us? There are many small indications that now is the time for us to think about moving from Toad Hall where we have lived for thirty-two years. It is both exciting and painful. A small example: Denis' books. Our library is large (6,000 volumes). Do you know how much weight that is? He is working on plans for extreme culling. I know it hurts. Ultimately, we want to continue ministering, serving God in a quieter place. As we hope for more space to focus on writing, I'm motivated by my editor at Kalos Press who is asking for another submission that might come out by next July. How to DO this?! Denis continues to toil over his projects. They need to be completed. We would love a little acreage where Anita might continue as Ransom's assistant and also pursue her love of gardening, fiber arts and animals. Pray, that in looking to move, God will open the door wide. With so many things to consider, I am fearful of making a mistake. This is a huge trust issue for me.

## Why I cancelled the Alaska trip.

After much debate with myself and discussion with Denis, I decided I couldn't make the trip to Anchorage to do a women's retreat this past October. I was very sad to cancel, but at the time my health had taken a downturn. I felt so unpredictable, I didn't want to take the chance of going and not being able to deliver. It was deeply honoring to be invited and I struggled with disappointment in myself. I know God works out his plans and purposes in spite of our weaknesses, but it was a hard decision.

I hope there are some of you who know you should not be committing to certain things, but feel constrained by your own (and others') expectations. May we all have the courage to listen to what God is teaching us about our limitations and live solidly in his grace.

## Finances

We are so thankful for the notes (and prayers and contributions) we receive – often from folks we've never met who *thank us* for our work! God is so kind and merciful to us. We are praying that in 2014 we will be able to continue our ministry, and that in this world with so many urgent needs, God will provide for us. It's all mercy, undeserved, lavish, free. Unbelievable, really.

## COMING UP..

- November 15-16** Ames, Iowa, L'Abri Conference. Denis: plenary and workshop.  
MLH: workshop.
- November 24** Warroad, MN, Public Library Book Festival. I'm the featured author for a reading and book signing. This is the area where I grew up. Scary! People will recognize characters from my book.
- 1st week of December** Trip south to Chattanooga with stops along the way. Schedule to be determined.
- January 17-18** Ransom Board meeting in Chicago.
- February 14-15** Rochester, MN, L'Abri Conference. Denis: 2 workshops.  
Margie: 2 workshops.

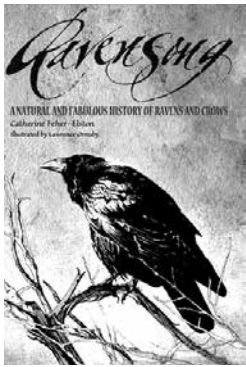


# Final Notes

## Be Not Dismayed

"God rest you merry gentlemen let nothing you dismay, remember Christ our Savior was born on Christmas Day." Despite seeming to leave out the women half, I love both the melody and the words of this carol. Especially the phrase, "let nothing you dismay." There is much to be dismayed about in our world. On the other hand, the fact of "Christ our Savior" – just those words alone? There is power to disarm the blackest night.

But I've often wondered about peoples living in times and places where Christianity is completely unknown. What of them? What fault is it of theirs that they never heard of Christ our Savior? How could they *not* be dismayed standing before God in the next life?



Recently, Denis found an amazing story in a book he is reading: *Ravensong: A Natural and Fabulous History of Ravens and Crows* by Catharine Feher-Elston.

In 1740 the Skitswish, a small tribe of northern Idaho, had a prophet/chief named Circling Raven of whom it is said he understood the language of the crows and ravens. On Solstice Day of 1740, Crow and Raven told him that in a land far away, the Creator, who also became the Savior of the world, had been born as a man on that night long, long ago. Circling Raven's people were to honor and pray to this child each year. This

became a joyful tradition celebrated with gift-giving to children and peace with other tribes. In addition, Raven told him that within 100 years men clothed in black robes would arrive with further news of this Savior. For the rest of his life, Circling Raven searched for the Black Robes. He died never having found them. His son, Twisted Earth led the tribe and continued the search for the mysterious Black Robes. In June of 1842 a group of Jesuit brothers arrived in their area and were received with joy. (Over 600 conversions were recorded.) Twisted Earth greeted them with joy and sorrow, tears streaming down his face. He was happy that the priests finally arrived, but saddened that his father had not lived to see the prophecy fulfilled.

Is Circling Raven our brother? Talking birds? Balim's ass? Bethlehem? I know that God, in all his infinite power, arrives in ways we dare not dream of.

So, sing it loud: Let Nothing You Dismay.



Warmly,

Margie Haack

## About Notes from Toad Hall

Toad Hall is the name of our home, christened by our children. It is from the book *The Wind in the Willows*, a favorite of ours. In it Mole, a shy yet daring character, and Ratty, who is much nicer and more sensible than his name would imply, have many adventures along the river. One of their friends is Toad of Toad Hall. Toad is something of an aristocrat and lives in a mansion. Otherwise, he has very little to commend him and really doesn't deserve friends since he is a callous liar, lacks common sense and, well, he lives for the pleasure of the moment—which brings him no end of trouble.

When we moved to Minnesota in 1981, our children had rarely seen such tall homes with their imposing three stories. They were used to one-story adobes which rambled along in the hot New Mexico sun. So, to them, a midwestern Gothic four-square looked amazingly like a mansion. Possibly even as great a house as Toad Hall.

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