What I Know

"The answer must be, I think that beauty and grace are performed whether or not we will or sense them. The least we can do is try to be there."

-Annie Dillard

I do not possess whatever title or degree might entitle me to determine what in nature is worthy of praise or lamentation. I am no Thoreau. I do not sing the praises of Walden Pond or lament the loss of what is beautiful about the Flint. Neither am I Abbey, trusted to write adequate tribute to the mighty Colorado River and his desert Southwest while bemoaning the loss of Glenn Canyon. What I am, however, is a lover of what inspires me to live to my utmost: simple and appreciative. I have been to the Canadian Yukon where the rivers are a most sublime hue of unpolluted blue and wild ponies still roam, delightfully unaware that anything in all the world exists outside of their chilly domain. I have happily lost my breath to Mt. McKinley, the Olympics, Cascades, Blue Ridge, and the Rockies. I have seen the Great Lakes and the Great Smokies. I rode on a boat to the base of Niagra Falls where all I could hear was the tremendous roar of the mighty water, and all I could feel was the rushing spray pepper my face and raincoat with the painful force of wind-blown sand. I have seen misty mornings on Virginia fields of blue and dusty evenings on Georgia's red. I have walked quiet, scenic fields forever changed by what we wrought there: Gettysburg, Antietam, Shiloh and countless others. I have stood quiet and contemplative in the presence of the seemingly endless list of names on the Vietnam Memorial Wall. But of all the places I have been blessed to live and to visit, none calls to my heart, calls me home, like Tennessee.

In Tennessee I lived perfected: simple, and in love with a quiet life of thankfulness. The soundtrack was provided by the cicadas, crickets and toads: buzzing, chirping and croaking a most unusually melodious symphony, joined by the melodic vocals of playfully carefree children. The stage lighting was provided by the pale blue sky with its gleaming orb and the mystical air waves thrown up by the high heat during day; and by night, the smiling stars and kindly lightning bugs. The smell was that of the sweet bluegrass and the heady perfumed Magnolia. The color I most fondly recall is the
red-clay of the dirt, eternal marker of the upper South.

A Quiet Evening Picking Clover and Sipping Tea

"No pain here, no dull empty hours, no fear of the past, no fear of the future."

- John Muir

Abbey claimed of his Arches National Monument in Utah: "This is the most beautiful place on earth." But, as he went on to write, it's all relative. For me, it was all relative to my little home on Cranklin Circle in Clarksville, Tennessee, 45-minutes northwest of Nashville, on the border with Kentucky. I'm certain for the reader who expects a fairy land of unrivaled, unsullied beauty and to be so moved as to sign on with Greenpeace, Cranklin Circle sounds like a smart joke. Perhaps for an environmentalist it is a cruel joke of a sort. Not one tree lived on Cranklin Circle that hadn't very recently been planted and yet trembled to survive. On a night walk around the Circle, one could find a multitude of recently dispossessed toads hopping all about on the new paved streets--poor little fellows, chirping and croaking their distress. Cranklin Circle lies on what was once a tobacco plantation. Now it is one among those most dreaded of all American icons: a suburb. But, look closely and you will see the hope that moves in with the young families. It spreads out beyond the walls of their homes and into their immediate natural environs. Each little home

has a lawn that is tended and pampered. Here, a family has planted a snowball tree. There, a family has bedded colorful flowers and green and yellow bushes of all sorts. Every so often, upon a yard, has been planted a tree with tall and mighty potential. And beyond the Circle, out across the way, yet lays a proud green field lined by tall trees, jealously concealing a mucky pond. Oh that our little dispossessed toads had knowledge of that green paradise just beyond their borders. Perhaps they might suburb there.

Among the sounds that nature still sings in the Circle, a new sound has joined the chorus: the laughter of little children. Playful shrieks. Shouts of joy!

"I see you!"

"Tag-you're it!"

"Jump higher!"

"Run faster!"

What could be more natural? The sound of children is the sound of perpetuation. When you hear it, breath it in. Quietly listen to the sound of the future--the sound that was once of your making. Be thankful--or melancholy as you may--that it is now their blessing.

On a cool summer evening (which in the South is not so cool at all) I would duck into my little house long enough to brew a delicious mug of sweet tea. Returning to my diminutive multi-posted porch, I would call to the children and offer to pay them a nickel for each clover they pulled from my yard, roots included. Clover you see, is a weed. (I read once that a soldier who had fallen wounded at Gettysburg, dropped on a field covered with soft clover and
was forever more thankful for that comfortable bed nature provided than for a thick bed of downed feathers.) Yet, clover is a weed, after all, and it must be pulled, at least from my yard. Of course the neighborhood children, including my two, would busy themselves with earning nickels. I would slowly sip my sweet brew, breath deeply, and revel in the slowness of the evening. Every now and then a car would pass by, driving slowly, passengers quizzically staring at the many children working tirelessly to pull nickels from my yard. They looked like so many worker bees, buzzing about enthusiastically, knowing the end result would be honey (or money, as it were). Off past the children, just beyond the next row of houses, I could see the green field with its tall tree sentinels. How lovely it was. I somehow knew that the sweet air I breathed was cleaned and cooled by that expanse of enduring nature.

My thoughts would wander to how happy and fortunate I was at that exact moment in time. I had my little Southern home, with lots of Southern charm. Away on a Middle-Eastern battlefield, I had my gallant and brave soldier-husband, making heroes of us both. I was secure that ours was a love that would endure and nurture our children well into their adulthoods. Here I sat, completely content and pleased on my freshly swept porch, fronted by a pretty green yard just big enough for a wild game of tag or a rowdy round of dodge ball. And the children were all about me, in the front yard, in the backyard, and down the street, heading my way. How much I loved the little darlings, my own as well as the many others. And, I sensed, they all loved me in return. It is a fine thing indeed to be respected by children: higher praise than to have the respect of nation-builders. I was a “neighborhood mom.” Ours was a safe-haven. Ours was the yard that was fun to play in. That is high compliment. I closed my eyes, breathed in deeply, held it for a few seconds, and breathed out, long, a prayer of thanksgiving to a God I knew must love me very much to bless me so well.

I joyfully knew that as the heated day retired to a still-heated Southern night, my children and I would stay out late, playing games that required the shadows of dark, like kick-the-can or flashlight tag. Eventually, we would return to the sanctuary of our little home on the Circle and nestle in beds cooled by air conditioning. But, happily, I remembered, just outside, beyond the next row of houses, still lay that misty green field. Something was nestled happily there, too, I was sure. And I was glad to fall asleep thinking of its charm. The words of Thoreau, that I had not known then, I surely recognize now as relevant of that time: “This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore.”

A Walk on Pavement, Beautiful No Less

“Nothing can rightly compel a simple and brave man to a vulgar sadness.”

-Henry David Thoreau
The mornings would start late for us in the Sunny South. The heat of day was too much to stand, so most of our mid-morning time was spent abed. We would wake late and retire late. We had to wait until late evening to venture outside and even then, when the shadows were long, the sweat would bead on our backs and foreheads as soon as we stepped out on to the front porch. (We waited until late nighttime to bathe. It was no use to start the day that way. Nature had other ideas. She bathed us during the day in sticky sweat, and lots of it.) Nearly every evening outside began with a walk around the neighborhood after dinner. As we walked, I was invariably thinking intently on the happiness I enjoyed.

Cranklin Circle was just what its name suggests: a circle. Conveniently, it was exactly one mile in length, making it easy to track how far we walked. One-two-three times and usually more around the Circle. Sometimes as many as fifteen children joined me and mine in this little adventure, quite unwittingly turning it into a big adventure. Occasionally, we would venture into an adjoining neighborhood; providing, that is, that the brood accompanying me was less than fifteen in number by at least a half, and everyone of those had the express permission of a parent. I loved the methodic rhythm of a steady walk. The beat-beat-beat of my steps. I loved to know that I was alive to what was around me and completely in rhythm with it. Sometimes, I would even call out an exultant little cadence in my head.

Across the street from our Circle was an older neighborhood fronted by a Christian church. God had happily planted a big, tall, knotty tree in that church yard, I supposed, just for my troop of little ones to climb. Every tree must be scaled by a child. I am certain that this is among the chief vocations of a tree. This tree was particularly well worked.

The children would walk until they were within about fifty yards of that tree. Then, they would break into a run to see who hit it first. I imagined the tree thinking, “At last they have come. Now the fun begins!” The tree, perhaps, was abed late, just as we were, and once it woke to the summer heat, spent the day in anticipation of our visit. I think the tree loved the children, too, cheerfully embracing them in its sturdy limbs. The children swarmed it like a litter of kittens swarm their mother. I would watch for a few long moments, smiling and fondly remembering my childhood, then continue on my walk. Within the span of a minute or so, the children would run up behind me, breathless from their climb and the ensuing chase to catch up.

We would walk sometimes for an hour or more, all about the area. Sometimes chatting merrily about plans for the evening: these few children here intended to jump on the trampoline when we got home; those few there planned to play Red Rover or Freeze Tag; all planned to immediately imbibe a tall, really cold--glass of water or lemonade or some such succor. On that account they were unanimous. Toward the end of the walk, neighbors' sprinklers looked mighty tempting to thirsty little marchers.

Always, they happily endured--each and
every one, each and every time—to the end of the walk without complaint. They stood ready, those little marchers, to move on to the next activity, the next hour, the next day, the next week. Time, likewise, marched. It marched past us much too quickly.

Time and Tide

"We are down here in time, where beauty grows... we may as well please our sensibilities and, with as much spirit as we can muster, go out with a buck and a wing."

-Annie Dillard

I moved away from Tennessee almost six years ago. My little ones are big ones now: teenagers. When I walk these days, I commonly walk alone. But that is relative, too; for I have my fond memories of the past and my pleasant hopes for the future walking about with me, climbing trees and laughing in my thoughts. When I think back to my time on Cranklin Circle, I decide, like Thoreau, that "when I compare myself with other men, it seems as if I were more favored by [God] than they..." I will forever happily remember my Walden Pond, my Sierra Nevada, my Glen Canyon: my Cranklin Circle in Tennessee. The place of my sweetest day dreams.