Dear Child of Nature
A Personal Essay by Judy Davies

"Dear Child of Nature, let them rail.
There is a nest in a green dale,
A harbor and a hold
Where thou, a Wife and Friend, shalt see
Thy own heart-stirring days, and be
a light to young and old..."
...William Wordsworth

My favorite memories of the many summers I spent at my grandparents' cottage as a small child are those of the long walks I used to take down the dusty August roads. I usually walked into town, three and one-half miles away.

My journey was in four parts, the first being a stretch of dusty road, cooled on one side by rows of beech trees. On this stretch of road I walked carefully, letting the cool dust, faintly damp with leftover dew, sift through my toes. I tried, usually in vain, to leave a perfectly straight line to the strip of road that was the second part of my journey. This bit of road was completely void of shade and was covered with thick gravel. The gravel was thin where the cars drove over it, but piled up in the center and on the sides. I usually attacked this road gingerly, walking in the car tracks. It was a real challenge to walk there. The stones would all lie evenly under my feet except for one or two small ones that would jab at my feet or between my toes. I would keep telling myself to relax and step lightly, but no matter how hard I tried; there was always a stone sending a sudden, bitter pain up my foot. I usually ended up walking on the piled stones on the side. They were warm from the sun and spread a comfortable, blunt, happy sort of pain through the soles of my feet.

The third part of my hike was a bit longer that the other two, and it was by far the most pleasant. This section of highway
was blacktop. It divided an abandoned pasture and cool pine woods. There were trees bordering both sides of the road. They leaned toward each other, forming a beautiful arch. If I hadn’t been such a “tomboy,” I would have imagined myself a bride walking down the aisle to meet her beloved. The pavement here was smooth and cool, a welcome relief from the rough gravel that preceded it. I always walked along the side of the road that bordered the wood because there was supposed to be a big, wild bull in the pasture. I had never seen him, but who was I to doubt the word of generations of the area’s young inhabitants? I was always on the watch for snakes here because I had seen one once and I was bound and determined to catch him. This road always smelled better than any of the others. The scent of cool pine needles and damp compost mixed well with the heavy warm smell of ancient grass and milkweed plants.

About halfway along the third road there was a huge old tree that stretched completely across the road. I always approached this tree with awe, for it was a magic tree. If you held your breath while walking under it and made a wish, it was sure to come true. I wished for a horse every time. That wish would set me dreaming about my horse and, before I realized it; I would be approaching the small hill that heralded the beginning of the last part of my journey. This hill had an almost holy aspect about it. The way the light fell on the pavement from between the trees was probably the cause of it. I always had a feeling of excitement and expectation walking up this hill. Upon reaching the top, a black, bare, dusty road, shimmering in the afternoon sun greeted me.

This was the last, and longest, stage of my trip. It was a direct contrast to the one I had just left. The pavement under my feet was almost blisteringly hot and the tar was soft and sticky. At first, the hot road felt good sticking to my feet, but soon I would be forced to take to the shoulder. The air surrounding the road was thick and heavy. It came at me from all sides and tried to smother me. The dust, aroused by my tired feet, settled around me, sticking to the sweat on my face and body. As I walked, I passed clumps of ragweed and goldenrod growing along the shoulder.
The tiny clouds of pollen, mixed with dust, tickled my nose. The bright sun beat down unmercifully. But, just as I thought I could walk no further, I would detect a small whiff of clean air that had strayed from some nearby lake. This almost undetectable breeze carried just enough freshness to keep me going. Soon I would be sitting on a stool in the drug store with the cool goodness of an orange popsicle running down my throat and the dusty sweat drying to a comfortable, scratchy crust on my face.

I took the same walk this summer. It was a beautiful day. The sky was blue with a few high clouds overhead. I began my walk briskly, remembering that I used to enjoy it so much, and expecting to feel this same joy. But, by the time I had reached the gravel road, I already felt that something was amiss. I succeeded in making a straight line of footprints, but it was a task and not a pleasure. The shade was chilly and I shivered. When I reached the gravel, I knew for a certainty that something was wrong. I couldn’t put my finger on it, but things just weren’t right. It was hard to walk on the piled stones, so I moved to the car tracks. My feet began to feel damp in my tennis shoes. I felt confined, but I didn’t dare take the shoes off for fear that one of the young gentlemen of the neighborhood would see me.

I was glad when I arrived at the third road—the second one had been getting increasingly boring. Nothing but stones and dust! When I first felt the fresh air and smelled the pine woods I had a feeling of hope, but it was soon gone. The trees still arched beautifully and the sun still shone through the branches, but they were merely trees and sunbeams with no individuality. I found that the old wishing tree had been cut down. I was surprised that the discovery did not upset me, but it really didn’t matter. Even if it had been there I wouldn’t have wished on it, for its usefulness had passed away with Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy. The longer I lingered there, the more uneasy I felt. I again welcomed the change to the last road.

The last road was wider than the others, and, for a brief while, I felt free. I didn’t notice the heat of the road at first, but soon the air began to oppress me. The dust settled upon me like an unseen foe. My new sundress hung limp around me and I was miserable. But this time I didn’t notice the tiny breeze. I was too
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busy looking for someone I knew to happen by and give me a ride home. I didn't want to be seen in town with a sagging dress, dirty tennis shoes and a sweat-stained face. When I reached home, I vowed never again to take another walk.

After a refreshing dip in the lake, my spirits revived. That afternoon I sat for a while in our hammock with an unread book in my lap, musing over my unpleasant adventure. As I was thinking, a little girl came by hunting for toads under the dock. I watched her for some time, absently. She was dressed in a faded, dirty blue “T” shirt and an old pair of jeans, and the remains of a cowboy vest. She had no shoes on and the slime coming from under the dock oozed between her toes. She looked so happy squatting there with her bottom barely touching the mud, peering hopefully under the dock at a fat toad sitting safely out of reach.

I smiled to myself, remembering how I used to enjoy the same pastime. Suddenly, I knew what I missed in my walk. I was now an adult, expecting an awareness of nature and freedom from care that only a child can experience. But watching the little girl, I also realized I could find much pleasure in my memories. At these revelations I felt a weight lifted from me. I had found a new home in the adult world with an open door to the past. As I headed for the house to prepare for a dinner date, I bade a fond farewell to the little girl and to my childhood.