

## In the Year of the Deer-Christ

by Mike Finley  
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Your ear perks up at the sound of the mailman pulling away in his station wagon. As you step out the door, his dust still hovers in the air.

You hike down the long drive to the box. There won't be anything good there; there never is. You have got used to receiving the unwanted: the supermarket circular, the mimeo school district report, the pink slip of the utility bill peeking out the envelope window.

The wonder is that you still make this long hike to the road before the postman's car dives over the next hill.

Up the road there, you see how it narrows, then loops over the neighbor's ridgetop, flickering like a flame, then meets at a point and vanishes.

Getting up each day and driving off to work turns you into a yo-yo. Every morning you rise on its string, and every night slide down again. How do you keep hoping, you ask yourself. And what is all this effort for?

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The road is for you, for people. You tell yourself that as you speed down its gravel, everything in its right place. Your grandfather helped plat it out when he was in his twenties, one of eight settlers in the whole township. They laid out a road every square mile, north to south and east to west. It made the prairie a chessboard and people were its grandmaster.

It didn't need a name. It was The Township Road, or just The Road. Your people made it. Your race maintains it. Your kind stakes claim to it day after day, every time a key turns in the ignition and wheels roll out, like a signature.

It confuses animals. Meadow beasts, marsh beasts, beasts of the ditch. A thousand times in the blank of the night that same pair of eyes freezes in front of you, caught in the headlights like a thief at the silver drawer.

And the thief never moves. Like it's disbelieving, or blinded. It just stands there *looking*.

This weighs the driver down, your whole day soured by the sight of a body going down under metal.

It could have stepped aside. But it didn't. *Whump*. Another innocent broken by the road. Count the bones. It's like cruising into Rome, crucifixions everywhere.

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In the spring the township man sprays the shoulders with herbicide. In summer time they mow the ditch grass every six weeks or so. It keeps down the insect and milkweed populations, and gives drivers another second to see an animal bolting. In the last weeks of the fall the farmers douse the roadsides with gas and burn them back while the cattle moan a thousand yards away.

The cattle remember smoke. They remember fire from a long time ago.

But all this destroying does no good. Winter comes and the snow settles where the wind wants it. Some of the roads block off for the season. Sometimes the snow is so deep, the ploughs create deep trenches, a single lane wide, sometimes a mile long. When two cars meet in a mile-long trench, one of them has to lose and shift into reverse.

Now in the cold season you stand by the window, watching the snow pass over the road like a stampede of spirit. Nighetimes you dream of a record snow, and your lifeline to town, to shelter and food, cut off for weeks.

After a time, the cards get tired of solitaire. By day you pass in a grudge of ice -- one false move will do you in, one gust of wind and you blow off the road forever.

In the month of suicide no word comes. The mailbox licks your fingertips.

One day you step out the door in shirtsleeves, blinking. The road is streaked with the skid of tires veering this way and that through the slime. A corpse of ashen snow lies shining in the ditch. Gray puddles face up to the sky, like columns of obituaries in the March edition.

You think the road is beyond repair, then along comes the grader to make it right again. And now, to smell the smells of the earth that you thought unresurrectably dead, rushing into your head once again!

On every loop of telephone wire a dozen grackles screech their screech. Each bird faces east like a bead on an abacus, on a rosary.

All winter you doubted. You survived the cold; but could anything else? Today, as you stand by the mailbox, you see something, a sign, pressed into the mud. You kneel in the clay and with the tips of two fingers you enter the print of the improbable deer.

And there is a letter for you today, from home.