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2019

## Winner - Eakring

Paul Martin  
*Yale Law School*

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**Eakring**

**Paul Martin**

**2019 Short Story Competition Winner**

The funniest thing happened last summer. I was off in New Mexico with a couple weeks to burn between a disappointing summer job and a fifth semester of law school. The general plan had been *Mexico Mexico*, but my passport expired back in two thousand and single digits and probably so did my reserves of motivation for activities like renewing passports. But hey, as you might've heard, New Mexico is pretty nice. There's these big open swaths of hardly anything, and regarding them open-minded you start to feel yearnings you'd never imagined yearning about. Like becoming dust and blowing slow across the desert under a full sun. And it's oddly life-affirming, that gentle wanting of things really, really far from life.

August twelvish marked the morning of my first full day in Silver City. My eyes opened up dry to the auto motel room and began to dry out further on account of being open and this being the Southwest, so I slammed them shut and went over to the bathroom to splash in some water, which did not help. The window over the toilet paper roll was big and clear. Faraway outside, sunbeams fell sheer and two hawks were climbing the light-cliffs, now and then washed out of the scene as they weaved up and up.

I'd been out late last night. Late enough and full of enough imitation mezcal that the morning light was hitting me in waves as bright backwash. It's been a rough and boozy year since Sam died, but a pinch less rough than the preceding year of Sam *dying*.

Feels wrong to admit that. Feels wronger to just pour liquid smoke into cheap whiskey and call it mezcal, though, so I was still ahead in this town, karma-wise.

By now I was sitting on the bed, tugging self-consciously red jeans up past the knee joint. “About time, fine pine,” I said aloud, for no apparent reason, embarrassing myself. A gnat made for my nostrils. I snorted defensively.

Shoes on, sleeves rolled, too-small sunglasses digging into my temples, I quit the motel and walked toward Silver C’s main commercial strip. Various brick and clapboard buildings swam up. One read *FUNCTIONARY COFFEE*, in big italics like that, and I figured sure. I set my Fancy Law School tote bag down at a table near the bathroom at the back where the smell wasn’t great but the light was kindly weak.

I ordered something syrupy, took my seat, and thumbed through sensationalized ledes. Some ivory tower luminaries had decided that if our universe doesn’t go dark and icy, it might just collapse and start all over from the top. And Gertie the pig had been pronounced the world’s first large mammal clone of a clone. Then I thought how we’re all just genetic copies of copies of copies—and I’d have kept on going but I heard my name called and knew there was a drink waiting for me on the dark Formica counter, which is a distracting thing to know.

Speaking of distracting, someone had begun to stare at me. I noticed her once I was back at my seat. A thin woman, blonde with shocks of gray, maybe blueish eyes, maybe forty-six. Maybe more like fifty. I couldn’t be entirely sure that she was looking at me, except when I was staring back at her, but there was an inertia in her gaze that suggested it was unbroken. She finally got up and made a few halting half-steps, glancing down at my shoes and tote bag, before resolving to come over and put a weathered hand on the metal chair opposite me.

She greeted me, her voice arrhythmic and soft, and pointed to my bag. She asked whether I was a law student. I told her yes, but not for too much longer, thank God. She giggled or hiccupped and her name was Claire. For a moment she looked twenty-two.

Turns out Claire had been a law student at UNM back in the early nineties. She quickly added that she had left all that behind, that the law was never a good fit for her, despite all she had invested in the course of trying it on. Claire threw her hands up as if to say “what can you do” and, yep, she said:

“Well what can you do?”

Claire said she had to leave but that she wanted to share something with me. She tugged a folded receipt out of a tight front jeans pocket and pulled out a pen from behind her ear. I hadn’t realized that people still wore pens up there.

“I was up at your school,” she said, “one fall, for a conference. Ninety-two.” She started writing on the receipt, pausing to think and chew on the pen tip.

“I found something while studying in the library. Never forgot about it, but I never had a good reason to tell anyone. ‘Till I saw your bag. Reminded me. Alright, there,” finishing and flicking the paper for emphasis, “go look this up. It has to be the hard copy version in the library. Everything after the decision is cut out of other copies and the online archives—I’ve checked. Ok, there, have a *great* day.”

I took the receipt. Scrawled on the edge were two numbers hugging the letters “K.B.” A citation to a court case. King’s Bench, maybe? I looked up from the crinkly record of groceries. Claire was back at her table, sliding her laptop into its felt sleeve, catching my eyes. Hi again and bye, she seemed to say, and she left out the green glass door. I looked down and nodded to my espresso drink, “alright.”

\* \* \* \* \*

I moseyed around Silver City for a few more days. A museum here, a Gila Cliff ruin there. I became, briefly, a man about town in a town about the past. They say the corner saloon was an old Butch Cassidy haunt. But they've also got whiskey to sell those of us credulously hanging on their every word, so who knows. And by they I mostly mean Dan Antrim, proprietor of one Ciénega Saloon, with the whitest beard and the electric-bluest irises you've ever seen. Call it nostalgia; call it naiveté; call it what it is—the blissful distraction of sunsoaked nowheres—but I liked Silver City. It was a shame to have to leave. Dan was sorry to see me go, he said, and I believed him. I said I was sorry to see him stay.

We went north and east, my Subaru and I, headed back a little early. Texas, Oklahoma, and then on to the next thing. Somewhere in Ohio I forgot where I was going for about eight lovely seconds. A moment of immediacy, of *this* sky and *this* inhale of conditioned air. Then I remembered I needed a few more credits meted out over nine more months, and the way forward was no longer joyfully arbitrary. That night I slept in the backseat at a camp site. I imagined there were stars visible up past the felt roof.

I dreamed and then daydreamed about the same thing. Sam and I met in 2014 and we fell in love by 2014 and a half. The moments you remember. The ones he can't. The ones you can't tell anyone about. Not because they wouldn't understand, but because they would—fiercely and completely—and that's too much to take.

New England sprang up on me. I think the transition happens sometime after the Tappan Zee but a little before the Connecticut border. You can't feel it until you've been driving in the region for a while and it hits you retrospectively. They say to visit in October when the leaves start to do their eponymous season falling thing. But I prefer

late summer, when the air's all thick and bright and the treetops curve to a lip overhead and look like green smoke billowing off the sides of the highway. Eastward I punched the cruise control.

\* \* \* \* \*

So that's how I found myself back at school with a few days before the start of class, sitting at a library computer, scrutinizing a faded Albertsons receipt from a part of the country with Albertsons. I found the case online. Old, short; nothing special. But I needed the print version. The catalog pointed me to the international collections in the basement, and down I went on a creaky, bronze elevator, obligingly.

There's an eeriness down there, especially potent without students shuffling around, when the daze of the weary Doc Martens two-step lifts.

Once in the correct section, I put my forefinger on the lip of the shelf and ran it past call numbers, no, no, *there we go*. Settlement-Cases of the King's Bench, whatever those were, by James Burrow. Eighteenth Century. The volume fell open to the precise page I needed, and I felt supernaturally lucky before I realized it had been dog-eared. At a glance, the case was far longer than the online version. Ah, no, the *case* was identical, but the writing seemed to continue well beyond its resolution. The court reporter just went on reporting—a kind of diary of musings. How had this made it in? Hunched in the fluorescent light, I started in on reading.

It starts, "Friday." Well, here, I'll scan it in:

Friday, 1st June, 1754.

*Rex v. Inhabitants of Eakring*

Two Justices made an Order for the Removal of *George Whitworth* from *Eakring* to *Retford*: and, upon an Appeal, the Sessions reversed that Order.

*Special case* – George Whitworth, a poor child of Eakring, and put out by the proper Officers, was indentur'd to serve Samuel Harlow as a PARISH APPRENTICE till he should accomplish his AGE OF TWENTY YEARS. About three Years before he attain'd twenty Years of Age, he ran away from his Master, and loitered, for some time, about the Countryside. In June, 1750, the Master Harlow died. And at Martinmas after, the said Whitworth did hire himself out to another Master at *Retford*. Yet he did not attain Twenty Years of Age until one year after this second arrangement commenc'd. The Sessions Court being of the opinion that Whitworth did not gain a settlement in the said town of *Retford*, they reverse the original Order.

Upon *Monday* the 13th of last Month a Motion was made by Mr. *Taylor White*, to quash this Order of Sessions: for after the Master's death, the Apprentice was at Liberty to hire himself. "Apprenticeship is a PERSONAL *Trust* between the Master and Servant." *Eyre* says this, in *I Salk.* 66.

*Mr. Wilmot* candidly owned that he *could NOT defend* the Sessions Order. But to the *original* Order he made one Objection—

That the PARISH of *Eakring* is at first mentioned; but the order charges, “And has lately intruded himself into *your said* “TOWN of *Eakring*.” That therefore it is uncertain whether *Eakring* be a *Town*, or a *Parish*; which are quite different Things.

THE THREE JUDGES held the objection to be over nice, and over-ruled it.

*Order of Seffions* QUASHED

*Original order* AFFIRMED

The Work being done and the Prothonotary agreeable to my Departure, I stooped to collect my Effects and strode briskly out the Door into an evening perfectly brisk as to match the said Stride. It was six Weeks since my Arrival in London, myself a loan Piece from the Lincolnshire Quarter-Sessions Justices to whom I was employ'd as a Notary Clerk. The King's Bench had sought help in producing summaries of several Easter Term Cases in advance of James Burrow's schedul'd visit to update his new Compendium. And I came on recommendation from Lincolnshire, a young man with an earn'd Repute for Memory and love of Law.

I was due no Credit, as it happen'd, for pouring over Court Records and distilling all I learn'd into useful Accounts of Arguments and Rules. No, the good James Burrow would claim it all as the Product of his abundant Genius. On the basis of his Reputation—gleaned from Lincoln's

Inn gossip—I doubted James Burrow would so much as look at my Drafts before dedicating them generously to his Brethren. I realized I could probably include anything within the Summaries. Indeed, if *these very words*, words I've begun to slip into my draft of *Eakring*, are one day seen and read, my guess will be proved correct.

I rushed to meet my Driver. The Court had secur'd for me one seat in a Stagecoach along the Great North Road, and thereafter I was to borrow a Horse in Doncaster. My bag was full of Notes and Drafts, which Drafts I was to perfect whilst back in Lincolnshire and send to London by Michaelmas Term. My fondest memories of that voyage are of the Stilton Coaching Inn, at whose vivid wood Bar I consumed an overabundance of Thrale Porter and promptly fell asleep. This moment achieved its singular fondness of recollection from the fact that Stagecoach Sleep was so hard to come by. I resolv'd never to traverse so many miles again.

When at last I arrived home to a cloudy midday, I first checked in on my Father. I spread a salve over the sores on his neck and apologized at his every faint Wince. I then hurried East towards the Homely Hen, aiming to secure a seat at the Fore, where the Tavern's Smells are favourably mixed with Mablethorpe's famous summer Winds turning off the North Sea.

And whom should I meet at the door but one Ainsley Kent, himself a former Lincolnshire clerk now retir'd to a life of occasional Fishing and frequenter staid Reflexion.

“Good evenin’ there, Ives. Been a fair while! I’m stepping out for relief. Seated at the back,” Kent offered, limp Fingers pointing the Way.

I sidl’d, reluctant, towards the Table. The Hen was brim-full of sailors just arriv’d. By their speech I gathered them to hail from somewhere Southwards.

A Drink later, the tavern Lute was out and passed to and fro between its regular Pluckers. The youngest settled on an and old and lively Tune. And here came Kent, squeezing deftly through the Seamen in those ridiculous silver-buttoned Sloppes, looking relieved and cheery around the Eyes.

But the Cheer wilted, and Kent summoned stale air from deep in his Stomach to shout, “EY! Whatrye sitting at that Table for?” his Voice breaking Scottish for full Effect. A baffled pause seized the Tavern, which as a whole had been listening though its Individuals had not.

“Did you not say to sit at the back?”

“Altogether wrong, Ives. I told you I, *I* was sitting here.” Kent exhal’d a soft staccato Chuckle.

The Lute started up again. More and more the Smells were of Grease and sweating Bodies. Of its own Accord, my Face scrunched up beneath the Nose, and I regarded my Friend with affectionate Impatience.

“Ah, the London Justices would say that’s over-nice. Thrust was clear enough. Overruled and quashed, I say. Now come sit down.”

“Oh quash yourself,” beaming, Ainsley Kent sat and rested his arms on the rough wood, lacing his thick Fingers, continuing presently, “I am of

course eager to hear about London—but first tell me, how have you kept yourself? And Miss Davies? Pat? Mason? Ol’ Haystack Henry? God! No, you do enough reporting . . . tell me only of you.”

All his features were made large and loose-shadowed by the close lambent Candlelight. I spoke into his looming Nose:

“Seen kinder Days. Father’s bad stricken with the King’s Evil. Swollen and Blotched and as like as not to live through Saint Swithin’s Day.”

“Terrible thing. And yourself on the Salary of the Third Clerk. I am sorry.”

I offered a humble nod, but Kent was already going on:

“I do happen to know the Gentleman leading the restoration of the old Abbey past Lowick Lane. Books in the Basement need clearing. For pay, of course.”

And it was at that precise Time that the Light outside had dwindled so low as to be eclipsed, in a fast, discernable Inversion, by the glow of the Tavern, and against the newly dark Windows the Hen’s orange Belly achieved a mystickal Radiance.

“Cleaning St. Antony’s? Well that’s rather far from my Station, I’d venture to say.”

“He’s looking for a learned Englishman, Ives. A learned Englishman. One to do the Work but with enough good Wits to spot the Volumes worth retaining.”

“Like the fine priest from the Quixote?”

Kent curled his lips, and out of them rolled a cough-laced laugh.

“Yes! Yes, Ives! You know that’s *exactly* how he put it. The Priest! Oh, oh, oh,” in descending Pitch, releasing Mirth as a slow leak, “but how is the Work, then, in London?”

“Much the same as here—I find it tiring, to be true and honest. And I cannot help but trouble over certain of the plights of my Countrymen—nor indeed the few too many philosophickal Quirks of our sort of Justice.” With that I reached for an Ale-glass that had just resolved out of the smoke.

“Quirks! How do yaah mean?” Ainsley Kent needled, feigning surprise.

“Ah, there’s Quirks a-plenty. Precedent and Authority, for one—or two. We hold fast to them, to their knots and shaded reasonings, tho’ the future calls us down a finer Path. And why? Tho’ I myself can think of a few meager virtues, I posed this to Justice Grenville, and do you know how he replied?”

I summoned a dour, dripping timbre and launch’d into my renown’d impression of the elder J. Grenville:

“‘Why, that esteem’d Principle finds no less Authority than our common Law; it is a rich Tradition with deep Roots.’

“Ah, but Ains, tha’ self-supporting Thinking has driven me mad e’er since! Not veer from the Past because our Foregoers chose not to veer from the Past? We might as well agree Trespass is wrong *because it is wrong*. Staked in a Bed of loose Sand, I say.”

“It’s a thought indeed, Ives, a thought indeed,” Kent muttered, mediumly perplex’d, his Face working through the Logic of it.

Behind him went a fat Sailor edging limp and heavy toward a Barrel whilst somewhere a friendly Soul plucked a slow Work Song. We all joined in. “*If this be our Ship! . . .*” until it was really acheivedly dark.

\* \* \*

Down into the Reaches of St. Antony’s Abbey I carried a long Candlestick. I recall well that first Descent. From the base of the stone stair, stretching out through the Earth, an arched corridor at a slight slope. Hanging off the hall, vast Chambers of Shelves overstuffed with several infinities of old Books. Stepping into the first such Chamber, visibly up to the task, me, Ives, dressed in cream, moth-gnawed Daywear suited to the Occasion.

Bare efficiency occupied my mind to the exclusion of much else besides. Any book unrecognis’d or unworthy joined a Heap under the fixtures at the corner. Ruthless, I scoff’d at disreputable Printing Houses and amateur Writers, *into the fire with ye*, but of course there was to be no fire but charitable Donation. The most damning Fate of all, I reason’d.

Books covered three of the Room’s walls, and I made quick work of the first. The second face of shelves was veritably caked in the fine Powder of Too Much Time, and Dust spun off the Edges of each Volume as I pulled them out by the Spine. No, no, no, pronounced I, aloud, whilst joyously tossing Book after Book over my shoulder from atop the ladder. Consigned

to the fires of Charity from a failure to spark Recognition in the learned Mind employ'd to the Task.

At about the twelfth straight Consignment—a streak of unusual length—I paused to take careful stock. All twelve appeared to be Volumes in the same Series. I pulled out the next Book—the same faded Ochre of the past twelve, but with a black Thirteen raised on the Spine—and opened it, Fingers cleaving against the resistance of the Pages. And imagine my Surprise when I immediately recognized it to be book of legal Cases and Court Opinions! *Thirty Hogsheads of Sugar v. Boyle*. I flipped forward. *The Grotius Sheafe Master*. Cases indeed! Apparently English. That I, the notary Ives, should encounter such an apt Oddity was a serendipity only ever realis'd in dusty Abbeys.

Inspecting the inside Cover, I noted a title: *United States Reports Volume 13*. And indeed on second inspection the Spines all read U.S. REPORTS in slight lettering. Confused at the pseudonymous Jurisdiction, I stepped down the Ladder to grasp the extent of the series. The whole Wall was an Expanse of numbers and grey-caked ochre. My darting Eyes immediately sought the end: Volume 712, every bit as worn as the rest. I left the Volume in place, already coughing, not wanting to stir up any more Dust—and more unsettl'd than I cared to admit.

\* \* \*

I took Tea up in the Cloister, alone. Out of the Calefactory, one of a few foci of the Abbey's restoration, rang Voices and sharp Hammer hits.

Mazarine blue Butterflies skimm'd on overgrown Grass, and my thoughts ventured up and a few leagues east, down Locksley Road and past Leighton mill, back to my Father, who until Lammas last had held Nature in holy Regard, but for whom all Beauty now stirred the Stomach—butterflies and music and rotting Skate heads all indistinct manifestations of the world's own illness. He was needful of a warmer climate by Christmas. Perhaps Brighton, or wherever the United States were. I drained the last of the Tea, whereupon several Flowers caught in my Teeth. A young woman employ'd to watch over the Premises presently came and took the Cup from my Hands.

\* \* \*

Try to comprehend my Disappointment when, back among the mysterious Books and again conceal'd from the meridian Sun, I came to understand that the United States were in fact the United Colonies, and that the Cases in those Volumes were of necessity fictitious, being as they were Records from Years and morrows not yet seen. What a grand, wasteful Project of insurrectionist Literature! And how had it ended up here, beneath the Nave of the Abbey Church? This delirious fantasy of an independent Pennsylvania quickly grew into a dwimorlic account of a Supreme Court in the Americas. Some New World madness must have seized the mind who, in imagining these countless Cases, fancied himself a prophet of rebellion. But it was precisely the Megalomania of one mind I saw maskt behind the putative Justices—the insane Conviction fueling an

ornate Artifice—that compell'd me to read on, flipping fast through Volumes to grasp the World envision'd in that Wall of Books. I perceived an admirable lunacy in the devotion to Cause that might prompt a Man to dedicate himself—for how long? I shudder'd to contemplate it—to the creation of these perverted Histories from the wrong Direction of Time.

Curious, obsessive details imbued the Volumes with realism. Certain of the choices sufficed to befuddle me entirely. Listing the Slaves of yet-unborn Patrick M'Cutchen furthered which Colonial End? And a dream of American Slavery yet alive in 1834 was a dark augury indeed. I could not discern a Purpose or Reason to it. But Obsession is infectious, and there were hours yet on the Candles. I fashioned a seat from the charity pile Stacks and began a methodical Study of Volume Forty-Five. The Pages were brittle, clumped in sets of twenty to fifty. I handled them with care, imagining the deft touch required to separate the blue Wings of the Mazarines above. I dared not open the Pages that seemed truly fix'd together.

Curiosity turned to apprehension upon reaching *Rhode Island v. Massachusetts*. The Year of Our Lord 1846—ah, the preposterousness of those digits! The Print that caught my Attention read, “In 1754, William Murray, then attorney-general, afterwards Lord Mansfield, was consulted by Connecticut . . .” I at once recognized the name. Murray was indeed attorney-general of England, but had only just risen to that Office several Months ago. The Book seem'd far older. Of course, a perceptive Prognosticator might have predicted Murray's ascension from his tenure

as solicitor-general, but even that fact seem'd too recent for inclusion in such worn and brittle Pages. I resolved to seek further mentions of modern dates, aiming to disprove the prophecies of these U.S. Reports by apprehending them in some small Error of prediction.

Alas, the next Volume, forty-six, made passing Reference to “the case of the *Vrow Dorothea*,” from a Court of Admiralty—again in 1754. I was very near *certain* that I had spoken with a Barrister from Ipswich about a legal Squabble involving that very Ship. And this Exchange could have been no more than a half-year ago. The sour Air thinn'd out some, and I fell Victim to the slow Suffocation that attends apprehension of the Unthinkable. Reason gave way to Magick, and in that great rearranging of my Mind, partickles of Fear came loose and collected in my Heart.

The bright Vault of Sky that greeted me as I emerged Aboveground, pallid and chewing the soft Inside of my Cheek, seem'd a betrayal. I had been so sure that it was Night. Wincing, I dragged my legs toward a footpath, which the East Scriptorium broodingly overlook'd, and tied and cross-tied a loose string on my shirt-side. I loped along, unbalanced from the roiling Tumult twixt my Ears. Instructions to the right leg appear'd diverted to the left, and vice-versa, and indeed a Sense of Vice-Versa at its most Universal had seep'd deep and far into the Afternoon. Home I stumbled. A north Wind picked up and invited the Trees to join in a sympathetick Sway.

\* \* \*

I found Father on the Floor of the Bedroom spitting small flyspecks of Blood onto the side of the Chamberpot. Draping him on my Shoulder I heaved him up toward the Bed, whereupon he cried out and clutched at his Throat, breaking open a halfpenny-size Lesion that hung off his Adam's Apple. I fought hard against my revulsion as the Blood streaked my forearm, finally succeeding in laying him down. I turn'd away quick and brought my hand to my mouth, and I remained turn'd toward the wardrobe long after, unable to cry and unwilling to vomit.

The rest of that Evening saw me sitting at the bedside, wrestling Disgust. In watching him drained of life and strength, the name *Father* had ceased to fit comfortably and I began to regard him simply as Robert—his given name, one he shared with an uncountable many ordinary Men. It was an effective Defence. I felt less and less a responsible Party, less and less personally implicat'd by the Decay in my family Tree.

Some ten or fifteen dogs milled outside in a wide circle and yelped, diving to the ground and coming up mud-cover'd and a-glimmer. I looked out at the slow churn of matted fur and thought principally of the Room in St. Antony's.

“Father. Robert,” I whispered, nominally to his relaxed face. “Do we honor the Past because we cannot remember the Future? Might we avoid years of Injustice if we but knew the Principles that would bring those Harms to a Conclusion? I think our Salvation lies in Lands across the Sea, Robert, in Turns of the Stars to come!”

Ah, that room, that shelf of Secrets! I could bear it no longer; I left Robert's side and, donning an Overcoat, scuttled West into the Night and its Chorus of Insects.

\* \* \*

I became a happy Captive of Prophecy. Night after night, I escap'd into the Ground and launched my mind toward the World to come. The words of Todd and Story became the language of my thoughts. Contemporary English grew stale and stilted.

Through the pages of the U.S. Reports, the history of that Nation attain'd an intoxicating grandeur. References to events perhaps more relevant to myself—a coming Conflict with Spain and France—seemed petty in juxta-position to an American Civil War still a hundred years out. In the story of America, I cast the Justices as gods—sometimes capricious, their words ever divinely alluring.

The count of States grew to forty-eight. My Head filled with grand notions of Democracy and hard-won liberty. I began my own record of their written Constitution, filled in piece-by-piece as I happened upon relevant quotations. Certain developments were truly shocking—a franchise for women, and, eventually, women on the Supreme Court! Their words I studied with particular care, those goddesses, seeking to resolve the Dissonance between my heart's trepidation and the wisdom of the future.

\* \* \*

I traversed my life above as a phantom, floating below the sweep of smeared clouds red in the evening and through the puffs of ship-steam on the wind. At Quarter-Sessions, I fought the urge to stand up and say something—what? I wondered—as I dutifully took down the roll from writs pleading coverture as abatement. I looked with disaffected disappointment upon eager faces gathered around the gallows. But nothing compared to the heavy sadness I began to perceive or impute upon the faces of young girls. I yearned to tell them of a faraway future. A contempt for my own time formed and hardened within my heart.

No longer did I harbor any delusions that my prophecies could effect some great Justice in England; the future—with its sins and measured pace—was utterly set. I came to this realization while observing a windmill and recalling all that I had read about the coming age of electricity. I soon fashioned a makeshift bed inside the room of prophecy, and filled a corner with my clothes. The nuns, who had begun to return to the Abbey, came to regard me as the mad hermit who lived below the Church. They were not entirely wrong.

The count of states climbed to fifty-one, and of amendments to thirty, and the language of the opinions continued to change, trying my comprehension—but I was a rapt and tenacious student.

\* \* \*

The dark halls beneath St. Antony's became my castle. I annexed a small room for the storage of bread and cured meats. And a corner at an L-bend in the hall for my writing desk. Whole weeks during Court recess transpired for me without a glimpse of English sky. I hailed passing stonemasons—who used my domain as a shortcut between buildings—to ask whether it was night or day, and attempted to adjust my patterns of sleep accordingly. I waged a losing battle against timelessness.

The more enmeshed within the space I became, the more I had the sense that something unseen nudged around the corners. I regularly woke up to find a chair out of place, a trouser folded the wrong way, or a wedge of cheese in the icebox shrunk azimuthally. Fiercely protective of my U.S. Reports, I began a ritual of counting all seven hundred and twelve of them each time I reentered my library-bedroom.

I spent many nights or days lying awake in my bed, my eyes making no distinction between open and closed. I floated breathless in the black waters of possibility around me, imagining America—always America. Her terrain rolled out green and glimmering—shocks of red rock and flat sweeps of white, crisscrossed by rivers wide as cities that splintered into tributaries as they climbed uphill and spilled into snowmelt mountain lakes.

One night between these dreams I saw a silhouette at the threshold of the room, and I was too far away in spirit to reach or call out.

\* \* \*

When I did venture back up to Mablethorpe to restock food and ink, I was shocked to find myself in 1754. Dragged out of America, my brain a thawing pool, I stared vacuously at townsfolk who attempted conversation. One morning I walked to the dockyard and peered out at a primeval horizon, undulations of ancient waters. Terror gripped me, and I ran back to St. Antony's. In that abbey, mind commingled with text, I was happy. Tales of 2050 calmed my nerves and drew me West. My chair became a seat on a sky-train in New York City.

\* \* \*

*Marion v. Washington* (2054) brought an end to my happiness. The majority opinion, penned by Justice Holland, started out normal enough, but had this one startling bit that said, "In the years since the discovery of the *Eakring* case and commentary, a debate has seized the courts and academy." My heart of course faltered when I read and recognized the name. *Coincidence*, I offered myself in appeasement. The Abbey air again seemed to thin out and my heartbeat went haywire.

Holland went on, "We recognize the significance of this case, being the first case in this Court postdating the *Eakring* discovery and quoted therein. It has been argued that 'these words are not our own' (*Rex v. Eakring* (1754) (quoting *Marion v. Washington* (2054)))." My poor brain sputtered and balked at the quote—this quote? *Who was quoting whom?*

“The parties have put before us two lines of precedent, compelling opposite results: one drawn from this Court’s holdings in *Sandbar* and *McCormick*, and one from a supposed future case—the aforementioned *Catal*—whose summary in the famous *Eakring* artifact suggests a marked departure from the rule in *McCormick*. But if the *Catal* rule is the future, it must one day obtain on the force of its own reasoning, not on bootstrapped acceptance of its own eventual rightness.”

I scrambled out into the corridor and up the stairs.

I was stark naked before a whole host of histories unwritten, ripped out of Eighteenth Century Mablethorpe to sit before posterity and be judged. I wheeled around, or the earth did, but among the stables and the refectory and the several nuns cupping tallow into candles, I saw nowhere to hide from time’s patient gaze.

Thunderclaps came screaming from far out at sea, and the smell of hot air settled upon the abbey grounds—a sure sign that the storm would venture east and miss us. The birds nested high above in the corbels—utterly unperturbed—knew this already. And one gull, stirring presently, shot me a look that fell just short of a smirk. Drowning in my own bewilderment, I let loose a physical cough.

I should mention that my father—Robert—died back in July.

Still staring at the bird, I called out to the nuns by the dormitory. One came over. I watched the grey serge tunic approach out of the corner of my eye and heard a voice inquire if I was quite alright.

“Tell me this—answer me this one thing, please, if you don’t mind,” my mouth turned slightly left in her direction and my eyes still fixed on the gull, “is there any hope at all in hiding from God?”

A predictable “no,” and so heartrendingly earnest, but I needed to hear it. I steeled myself against the gull’s judgement. I drew a breath against the wind and turned toward the Church.

\* \* \*

Faraway across the Atlantic in the Twenty-First century, the cat was out of the bag, it seemed. In each new Volume, every case I turned to spent most of its pages ruminating on *Eakring*—and by extension, on me. If I didn’t feel so sick over it, I might’ve been flattered. There is a word, sometimes employed by the Justices in the mid-Twenty-First Century, which felt apt: *blah*. *Eakring* awaited me at every turn—

*AMI v. U.S.* (2060):

“*Eakring*’s authenticity has not been seriously in doubt since 2052. But Petitioners would not merely have us recognize this; rather, they invite us to contort our reasoning to conform to mere inferences of future precedent they argue are evident from *Eakring*’s quotations of *U.S. v. Contratech*

(2069)—a case we have not yet decided, based upon a controversy not yet arisen. At oral argument, counsel for petitioners pleaded their inability to omit this argument from the brief because of a paragraph in this decision—namely, this paragraph—excerpted in *Eakring*. We are not amused. The Constitution grants us no power to reason from the future.”

*Landers v. Gonzalez* (2063):

“We now come to the part of the opinion quoted in *Eakring*.”

And, ineluctably, *U.S. v. Contratech* (2069):

“To the extent that *AMI* is inconsistent with this rule, it is overruled. But we remind the parties that the decisions of this Court are our own; *Eakring* has proved no more than a prophetic sketch, and we are not bound by its predictions. We will demonstrate: the word ‘blueberry’ appears nowhere in *Eakring*, and yet this paragraph is quoted in full. Instead, *Eakring* sees ‘cuttlefish’ take the place of ‘blueberry,’ and ‘masonry’ the place of ‘cuttlefish,’ and so on. Make no mistake; our destiny is our own.”

Those words from Justice Fischer were among the most peculiar yet, because of course I *had* read the word ‘blueberry,’ and thereafter

transcribed that paragraph exactly as it appeared in the worn volume that lay stiff in my hands. Look for yourself: it says “blueberry,” clear as day. The rules for my colloquy with the future were becoming incomprehensible.

Hoping to return to a survey of posterity’s wisdom uncluttered by self-reference, I resolved to not quote—to resist even naming—the next several cases I read, ensuring that my prophesied excerpts could not divert the line of reasoning back to consternation over *Eakring*. But it was to no avail. *Eakring* figured centrally even in those cases that could not quote themselves by way of my pen. References to a litigious, minor political party born out of the debate became commonplace: The Children of Whitworth. *Oh boy*, I thought, anachronistically.

But things really started to go off the rails at about Volume 700, approaching the Twenty-Second Century. The Children of Whitworth, having won the Presidency, filled the Court with sympathetic minds—no longer anxious about reasoning from future precedent. Citing, though not quoting, a future Amendment to the Constitution—future to them, not merely to myself, mind—the Whitworth Court reasoned that the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 2029 were unconstitutional, or one day *would be*, and struck them down as such in *Reegan v. Georgia* (2086). In support of this decision, they quoted—what else—*Eakring*: “We hold fast to [the past], to [its] knots and shaded reasonings, tho’ the future calls us down a finer Path. And why?”

I could not bear the responsibility. I consulted my own slapdash Constitution and confirmed the lack of any Amendment postdating *Reegan*. This, I reasoned, meant that I had yet to discover that Amendment in an even later case, whereupon I was fated to write it down in these very pages for the *Reegan* Court to find and reason backwards from. I became determined to frustrate that eventuality.

But what use was my attempt to steer a future already written? I looked up at the ceiling, drab and water-stained, which seemed to confirm my hopelessness. I recalled a sad and lovely lyric from a footnote in *Pleasant Grove City v. Sumnum* (2009), “Imagine there’s no countries, it isn’t hard to do, nothing to kill or die for . . .” and tried to fit it to a makeshift melody, which I sang, pleadingly, head canted up, to the church and sky above.

Ah—Blueberry! The strangest thud of epiphany. I started rocking my head, manically, trying to help my thoughts along with a physical nudge as they processed a truth now coming into focus. I grasped at last the nature of the room, of the prophecies. Not prophecy—history. The volumes were just what they seemed: old, worn out books. Impossibly old books: records of a United States from long ago—and contained therein, a memory of a yet older *Eakring*, of another Ives, who had read and transcribed “cuttlefish” instead of “blueberry.” And how far back did it go? Endless cycles of kings and revolution, of the whole history of the stars?

I started gathering volumes, able to hold four or five at a time against my thumping breast, and lugged them upstairs below the south

face of the calefactory. Day drained into night, and all the while I muttered names to myself, Martin Luther, George Whitworth, King George, Martin Luther King, imagining their birth and rebirth and despairing a bit at the poor memory of a world that forgot their names with its each recreation.

There came a moment when the pile of books on the grass had grown quite large and was caught suspended in the combined light of the lantern and the moon. The book-tower became a gnarled cathedral. The slightest dimming of the lantern saw the illusion drop away completely, and so in the changing light I circled 'round the books—now stone, now buckram—and split my sight between both truths. I sought courage in the faces I could trace between the stars and kicked the lantern forward. Glass shattered and a flame caught, burning low and licking red. Down and back I continued, adding books to the inferno.

Windows in the dormitory came alight and several figures shuffled out. I squinted over at them, watched them point and mutter and wave their arms in concerned arcs. “This is my job!” I shouted, and again, “my job! I’m a learned Englishman!” I could feel that my eyes were wide to the point of completely crazy; they burned hot and dry in the light of the bonfire. Those nuns would never know the weight of real prophecy! “Is your God all-knowing, sisters?” I called, jeering. “Does he see our souls and future? Or has he just got a *damn good memory*?” We all ended up watching the blaze burn out to an amber glow. I stood and regarded the spilled ash of futures past, and the sisters inched closer, and I came to feel the lot of us had achieved an unspoken understanding. After a time, slaps

of cold from way above and the uneasy sight of the church towers, in the mid-night jutting and sepulchral, drove us all inside to our respective hiding holes.

When I awoke, I knew it was morning. I lit a candle and cast the light over at my empty shelves. Mostly empty. Totally empty, really, but for one lonely looking book, laying sideways, branded with a seven one two. I hadn't the courage to burn the grand finale. I approached 712 furtively. The bridge of my nose split little runnels of sweat and disappointment. 712 was warm in my hands and I was warm in its hands. We carried each other out and up and out again, settling by a pillar at the cloister. I opened to the very last case. Flowers bent towards me; there was a tightening, a tensing in the breeze and stone.

What a striking disappointment: a boring regulatory decision. No mention of *Eakring*, no ode to America. Something about carbon and the weather and little fractions of "degrees centigrade." I rushed through the final pages, hoping for some soaring passage, some new insight of justice, but even the language was a disappointment. It was an order written hastily—hurricane spelled with one r—and I resented the Justices (all nine!) who had signed off on something so inconsiderately mundane. America lost some of her luster. My set must have been incomplete; this could NOT be the last word of a great electric empire long dead and yet to come.

I marched, seething, out the heavy church door and stood—expectantly, contemptuously—before a tall oak tree. Small birds in gold

livery assembled on a branch and looked on knowingly, and the sky was all a desperate sort of blue.

And that was all. The next case—*Rex. v. Some Other Parish or Town*—begins as if everything were normal.

\* \* \* \* \*

Conspicuous silence. The library—suddenly more thing than place—somehow raised its eyebrows, *well?*, and awaited my reaction. My heart discerned a gravity in what I knew to be a hoax. Did the librarians know about this? *Hilarious!*

Alone among the stacks, get this, I actually smiled a big, dumb grin just to sell the feeling.

Could the universe have rebooted without changing hardly a thing? A contingent question, of course, just within the internal logic of this elaborate librarian's trick . . . . I frowned around at the shelves and offered up my palms to the low ceiling, as if to say "really?" And then I did say it:

"Really?"

If it's true, though. Time as turnstile. A cycle of *bang* and *crunch* and light and freezing dark. It's a thought indeed: copies of copies.

Somehow, I found myself back at my first-floor apartment at about 7PM, struggling with the keyhole. The door opened and out spilled a reservoir of cold air. I sat down on the kitchen stool and my posture broke and I kind of rested my chin on my thumb. *Fuck*, was how I felt.