



A ROAD IS ALWAYS A JOURNEY, ALWAYS A CHOICE

As he lingered, shadows shifted, coalescing into the vague forms of travelers long gone, their eyes gleaming with the knowledge of paths unseen; a maiden clutching a lantern, a boy with a flute whose tune had been forgotten for centuries, a stagecoach driver who knew well such secret roads. They moved with unnatural grace, fading whenever he tried to focus fully upon them, leaving only the echo of their presence. Amos felt neither fear nor welcome, but a profound and terrible wonder.

—Twilight Hollow

LAST RIDE
ON THE
GALENA COACH ROAD

and

Other Tales

John Spencer

MONROE ST.
SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS

Last Ride On The Galena Coach Road and Other Tales

A Monroe Street Press/Spencer Books Publication
spencerbooks15.livejournal.com

Second Edition
Copyright © 2026 by John Spencer
All rights reserved

ISBN: 9798196409295

Original cover art and illustrations: John Spencer

Design: Monroe St. Press

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publishers.

This is a work of fiction.

Any references to historical events, real people, or real locales are used fictitiously. Other names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination, and any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Printed in U.S.A.

Preface

The Measure and the Mark

There is a difference between a map and a road.

A map is a thing of the mind—a grid of ink and arithmetic laid over a world that never asked to be measured. It is the dream of the surveyor, the straight line of the conqueror, and the cold logic of the algorithm. But a road? A road is a thing of the earth. It is a negotiation. It is a shared memory of every footfall, every iron rim, and every heavy-hearted traveler who has ever sought the horizon.

In the stories that follow, you will find both.

You will walk with Miller, the man of the chain and the leather cuff, as he attempts to force a rectangular order upon the circular life of the Illinois river-bottoms. You will feel the

Sullen Earth pull at his boots, a land still scarred by the fires of 1812, refusing to be reconciled to his transit.

You will meet Echo-Stone, the boy whose flute held the land's permission long before the first stake was driven, and the Warden, a maiden whose lantern still guards the verges where the grid fails and the shadows grow long.

The roads in this collection are more than mere passage. They are "held notes." From the dust-choked stagecoach traces of the Galena Road to the neon-blue surveillance of the digital Grid, these paths carry the weight of what we are running from and the hope of what we cannot leave behind. They are places where time grows thin, where the dust refuses to settle, and where—if a man knows how to wait—the earth might finally offer up a polished stone instead of a rut.

Every story here bears a mark. Not a flourish, not a trick of design, but the quiet impression left when human purpose meets the land's long patience and is changed by it.

Whether you are driving a Hemi Cuda through a Jo Daviess storm or walking a French lane with a rag doll in your hand, remember this: the road always knows where you are. It keeps its own ledger. It watches the shoulder. And in the end, if you are very lucky,

it may just show you the way that leads only upward.

Slow down. Keep your eye on the verge. The reckoning is earned.

—*John Spencer, 2026.*



Notes from the Earth

(The Road Arrives)

The sun was a pale smudge behind the river mist, a ghost of light that failed to burn through the damp weight of the Illinois valley. At the edge of the limestone bluff, where the rock leaned over the water like a sentinel, Echo-Stone sat with his heels pressed into the cold silt. He was fourteen, but his eyes held the stillness of the strata beneath him—a temperament formed by the density of the hollow. He was of the river-people, but in his blood ran the older, heavy-browed lineage of those who had watched the ice retreat.

Below him, the river moved with a muted insistence, its surface broken only by the slow rise of bubbles where submerged logs released trapped air. A kingfisher rattled once and flashed blue across the mist, vanishing into the trees. Somewhere upslope, an acorn dropped from an oak canopy and struck another limb on its way down, ticking softly before disappearing into the leaf mold.

He was not there to play. He was there to hold.

Across his knees lay his flute, river-cured and hollowed by seasons of silt, its surface etched

with the fine, swirling grain of cedar. He lifted it and began the circular, returning rhythm of the river's tune. As he blew, the first notes were thin and clear, stitching the air to the limestone. It was a song of permission, a melody that asked nothing but offered everything. The hollow opened to him.

Birdsong shifted in response — a thrush's phrase lengthened, a wren paused mid-call as if listening for the next breath. The wind in the prairie grass bent in long, easy phrases, combing seed heads and carrying the dry whisper of last season's growth. Here, the world was a held note, and as long as he breathed, the land was soft and the river was kind.

*

Thirty centuries later, the mist remained, but the air had curdled. It carried the scent of wood smoke, the musk of oxen, and the sharp, metallic tang of forged things.

Miller, the surveyor, adjusted the leather cuffs protecting his pale, ink-stained wrists and cursed. He hauled the sixty-six-foot Gunter's chain through the brush, a literate man doing the brutal, physical work of the grid. He was a pioneer professional, an intruder tasked with laying straight, unyielding lines over a land that

had only ever known the riparian curves of the water. He was carving a map out of a wilderness that refused to be read.

Dry branches snapped beneath his boots. A startled grouse burst from cover, thundering away through the understory, leaving only the echo of wingbeats and drifting feathers. Miller flinched despite himself, annoyed at the way the land kept announcing its presence.

The chain didn't slide; it snagged. Clink-snap. The sound was a discordance that tore at the fabric of the Hollow. Behind him, a pack horse stepped with the blunt, bone-jarring concussion of iron-shod hooves. The horse didn't negotiate with the earth; it commanded it, its weight a violent declaration of ownership.

Miller wiped sweat from his brow, looking at the charred remains of a French orchard—the trauma of 1812 still etched in the blackened stumps and the ruins of stone chimneys. A few surviving apple trees twisted nearby, their fruit small and bitter, dropping early to rot in the grass. He felt a peculiar pressure in his jaw.

The ground wasn't hard like stone; it was dense. A thick, grey clay gathered at his boots and clung to the iron of the chain, refusing to be shaken off. It was a literal burden—the land making him carry a piece of it with every step he took away from the water.

Echo-Stone's rhythm faltered. He did not hear the curse of the future man, but he felt the man's disturbance as a tremor in his teeth—a thin, metallic wrongness threading through the river's voice. The conversation between water and land did not end. It hesitated.

A deer standing at the tree line lifted its head, antlers brushing softly against a sapling trunk. The animal froze, ears forward, sensing a pressure it could not name. Even the insects seemed to thin their song.

The river's surface tightened, its small sounds collapsing inward. What had been a speaking current became a held breath. The bluffs did not answer. They drew back, their silence thickening, no longer receptive but braced against an approaching iron momentum.

Echo-Stone lowered the flute and felt its weight settle into his knees. The wood, once warm with passage, felt inert—bone without marrow. He understood then that the song he carried could no longer travel. It would not move forward with the river. It would have to stay. It would have to become a wall.

He raised the flute again.

This time, he did not seek the rhythm. He did not shape a phrase. He sealed his lips and

breathed a single long note—low, unadorned, unfinished—and refused to let it go.

The sound did not project. It did not ring. It compressed.

Air thickened around the mouth of the flute. The vibration folded back on itself, caught between breath and wood. Echo-Stone's chest began to burn, the ache of held air blooming behind his sternum like a banked coal. His shoulders trembled, and his pulse hammered against his throat, but he did not release. This was not music. It was a binding. It was a declaration of presence.

The note sank.

It pressed downward through the bluff, through the wet seams of limestone, through pockets of ancient shell and riverbone. Where sound could not pass, it pooled. Where it pooled, it weighted the ground. The earth received it the way earth receives all burdens—without complaint, but without forgetfulness. The molecular space between the soil and the silence vanished.

Echo-Stone held until his vision darkened at the edges. Held until the river could no longer recognize its own voice. Held until the land answered not with welcome, but with resistance.

Hold.

When he finally released the breath, the air did not rush back. Silence arrived slowly, like a lid settling onto a vessel that had been filled too full. Leaves stirred again. A distant woodpecker resumed its tapping, cautiously, as if testing whether the world would answer.

*

Far down the long spine of time, Miller's chain snapped taut and refused to slide.

The iron links clinked once—sharply—then stilled, as if something beneath them had decided to keep them. The pack horse shifted and stamped, its hooves sinking deeper than they should have, the grey mud rising to swallow the iron shoes. The earth did not splash or crumble. It closed with a wet, final suction.

Miller wiped his hands on his trousers and stared at the measurement, certain the error lay in his own eye or the fraying tension of the links. He pulled again, his boots slipping on the slick surface. The chain resisted, heavy with clay that clung as though it had intent. Each link carried weight beyond mud—a drag that traveled up his arms, through his leather cuffs, and lodged in his shoulders.

He felt it then: the pressure in his jaw, the subtle ache behind the eyes. Not pain. Density.

Back in time, on the bluff, Echo-Stone lowered the flute. The note was no longer in him. It had been taken. It had been planted.

He knelt and pressed his palm to the ground. Beneath his hand, the soil was cool and tight, as if something had been set within it and asked to stay. The land had learned a new posture. It would not strike back with fire or flood. It would remember.

Only then did he turn to the limestone face.

He worked slowly, using a shard of chert. Not because the stone resisted—but because it listened. Each stroke of chert was placed where the sound had settled deepest. The long vertical groove came first: the held breath. Then the interruptions—the places where fingers had once lifted and paused, rendered now as jagged refusals. These were the first glyphs, the anchor points of the Sullen Earth.

By the time he finished, night had pooled in the hollow. An owl passed overhead, its wings soundless. His arms shook with a fatigue that felt as old as the bluffs. The stone was cold beneath his hand, not with the chill of shade, but with the temperature of something that had accepted a permanent burden.

Centuries later, Miller's palm found that same groove.

The stone was colder than it should have been. Not dead—contained. He withdrew his hand as if from deep water and looked again at the marks. They were not letters. They were not drawings. They were pauses—places where movement had been told, long ago, to slow.

He drove the iron pin once more. The mallet fell. The sound vanished into the ground without echo, absorbed by the density of the boy's last note.

Miller straightened, his breath shallow, and looked back toward the river, toward the curve he had tried to deny with his straight lines.

"The grid is wrong," he said quietly, as if speaking too loudly might wake the very earth.

"We go around."

The road would pass. Maps would be drawn. Hooves and wheels would follow. But the land, having learned how to hold a note, would never again give way easily.

Last Ride on The Galena Coach Road

(For Bill and Isaac)

The old Galena Coach Road had been carrying people to their fates since before Illinois had a name. First hunters, then French traders, then the stagecoaches that rattled between Springfield, Peoria, and the lead mines up north. You could still see the old ruts in places if the light was right—deep, worn grooves like scars left in the land. Horses had strained there. Wheels had broken there. Folks had prayed or cursed or both.

By 1976 the road wasn't much more than a forgotten shortcut between cornfields, a ribbon of gravel that stubbornly kept its shape even while everything else in the world changed.

He liked that about it.

My brother-in-law wasn't the talking kind. The war made sure of that. Vietnam had scraped him clean inside, the way fire leaves a stove-black shell. Some men came home and tried to rebuild themselves. Others just tried to stay inside the lines, hoping no one noticed the chips missing.

He drove instead.

That car was his church, his counselor, his hiding place.

A '65 Ford Falcon—nothing fancy, nothing showy. Just a straight-running little machine that didn't complain. He kept it tuned sharp, too. You could hear it coming down the road

like a promise. Sometimes he laughed harder behind the wheel than anywhere else. Funny how a car can be the only thing that forgives you without asking questions.

Good Friday '76 was cold, the kind of early spring chill that sinks into the soil and reminds you winter isn't quite finished. The day had been quiet. He'd eaten little, slept less. He had that distant look in his eyes again—the one where you could tell he was seeing someplace else entirely. Someplace with tree lines that hid rifles. Someplace where the air smelled like smoke and jungle rot and young men dying far from home.

He didn't tell anyone where he was going that night.

He just grabbed his keys and said he needed a ride.

The Falcon fired up on the first turn, headlights cutting across the yard. I watched him from the window, his silhouette small in that big night, shoulders bowed as though he carried more weight than a man should.

I didn't know it was the last time I'd see him.

He took the Galena Coach Road, naturally. He always said it felt honest. Modern blacktop was too smooth, too false. But that old coach road... it still had the bones of history under it. You could almost hear the clatter of stage wheels if you listened, or the steady thunk of horses pulling the mail north. Long before Lincoln ever rode it as a circuit lawyer. Long before the wars, both old and new.

The road remembered things.

Maybe that's why he went there.

The night was starless, real Midwestern black. Gravel spit behind the Falcon's tires as he opened it up, letting the engine stretch its legs the way a man might stretch his lungs after a long silence. Maybe he was racing something. A memory. A ghost. Himself.

Not many people know what flashbacks truly are. They're not visions, not dreams, not even memories. They're ambushes. You can be driving along, thinking about tomorrow, and suddenly it's 1969 again and there are shadows in the treeline and the air sings with a sound you'll never forget.

Maybe that happened to him.

Or maybe the road dipped, or a washout grabbed his tire, or a deer bounded across the dark.

No one was there to see it.

But the Falcon left the road, rolled down a small embankment, and ended against an old hedge of osage orange. The sheriff said it looked like he hadn't even braked, like the whole thing happened in an instant. Maybe it did.

Good Friday.

An old road.

A veteran who carried more than his share.

A car that had been his one steady friend.

The funeral was small, the way he would've wanted. A few veterans came—quiet men with thousand-yard eyes who nodded at each other like they understood everything that didn't

need saying. When the minister talked about peace, those men stared at the floor.

Years passed.

The earth healed.

Grass grew over the scar where the Falcon rested.

But every time I drive past the turnoff to the Galena Coach Road, I slow down. I look north toward where the road bends out of sight, where the ruts of the stage line still lie under the newer gravel, where horses once strained through mud thick as sin.

Some roads are older than memory.

Some men carry burdens older than themselves.

Some nights take both.

And last year, when his grandson Isaac died in almost the same way—different car, different road, but the same cruel echo—it struck me like a fist: some stories travel through blood the way the old road travels through the land.

Straight lines through time.

Repeating patterns.

Unanswered prayers.

Racing with the devil, all of them, and doing the best they could.

I sometimes think of my brother-in-law in that Falcon, the engine singing, the night rushing past, the ghosts finally catching up. Not in a frightening way. More like... a man coming to the end of a long trail and seeing familiar faces waiting for him.

The old Galena Coach Road still runs there between the fields.

Still crooked.

Still quiet.

Still carrying the memories of everyone who ever passed down it.

And some nights, if the wind is right, I swear I can hear a '65 Falcon in the distance—downshifting, opening up, chasing something only he could see.

Maybe he finally caught it.

Maybe it finally let him go.

Either way, I hope the road was gentle with him.