

Collector Road  
By Laurie Allmann

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Collector Road  
—Laurie Allmann

See in your minds' eye  
This 4 mile stretch of country two-lane:  
Once dirt, then gravel, now paved,  
Double line down the center  
Nearly all along its length,  
Rolling like a ribbon past a cattail marsh,  
Past a sign for fresh eggs and honey,  
Past fields of corn and beans and alfalfa running  
All the way to the horizon,  
Past one weathered barn  
And then another,  
Past some twenty head of Holsteins grazing in  
Their evening pasture, udders heavy with milk,  
Past a lake that may be blue or gray or Liberace pink  
Depending on the hour and the day,  
Past that old Mercedes that's been for  
Sale so long that people use it  
When they give directions.  
And then beyond,  
Past the point where the soil goes from  
Coarse to fine, and the trees, they come up close  
On either side, close enough that the branches  
Almost touch overhead, and it's easy to picture  
How it was before there was a road at all.  
On their maps, the transportation wizards

Call these little thoroughfares

Collector Roads.

They got that right.

Collector Road.

Collecting neighbors strung along its length

Like so many freshwater pearls,

Lustrous and a little oddly shaped.

Collecting growing seasons caught up in the

Ropy veins of long-time farmers' hands,

The dwindling ranks of

Men and women in their 60s, their 70s and 80s,

People who have lived here nearly all their lives,

Who can tell you, if you ask,

How to get that taste of grass inside a chicken egg,

Or how to raise a calf to win grand champion at the fair;

How to put a super on the hive in June, and stack them through the

Summer as they fill, so come September you can

Line your shelves with

Honey for your bread.

They can show you how to read a fist full of soil,

How much seed an acre takes, and how much rain to pray for

If you're the praying kind.

And if you weren't there to see it, well, they'll know

The year that giant ash tree there was planted,

And where it was the town hall used to stand.

They tell you of the creek that ran in spring

That you could get across by jumping rock to rock.  
They'll lean back on their chairs and resurrect the winter when  
The snow piled into drifts as high  
As power lines,  
And that day in 1951  
When the sky turned dark and eerie green before the twister  
Came out of the south and ripped  
Whole pieces from the barn and pulled up trees as  
Easy as you'd pick a dandelion, and all the while they  
Huddled in the cellar with  
Their baby in their arms – "Here he comes now," they'll say,  
"He won't remember that, he was too young."  
And even you will feel the rush of time to look and  
See that baby, now a man of fifty-five,  
Negotiate a final turn and cut the engine on a tractor in the drive.  
Together you will watch him stride across the yard, this man who may well be  
the last to make  
A living farming on this road where once  
It was the rare one who went to work in town.  
You will sit at kitchen tables or on porches with a breeze,  
And when you rise to leave you might be told to take a couple of those peppers  
home with you, and really,  
You could take your pick from all those blue-eyed, yellow  
Kitties in the barn. And don't forget to bring your boy by  
For a combine ride this fall.  
And you will start the car but you will not want to leave  
Because the air smells  
Like your Grandpa did when he came in from doing chores,

A little hard of hearing so he  
Always called you Glory instead of Laurie, but you didn't mind.  
And there's something else here  
On these farms  
That just goes without a name  
That has to do with strong backs and hope  
Laid out across the fields for everyone to see.  
Collector Road.

Collecting time. Thousands of years remembered in the  
Sediments of the fen that lies just east of the road:  
An unassuming boggy hollow that once cupped a block of  
Melting glacial ice while there were still  
Hearts beating in the chests of  
Mastodons and mammoths and the  
St. Croix was a hundred times the river we know now.  
This little fen where you can dig down thirty feet  
Into the peat and find  
8000 year-old pollen grains that paint a picture in your  
Mind of ancient oak savannas and long lost water lilies.  
And somewhere in this seamless record,  
Are the ski tracks pressed into a snowless bog  
By old man Sundberg,  
Who every autumn liked to walk here from his farm across the way  
And strap on a pair of wooden skis to keep him  
Up on top the boggy mat while he picked  
Cranberries.  
Collector Road.

Collecting lures and bobbers on the wires beside the lake  
Where on a Monday summer noon, a father and son walk along  
The gravel shoulder to their car; this boy who says his name is  
Joey, who wants you to know  
That he is not four years old, mind you, he is four and half,  
And he is laughing as he swings a stringer of bass in an arc he calculates  
Perfectly to spray some fish juice on his Dad;  
And his Dad, a stocky man with a marine-style buzz cut who  
Has taken the day off work so that he could  
Be made more stinky by his son.  
Collector Road.

Collecting Micky,  
Strider,  
Rainy,  
Hallie,  
Bruno,  
Abby,  
Lucy,  
Max,  
Oscar,  
Heidi,  
Allie,  
Angel,  
Yogi,  
Molly,

And Barney, who is remembered at the edge of a yard by a cross made of  
popsicle sticks.

Dogs, that is;

Collector Road.

Collecting seeds descended from the mountain slopes

And sun-filled valleys of distant Laos, once a homeland, now always 12 hours

Ahead and out of reach for generations of this family, this

Hmong family that stops on a Sunday drive to buy

Some eggs, and in uncertain English, the man politely asks

Where a person might find some land to rent –

A bit of space for chickens, maybe a garden, and he is told

“Here.”

And now they come most every day the ground is free of ice,

Their garden a piece of art,

A careful mosaic of mustard greens and squash and corn and

Cucumbers like you have never tasted,

lemon grass and tiny, fiery chilies,

And beans that climb on trellises lovely as spider webs, though they are made of  
rough branches tied at the joints with

Strips of cloth.

These people who have seen what

People shouldn't have to see,

With memories that no-one ought to have,

They plant the progeny of seeds

They brought in suitcases to a country

Where they did not speak the language,

A country of which they knew almost nothing,

Except that it was vast, and they had to look ahead, since there could be no looking back.

And now they drive out from the city

After long days spent at work,

To tend this piece of earth with almost palpable contentment

Because, he says, there are the trees,

Because, he says, because it feels safe,

Which after all is no little thing to say.

And their youngest, dear three-year-old Pah-zee —

Is happy here.

She's taken to running up the hill to the

Kind people at the farmhouse when it's too hot or

The mosquitoes are bad,

Or when she wants to make a picture with

The crayons she is sure to be offered there

By the woman who is the age her

Grandmother would have been,

Should have been,

By now.

And even if the language flowed

More readily, there isn't much that

Really needs be said between the

Family that happens to own some land along this road and the one

That happens to rent some of that land;

Nothing that hasn't already been said by way of

crayons,

And one year, by way of a knock at the door and the

Unexpected gift of a Thanksgiving turkey

Stuffed with rice noodles.  
Collector Road.  
Collecting pieces of the river, not the river proper that  
Runs some five miles  
To the east, but this larger river – the  
One that begins at that water's edge and reaches  
Inland;  
This larger river made of hawks and eagles following  
The flyway with their keening cries, the flash of sun  
Reflecting off their spreading fan of feathers as  
They bank around a curve;  
This larger river  
Made of water running unseen and unheard  
In underground sheets and seeping through  
Cracks  
In bedrock;  
This larger river that fills the valley  
With expectancy.  
Collector Road.

Collecting bloodlines from around the globe,  
Expressed in family recipes written on  
Paper worn soft as cloth, or not written down at all –  
Swedish pepparkökar rolled thin as new ice;  
Norwegian lutefisk that begins as a hard plank of dried cod and  
Goes downhill from there;  
Melted butter poured over Polish pierogi, a fork pressing

The edges of the tender pasta to seal in the fillings of sauerkraut and bacon or  
Potato with ricotta;  
The little brown rocks of German pfeffernuss that improve  
With a coating of pocket lint;  
Sri Lankan curries made from two cupboards full of spices, taken one by one and  
ground fresh for dinner.  
Welcome to the table, sit yourself down.  
We've got Jesus and Buddha at the same potluck.  
Collector Road.

Collecting wheeling wings of goldeneyes and teal above  
A wetland rimmed with winter ice,  
Collecting veils of fog that gather on  
Cool mornings in the hollows of the fields,  
Collecting painted turtles just out of the egg, small enough to  
Fit inside the circle of a two-bit coin with room to spare,  
Collecting prairie grasses in the ditches by the train tracks.  
Collecting the lost sleep of children whose parents  
Have awakened them in the night  
So that they might walk down the driveway,  
Out from under a ceiling of oaks to the road,  
To see meteors streak across a dark sky,  
To watch and wonder at what splendor  
Fills the open space  
Collector Road.

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