A Desire to Dance[1]

My God, yes, I need to dance more.
Not merely tulips, green grass
and slick ballroom floors.
But into life, living,
loving, creating, dancing.

Child, sweet child,
full of health and vigor,
where have I lost you?

Helen near the sand box and lilac tree in the yard of the farm where she grew up, circa 1948.

The John Deere, model MT tractor
you used to drive to cultivate the corn
and mow the oats.
Oh dreamer, contemplative one,
who even at that young age
appreciated the solitude and patterns
of the fields and nearby Lizard Creek.

Oh child of summer who knows
the pungency of farm life,
the animals, the manure,
the smell of straw baled and
stacked in the barn.
The wild flowers
beside the gravel road.
The volunteer tiger lilies
along the lane to the house.
The time your mother taught you
to bounce a ball.
Yes, the ball, red, white, and blue
with stars and stripes.
Bouncing it on the round concrete slab
that covered the underground coal bin
next to the house.

Yes, the dance, Dear One,
the roundness of the ball,
the roundness of that concrete sphere,
the circle that encompassed
you and your mother.

You must dance more.
It is your life and desire to move
with the rhythm of that ball,
the rhythm of the farm,
the land and the universe.

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1. I wrote this poem in1991 at a writing class at the Angela Center in Santa Rosa, California.

From the yet to be published book *The Road I Grew Up On: Requiem for a Vanishing Era*
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INTRODUCTION TO MY ROAD[1]

The road between sections 7 and 18, Garfield Township, circa 1949. The LaVonne Page Howland collection.

I grew up on a farm in Pocahontas County in northwest Iowa, an area that prides itself on having some of the most productive agricultural land in the world. Like a lot of people, I used to think that the landscape was flat. Now I realize it rolls gently like the subtle and sensuous curves of a human body. These undulations were created as recently as 12,000 years ago when glaciers moved across the Midwest, leaving behind wetlands and tallgrass prairie.

In order to find the road where I grew up, you have to drive two miles south of my hometown of Rolfe and go west — or perhaps I should say, turn right. The road consists of four straight miles of gravel then a mile of dirt that ends at a T-intersection.

It is difficult to imagine what the area was like in the 1940s when I was a toddler, but there were 11 farmsteads along the road, an average of 2.2 farms per mile. Each place had a family that lived on it and farmed the land. Some families, like ours, owned the farms where they lived. Others were renters. Others were there because their fathers were, what we called in those days, hired hands for other men. Each farm was nestled in a grove of trees with build-

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1. This description of the road was originally prepared for the introduction of a video that I produced in 1997 about the road. A full version of the video has not been completed. In 1998, Velma and Verle Howard moved from their farm along the road to a home in Rolfe and sold their acreage to Brian and Brenda Slama. Marion Gunderson died in 2004.

Corn picking at the Adolph and Agnes Sefcik farm, 1940. The Agnes Sefcik collection.

ings such as corncribs, barns, or silos. Each had animals such as Hereford cattle, Hampshire hogs, Shropshire sheep, or Leghorn chickens. Each had a dog or cats that would hang around when the cows were milked.

It was rare, but our farm still had 100 acres of prairie that produced wild hay that could be fed to the cattle or horses. Many of the places had windmills that pumped water for farm and household use. Most of the families had large vegetable gardens. The women canned peas, corn, tomatoes, and string beans and stored them in cellars for use during the winter. Rural people were more isolated than today, and the main forms of mass media available on farms were basic things — magazines, newspapers, and the radio.

Farmers in Pocahontas County grew corn, oats, soybeans, alfalfa, and clover. They were completing the change from using draft horses like Kit and Kate or Mabel and Molly to using International Harvester and John Deere tractors to do fieldwork.

Farmers still joined together in crews called threshing rings to harvest oats. But as the 1940s ended, they began using mechanical combines pulled by tractors and driven by one man to harvest oats and beans.

Farmers were planting hybrid seed corn, taking advantage of breakthroughs in genetic research done in the 1920s and 30s.

It is no coincidence that commercial fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides first began to appear on farms after World War II. During the war, the nation had built large industrial plants that produced ammonium nitrate that was used in making explosives. At the end of the war, these same companies used ammonium nitrate to produce fertilizers, and farmers were encouraged to use them.

The pesticide DDT was also used on a large scale during the war. The military sprayed it on troops stationed in the Pacific Islands to protect them from mosquitos and malaria. After the war, farmers used DDT to kill flies around barns, and in the 50s, they used it to kill bugs, cornborers, and grasshoppers. DDT is now banned in the United States.

As part of its wartime research on biological weapons, the United States government instituted a crop research division in the early 1940s. Its mission was to develop chemicals that would destroy plant life. By the end of the 40s and in the early 50s, a derivative of this research called 2,4-D became popular among farmers who used it for killing broadleaf weeds. It is still used in small quantities today with other agricultural chemicals. Had our government not ended the war with Japan with the atomic bomb, the precursors of 2,4-D might have been dropped on Japan's fields to destroy its crops and starve its people.

Many men who grew up along my road served in the war. Don Grant was a radar expert with the Air Corps in England and France. Verle Howard ran power plants for the Air Corp communications network in Italy and Africa. Milton Harrold was in the infantry in the Aleutian Islands, and Joe Reigelsberger was a Marine building roads in China. Roger DeWolf was also a Marine and served with the occupation forces in North China at the end of the war.

My father, Deane Gunderson, grew up three miles from the road where I grew up, then graduated from Iowa State College, and was an engineer at John Deere Tractor Company in Waterloo, Iowa. He supervised the department that made Grumman aircraft parts for the Navy's Hellcat fighter.

The nation was under the leadership of Harry Truman, who became president following the death of Franklin Roosevelt on April 12, 1945. A week later, Marion Gunderson entered Allen Memorial Hospital in Waterloo and gave birth to her third child. Meanwhile, halfway around the world from where I was born on April 19, the Allied forces stopped the Nazi regime and Adolph Hitler committed suicide. Germany announced his death on May 1 and signed an unconditional surrender on May 7. Then on August 6 and 9, the United States dropped atomic bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima, and Japan surrendered.

In September, when I was five months old, my family moved from Waterloo in northeast Iowa to the farm where I grew up in Pocahontas County. During the 1950s, there were so many children from my road that we filled over half of a bus that went to the Rolfe Consolidated Schools.

Today, the township where I grew up is radically different. Two of the farms along my road have only a lone crib or a set of grain bins to mark the spot where a family once was part of the neighborhood. Five building sites have been completely cleared and cultivated. There is no prairie except remnants along the railroad tracks and in road ditches. Almost all the tillable land is in corn and soybeans, the so-called cash crops. There are no more horses, dogs, sheep, or chickens. Only one farm raises cattle and hogs.

Only four families live along the road where I grew up. There are two retired couples — my parents, Marion and Deane Gunderson, and Velma and Verle Howard. Marjorie Harrold lost her husband, Faber in 1989. He died of cancer. She continues to garden, manage the home, and help with the fieldwork. Her son Paul is in charge of the cattle, hogs, and crops. It is unlikely that descendants of these families will ever move back to this road.

In 1992, Mick and Sue Reigelsberger and their twins moved from town to the farm where Mick had grown up. Joseph and Kaitlin were three at the time and the first children to live along the road since 1980 when Mick and a neighborhood friend graduated from high school. Mick's parents, Joe and Norine Reigelsberger, retired from farming in 1992 and moved to town.

There were no street signs in the rural areas of Pocahontas County until the emergency 911 system was initiated in the 1990s. This sign stands at the corner west of the Gunderson farm in front of a field of maturing corn, 1995. The road Helen grew up on is now designated as 480th Street.

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