

Letters from The House Between

Formerly *Notes from Toad Hall*

Issue 4 **Winter** 2017



Sheep, Chickens and Me?

Remind me again, Lord. I'm a sheep of your pasture? Psalm 23 is filled with familiar images because my family once owned a flock of sheep. In the Bible, God often compares us to sheep. I'm not offended because, truthfully? I share some of their mind fog. However, the meaning of "thy rod and thy staff, comfort me" puzzles me. A stick comforts? As a child, my sticks had nothing to do with comfort. We tried to hit one another with sticks, we poked them into ant hills and wasp nests and cow pies. They were swords for battle and sometimes made our behinds sting when a parent grabbed them from our felonious little hands. This is comfort?

Free-ranging in Green Pastures

With four young hens as tutors this year, I've gained a little theological insight. They are handsome egg layers, but like sheep, they aren't that smart. I allow them to free-range in our yard occasionally and like to think they love me because they follow me when I'm in the yard, even as they pause to peck the grass and eat God knows what.

Beside Still Waters

Herding them back to their coop as evening fell was a challenge. At first they defied me by running under the bushes and the deck to escape. When I duck-walked under it to chase them out, they ran under the magnolia tree. From there they raced around back under the deck. I warned them to come home to the safety of their coop. *Don't you want a little drink of water?* I asked. *You know how raccoons and coyotes love little chickens in the night. I'm telling you.*

A Table (or bed) In the Presence of Enemies

They were having none of it even though staying out at night was courting death. Raccoons visit us nightly. Before we learned their criminal ways, we lost bird feeders and potted plants and dealt with piles of poop left at our door. How they would love a dainty little chicken thigh! So the hens must be locked up safe from predators who would eat my plump little girls.

The Rod of Comfort

As I struggled to return them to the coop, I remembered Denis' diamond willow walking stick, five feet long, smooth and a perfect tool for forced marching and thwarting end runs. The hens now recognize the stick and cluck with annoyance as it approaches. They don't understand it's for their own good as they are herded toward the comfort of their pen. So is this what it means to be comforted by "thy rod and thy staff?" It isn't for hurting, it's for encouraging a run in the right direction because God knows it will bring us safely home.

John Flavel, a theologian and minister from the 1600s, puts this journey in the company of God's sticks like this: (His language is rich and his kind heart is full of love for his people).

"O how ravishing and delectable a sight it will be to behold at one view the whole design of Providence, and the proper place and use of every single act, which we could not understand in this world! What Christ said to Peter is as applicable

to some providences in which we are now concerned as it was to that particular action: 'What I do, thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter' (John 13:7). All the dark, intricate, puzzling providences at which we were sometimes so offended, and sometimes amazed, ... which we so unjustly censured and bitterly bewailed, as if they had fallen out quite against our happiness, we shall then see to be to us, as the difficult passage through the wilderness was to Israel, 'the right way to a city of habitation' (Ps. 107:7)." (from *The Mystery of Providence*)

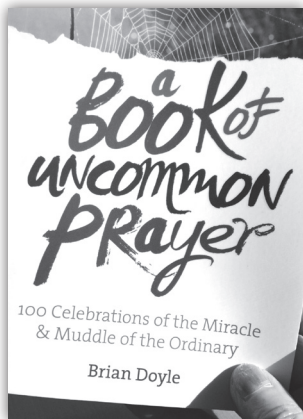
And so, one small miracle of the ordinary comes to mind: our desire to live in a quiet country setting always seemed impossible. For more than forty years God placed us in an urban setting while ministering to others. Today I sit at my desk in a place I couldn't imagine, watching the sun rise through the autumn woods, while below my window four wild turkeys forage beneath the bird feeders. At times I've

despaired of ever walking an easy path or seeing enemies vanquished, but I've been comforted believing God oversees our paths and guides us by whatever means, including that staff or "stick" that ultimately brings us Home past difficult terrain whether in this life or the next.



The rising sun in my office - the indication of such blessing.

Christmas Gift List 2017

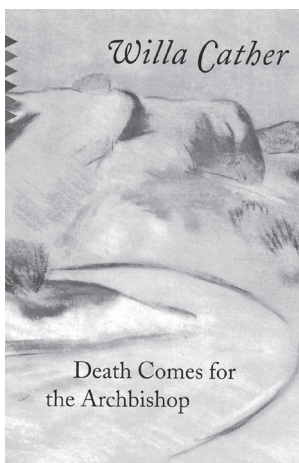


A Book of Uncommon Prayer: 100 Celebrations of the Miracle and Muddle of the Ordinary

by Brian Doyle, 2014, Sorin Books (spiritual)

Brian Doyle was a writer full of passion and love and humor and the gift of forming just the right words of praise and thanks and questions to make you laugh one moment and weep the next. He's gone now; cancer of the brain took him quickly from his diagnosis in fall of 2016

to his death last May. You can still hear him giving readings and talks on the web before he left us. In this little book of prayers he delights, convicts and sends me to Denis with, "we've got to read this to so and so." Be advised that I will bring out these prayers and share them with whoever is captive at our supper table because we get it when he sends up a "Snarling Prayer for the Reckless Jerk Who Just Swerved Insanely Among Three Lanes of Traffic at Incredible Speed While Texting, Causing Us Other Drivers Heart Palpitations" or "Prayer of Thanks for All Birds, Herons in Particular" or "Prayer for All the Dads of the Girls I Dated Before Winning the Girl Lottery Big Time." And many others that broaden and enrich our prayers to the One Who Hears All.

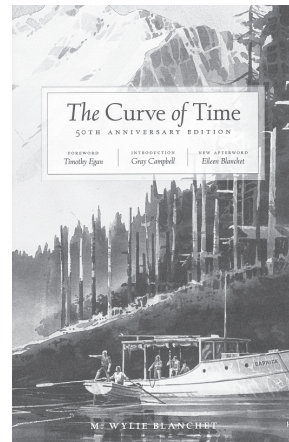


Death Comes to the Archbishop

by Willa Cather, Vintage Classics (fiction)

This past year Denis and I read aloud this classic first published in 1927. There is something mystical and calming about the prose, I'm reminded of the verse in Philippians ... "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable ... think about such things." Cather writes us into a place of quiet beauty recalling the life of a bishop – a real life that was not perfect in a Thomas Kincaid way, but one including difficulty and loneliness. (The book seemed

point/counterpoint to this past year with its many disasters, lies, and deaths.) In 1851, Father Jean Marie Latour came to New Mexico as the Apostolic Vicar. He found a vast territory of mountains, mesquite and piñon covered hills, and tortuous arroyos. It was American by law, but Mexican and Indian in custom and belief. With the deepest desire to live out the gospel with purity and love and honor, the Bishop spent the next 40 years of life spreading his faith in the only way he knew – gently. A little sample of Cather's style: *In New Mexico he always awoke a young man; not until he rose and began to shave did he realize that he was growing older. His first consciousness was a sense of the light dry wind blowing in through the windows with the fragrance of hot sun and sagebrush and sweet clover; a wind that made one's body feel light and one's heart cry 'Today, today,' like a child's.*



The Curve of Time

by M. Wylie (Capi) Blanchet, 2011, Canadian edition: Whitecap Books. (memoir)

What a pleasure to read this book during a year of world crisis! Capi settled on Vancouver Island in the early 1920s where her

husband purchased the Caprice for \$600. A rather small boat, he took it out one day and never returned, but it was found and towed back to shore. Rather than be rid of this reminder of her loss, the boat became her joy. For the next fifteen summers she and her five children explored the straights and islands of British Columbia with the Caprice and a small dinghy trailing behind. In some ways this is a land that no longer exists, developed and inhabited as it is now. But she takes you into those days, into those straights with their dangerous tides, rocky reefs and bottomless seas to find adventures I'll never experience. They visited abandoned native villages, swam in the calm waters of an island cove and ate grilled fish caught in deep inlets between towering cliffs and mountains. *"... Two thousand perpendicular feet below we came out into bright sunshine. Two thousand feet more and we were back at the wharf ... We made our squishy way to the dinghy and back to Trappers' Rock. There we fell into the sea – clothes and all. How warm the water felt, how hot the last rays of the Louisa sun! We cooked ourselves a great pan of bacon and eggs – a big pot of coffee and great spoonfuls of honey on top of peanut butter and crackers. Enjoyment is always greatest when you have enough contrast to measure it by."*

The Residence: Inside the Private World of the Whitehouse

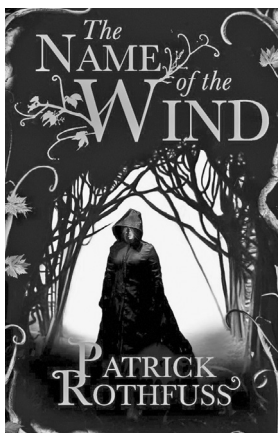
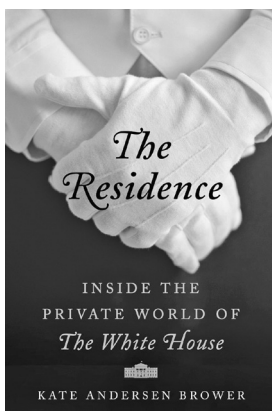
by Kate Andersen Brower,
2015, Harper. (nonfiction)

The Residence, an extremely readable book, gives us a rare glimpse into the duties and lives of the White House staff who care for the practical daily needs of the president and his family. Someone called this book *Downton Abbey* for the White House except that both the author and the dozens of employees who were interviewed are circumspect about the lives of the first families. The same residence workers serve year after year, quietly unseen, unheralded, and careful to protect the privacy of the residents, many of them

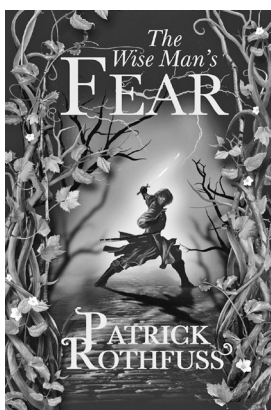
stay in their positions their entire lives.

The many stories – some told by former first ladies, children and grandchildren – make it a fascinating read. There were even

interviews with some staff members who served as far back as the Kennedy administration. We learn much about the intense challenge of serving an entirely new set of personalities every four years. The chefs learn the preferences of the new family regardless of how unsophisticated or complicated – whether it was Texas bar-b-q or French cuisine. Butlers and maids must learn the personal habits and expectations of the new residents. Florists cater to new and varied tastes as they discreetly change arrangements in private and state rooms. The Secret Service is challenged to circumspectly protect people whose lives (and loves) are so important they must be safeguarded at all times, including teenage children trying to give them the slip.



lack any kind of moral uprightness and others who uphold a sense of justice and kindness that is persuasive. So satisfying! Like Tolkien he has created a world with a history that goes back hundreds of years filled with strange cultures of men and wild beings, both good and evil who sometimes cross over to man's world. Kvothe, the main character, is the hero and villain of thousands of tales. He is presumed dead but actually lives in a backwater under an assumed name as the proprietor of the Waystone Inn. A biographer called Chronicler who realizes Kvothe's true identity convinces him to tell his life's story in three days of intense writing. So this is volume one of a trilogy – the first day. Kvothe (and I don't think this is a spoiler) was the son of a gypsy people who were gifted in the arts of music, poetry, theater, and magic. One day while their troupe was camping in a wild forest while traveling to the next gig, all were murdered and their belongings, horses and carts burned. Kvothe who was a little boy at the time had wandered off and returned to the campsite in time to witness the death of his parents in the last of this savage attack. He escaped only to make it a lifelong quest to become educated in the higher magic of naming and to find and punish the dreadful demonic creatures, the Chandrian, who had killed his troupe and about whom very little is known, or if known, is repressed in fear.



The Wise Man's Fear continues Kvothe's life story in volume two, the second day, as he grows into a young man, a warrior, an arcanist, and a musician of genius as told to Chronicler on this second day of writing. Meantime, in the world outside the doors of the inn, his future is approaching with ominous sounds and strange reports of violence. In a lyrical beginning and end to *both* books Rothfuss refers to the same great silence, a silence of three parts with the final silence described as: "The Waystone was his, just as the third silence was his. This was appropriate, as it was the greatest silence of the three, wrapping the

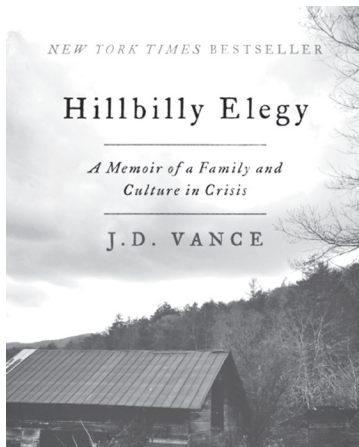
others inside itself. It was deep and wide as autumn's ending. It was heavy as a great river-smooth stone. It was the patient, cut-flower sound of a man who is waiting to die."

With this foreshadowing reminder, we readers nervously wait for the complete story to be published, hoping that our hero, Kvothe, will somehow survive the mysterious coming disaster.

The Name of the Wind (2007) and The Wise Man's Fear (2011)

by Patrick Rothfuss, Daw Books (fantasy fiction)

Patrick Rothfuss writes fantasy fiction that has riveted me for hours this past year. It's been *forever* since I read fantasy novels as good as this. Even though Rothfuss has been around a few years – this past year was my first taste and I'm excited to turn you on to his books. He reminds me of Tolkien or Lewis, except, as far as I can tell, he doesn't share their Judeo-Christian worldview although he still keeps to ideas of right and wrong. There are despicable characters who completely

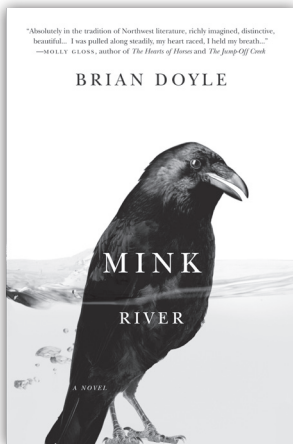


Hillbilly Elegy by J.D. Vance, 2016,
HarperCollins (memoir)

After reading this beautiful memoir, I couldn't stop thinking about it. It raised both sympathy and many questions. It was disturbing, hilarious, penetrating and well written – the story of a boy growing up in an impoverished, broken Appalachian family, and escaping to become a Yale educated lawyer but he has not left history behind nor denied it. He helps readers understand why many white, working class people have felt so disenfranchised by our country, and, as one reviewer puts it,

Vance “suggests that tribalism, mistrust of outsiders and ‘elites,’ violence and irresponsibility among family members, parents without ethics, terrible work ethics, and an us-against-them mentality is dooming the people who live that way to becoming poorer, more addicted, and more marginalized.”

As Vance tells it, no government program alone can fix the problems of poverty, alcoholism, drug abuse, loss of jobs and make people feel great again, because these things are passed down from generation to generation. So it isn't only societal, it is also endemic and internal. Few escape the life. Vance was the exception in getting out mostly because he had a grandmother who loved and encouraged him. She identified as a Christian, but you would hardly believe that to hear her talk or watch as she often threatened others with a gun. She'd scare off Godzilla. Vance barely knew his father and his addicted mother had many husbands and lovers which left both Vance and his half-sister deeply wounded. This book just seems so timely for understanding a good portion of our country in these tumultuous days.



Mink River by Brian Doyle, 2010, Oregon State University Press (fiction)

For such a great and glorious pleasure in story-telling, this was one of our favorites this year. I read it first and then suggested it to Denis. When I asked what he thought, a day later, he reported this: It has been years since I read a book that made me laugh and cry in the first 60 pages. So. Well. Okay. It may not do this for all of you, but my bet is some of you are going to love this little town on the Oregon coast with a rich mix of both familiar and eccentric working-class characters from Irish immigrants to Salish Indians, even, and including a talking crow named Moses. It is

beautiful and real and fantastical all at once. And notice, this is the same author of the *100 Prayers* book included in this list. Doyle was a consummate list maker, and sometimes that tried me a little, but Denis loved it. Here is a partial description of Neawanaka: “Right now, for example, look up, right over there, see the eagle flying low and fast down Curlew Street? Watch: as he sails over the grocery store he whirls and *snatches* a whirling piece of cardboard, and he flapflopflaps down the street triumphantly, big as a tent, you can almost hear him thinking *I am one bad-ass flying machine, this weird flat brown bird didn't get away from me, no sir, nothing can elude my lightening deftness in the air ...*” And so, amen. Get the book.



The Slow Regard of Silent Things by Patrick Rothfuss, (2014)
Daw Books (fantasy fiction)

With two volumes of the trilogy already published, Rothfuss released a short novel about one of the characters that briefly appears throughout the trilogy. It is a strange and wonderful book I plan to read again. It's a mystery where Auri comes from, who her people are, or how she came to live in “the Underthing.” She is full of secrets, strange rituals and obsessions. Auri lives in the underground of the University. We don't know how it got to be what it is, an inky, black place of relics, passages, pools, twists and turns of halls and walls, and darkened rooms full of inanimate objects unable to move but aware of life around them. Auri herself is a complete contrast to this dark and heavy environment and perhaps that is part of her appeal. She is a tiny girl/woman with golden hair that flies around her head like a cloud. Her delicate hands and feet are quick and discerning. Part of her work and gift is knowing even inanimate objects prefer a special place where they belong and it is up to her to discern and move them when needed. In a crazy departure from writing convention, this short book has no action, no dialogue, no conflict and only features ONE character. In fact, after the first draft of this book, Rothfuss called it “A colossal, smoldering mess of a trainwreck.” And yet, I loved it to pieces for its joyous, beautiful artistry.

And Finally...

Family. “You are so, so good to me.” Those were the words of Denis’ mother to us. For the first time in her life we’ve been able to consistently express love by caring for her. To us, it is only right. We are glad that since his father has passed we can take her for Chinese food, bring her to our home, put together jigsaw puzzles and watch *Call the Midwife*, (which both fascinates and horrifies her!) and show in a dozen small ways that she is a valued child of God. She is 94 and our only regret is that her time here is probably short.



The Hens. For delight and laughs and four eggs every day. My sister has sent a xylophone for their pen. Chickens apparently like music, but mine will need a few lessons before they match the ones on YouTube.

Your email address! We want to alert you that some time in the next two years Ransom is going digital with our publications. To receive Denis’ *Critique* and my *Letters from the House Between* you’ll need to send us your email address, or easier, log onto our website and sign up to receive *EMAIL UPDATES*. I know. I know. We dislike doing this since we love hard copies of – books, letters and anything printed. But as we begin cutting back on Ransom’s expenses in anticipation of eventually retiring, it will become necessary to stop printing and mailings. So, please do stay with us a while longer! We love and appreciate you.

This time of year. Advent. Sometimes I sincerely wish I could live in the Christmas of *Little House on the Prairie* and be thrilled to give you an apple and a corn cob doll. Alas. Not possible. I also wish I had new words with which to greet the baby Jesus. Alas. I’m fresh out. But the old ones will do quite nicely as we process the events of 2017 some sad, some marvelous and look forward to the consummation of God’s Kingdom. And so we sing: O come, O come Emmanuel.

*O come, Thou Day-Spring
Come and cheer
Our spirits by Thine advent here.
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night
And death’s dark shadows put to flight
Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel
Shall come to thee, O Israel*



With love and hope for the future,

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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