

**B**are feet, morning, noon, and night; why put on shoes? It just takes extra time when you're in a hurry to be out of doors in the fresh new morning, and you'd only have to pause to take them off when you want to wade in the creek. And it is much easier to climb trees with bare toes to curl around the branches.

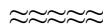
What the softness of age and moving about in cities has caused me to forget all too often, I knew indisputably as a child: that a bare foot is one of the most tactile pleasures in life. To feel the ground you walk on, to know its textures through your sole—your soul—to absorb the cool of night and the heat of day through the tender arch which keeps you springing forward...This is one of life's greatest privileges.

In my younger years, from the moment school broke in the spring till the day I must return in the fall, my shoes were tucked somewhere in the back of a closet. In the morning I'd run out into the dewy grass and, if the lawn had just been cut, little plant particles would stick all over my feet till I had green textured stockings. When I wanted to come in the house I ran first down to the stream, where I stepped directly into the cold swirling water and stood on the smooth rocks until my feet became icicles. Then I'd fly up the gravel path, quickly, so that I wouldn't feel the jagged edges, and step onto the cool granite of the stone porch, and then over the prickly doormat (where a dog or goose or goat was likely to be sleeping), and into the kitchen. There, the floor was smooth waxed oak boards, fit together by tongue and groove, paradise for a crawling baby and just as much-so for the flat of the foot. In front of the wood cookstove and under the sink were braided rag rugs, a cushion of softness when they were freshly shaken, and a catch-all for grit and wood ashes by the end of the day.

But outside, the sensations were more thrilling: the hard-packed earth that lined the outhouse path; the mud that squelched between the toes after a rainy day as I splashed through puddles; the frost on the fields of an early autumn morning that burned as the ice crystals melted under the heat of my heel; the floor of the chicken house, strewn with old hay and dried droppings and fresh juicy ones that sometimes caught me by surprise; the cow stall with its piss pit that I had to wade to get to the other side of the manger; the raspberry patch with its broken bits of briars mixed with pine needles and weeds, a test to ripening toughness; the gravel road which stung even seasoned feet as it slithered up to our neighbors' farm.

By summer's end my soles were impervious to pain, and I could run up and down the neighbors' road without flinching. In fact, the stones felt more like a massage than a malevolence. I enjoyed the chill that crept in as night fell, and the hot sudsy water I poured over my toes before climbing between the sheets. But most of all I loved being unencumbered by any material which could come between me and the earth I trod. Direct contact with my day-to-day environment brought with it an awareness of my world which I would not have missed for the most beautiful shoes on the planet.

In heaven, you will find me skipping gleefully down a grassy star-studded road—barefoot.



Note: *Child of the Woods: An Appalachian Odyssey* is available for purchase online from Amazon and Barnes & Noble. It is also available from the following local stores (Western NC):

Malaprop's in Asheville

Penland's Department Store in Marshall

The Laurel River Store at the junction of Laurel and Hot Springs

Old Creek General Store on Shelton Laurel

Bluff Mountain Outfitters in Hot Springs

Gentry Hardware in Hot Springs

Mars Hill University Bookstore in Mars Hill