expect. Though all the tests came back negative, Charette’s doctor suspected his high-stress lifestyle would eventually make him sick: “He told me I would die of heart attack or stroke within five years,” Charette says.

He quit his job the next day. Soon after, his then-wife got a job in eastern Oregon, where Charette still lives. While substitute teaching and mulling his next step, he enrolled in a pottery class and began to explore what would become his trademark style: pieces reminiscent of historical Yup’ik masks, but made from clay—the medium that appealed most to him—instead of wood. Since then, his work has won prestigious awards and been featured in a 2008 traveling exhibit of contemporary Native North American art.

His masks explore concepts such as the afterlife and the spirit world, Yup’ik mythology, family stories, and cultural commentary. “Phillip doesn't simply copy the historic masks,” says the Montana Historical Society’s Bill Mercer, who acquired one of Charette’s masks for the Portland [Oregon] Art Museum when he was curator for Native American art there. “It’s this wonderful, contemporary, updated version, transforming them into art but maintaining their sense of spiritual potency.”

Like older masks found in ethnology museums, Charette’s masks have a broad range of meanings and purposes. Some express ritual power; others are more like entertainment, encapsulating stories. “Just imagine that you don’t have any media—no television, nothing,” says Charette. “This was the media format for the Yup’it. Into it go stories, values, all the cosmology. It becomes a mnemonic device, the visual cue that helps you retain the knowledge.”

Charette often performs traditional Yup’ik songs and dances when he lectures. He also explains the meaning of the symbols in his work, shares insights from his research in the Smithsonian Institution’s Native American collections and elsewhere, and draws analytic comparisons to other artistic traditions. In this approach, he sees the imprint of his time at Harvard—and his interest in academia is not altogether defunct: he hopes to earn a master’s in fine arts and teach at the college level.

Charette traveled to the Smithsonian Institution in 2003 to view the museum’s Yup’ik holdings; the mask at left, from his Poisoned series, shows that trip’s influence and comments on the way museums handled Native American art objects, many of which have sacred value. Charette saw many Yup’ik masks that had been treated with arsenic as a pesticide when the museum acquired them, then further defiled by stamping them with the word “poisoned” once the dangers of topical exposure to arsenic became known.

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John Katz wants to track down the title and performer of a song, popular at Harvard in the 1960s, containing the lines, “It’s two blocks down from Albiani’s, that’s where I always spend my money, at the Harvard Coop.” (A Web search has suggested one possible source, the album The Harvard Lampoon Tabernacle Choir Sings at Leningrad Stadium.)

Send inquiries and answers to “Chapter and Verse,” Harvard Magazine, 7 Ware Street, Cambridge 02138, or via e-mail to chapterandverse@harvardmag.com.

Chapter & Verse
Correspondence on not-so-famous lost words

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