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Bottom Right: Verso

"Ehhhee, aaww ett."

"Good. Let me know if this gets too painful," said the kind dentist un reassuringly.

"Buhhh huuuu wuuuuhh ..."

"You can just raise a finger."

"Buhhh whuuuu whii ooo ...," I added.

"I can switch to another part of your mouth, or apply more of the local." Scott's translation skills were brilliant. Of course, he had had this conversation before. "We" were doing a deep cleaning. I wasn't exactly sure what that meant --did he do shallow cleanings?-- but I assumed it meant my teeth were in bad shape, hygienically speaking.

Having ensconced me in the big chair in the assigned room, the Filipino hygienist had rubbed "the local" over all four quadrants of my gums, back and front, applied the lip balm, and inserted the saliva-sucking gizmo.

"Don' worry," she had said. "Even though you haven't been here for a whole year, he's very gentle." Was there an undercurrent of sadism in that semi-sequitur? She left the room before I could reply.

When Scott came in, perhaps because she had called my attention to the elapsed year, he did look different: paunch a little bigger, some new wrinkles, hairline a little higher. Nevertheless, the cleaning began as they all do with this dentist --i.e., with nothing that marked it as "deep," at least as far as I could tell. Maybe it would just take longer and cost (the insurance company) more. Over the years, all his major projects --bridges, crowns and such- have been perfectly conceived and executed --again, as far as I can tell. That is, nothing ever hurts, fits wrong, or falls apart or out. Even the way he moves around your mouth seems expert: gentle, but sure. His fingers dance.

Why, then, you ask, had I not been to the office for a year? Well, not that avoiding a trip to the dentist needs to be explained, but in this case there was an extra reason: Scott's conversation is stupefying. Of course, a "conversation" with your dentist is mostly a monologue, but his are

banal and cliched, and he motors on for however long the treatment takes. I'm sure you don't want a transcript. Suffice it to say that today's recital featured the academic achievements of his two adolescent boys (Pride and Joy); his wife's generous, but time-consuming, involvement in the civic affairs of their suburb (a real trooper); how he hit a deer (big, no, huge) on the road one (dark, but not stormy) night; and the family ski vacation (quality time, broke the piggy bank).

Bottom Right: Recto

As Scott nattered, picked, and scraped away, my thoughts drifted onto topics no less banal than his: the shortest route home that would cover all the shopping; whether Mary, my wife, was coming home directly from school (she teaches fourth graders) or going to the gym first; and so on. After that, they (my thoughts) settled onto a recent death. Although the deceased was a person my wife and I had known for a long time, I can't really call him a friend, an acquaintance, or by any other common relationship term. Since he is –was—mildly famous, I've changed some of the facts about him, including his name, to "Charles Goldstein." Charles was among the unquiet dead. About five weeks before my cleaning, on a street here in Manhattan, age sixty-two, he had supposedly succumbed to an aneurism. I was about to say, as people do in such cases, that there had been no previous signs. But I can't really say that.

As Bill, his elder brother, a psychiatrist, put it at the memorial, which took place a week later in a large room above the antiques shop that once belonged to the family, "As far as we know, there had been no ... etc." A beat later, he added, "Then, again, there are many things about Charles we didn't –don't- know."

In fact, Charles Goldstein had been a longtime resident of London, an expatriate like Henry James, of whom he reminded me in other ways, principally in being an aesthete. Charles worked in the African Antiquities department of The Commonwealth and Dominion Museum (The C & D). He was a semi-renowned authority on wooden masks. Also like James, if it's not too precious to say so, Charles was someone whom we always seemed to see from the middle distance, which was also James' favorite –e.g. the opening of *Portrait of a Lady*.

The middle distance, even when you were right next to him, like the time the three of us --Charles, Mary, and I--were standing sipping tea on a bright, chilly winter afternoon at the kitchen counter in his lovely big house in the western (prosperous) part of the borough of Haringey, which is on the inner edge of outer London. Charles may have bought this manse, in which he rattled around, to house his personal collection –no, collections, for there were not only masks from several African countries, but vases, beautiful Chinese ones, and very old-looking pots (?Inca ? Aztec), into which I imagined him dropping his little secrets on little slips of paper like fortune-cookie fortunes. Everything, including the security system, was museum quality. What I mean by the middle distance is that Charles, who was also very short and slight, about the size of a smallish ten year-old, always gave you the feeling of being kind and cuddly, very close, yet a complete snob, not quite present. He was a boy-sized, sophisticated, reticent adult.

"Yeuhss," he remarked in his trans-national accent, "my muthah was especially fond of that one." The difficulty of transcribing this odd accent makes him sound like a jerk, but he was not a jerk, only a little stereotypical, perhaps, as transplants often are. He made the remark in response to Mary's quotation of a famous comment by Eleanor Roosevelt about teaching children to feel at home in the world. Charles' mother had been an acquaintance of Mrs. R's.

Bottom Left: Verso

By now, it was about twenty minutes into the cleaning. I think Scott had been ticking off his wife's current committee memberships.

“A bit wider, please?”

“Muuhh juhjh iii huuummg uhind.”

“Your jaw is coming unhinged? Ha ha, very funny. Okay, we’ll take a break.”

The sucker gizmo was removed, I obeyed the “rinse” order (not too much blood), and, perching on his stool, he segued into dialogue.

“So. How are Mary and Joan? The grandkids?”

“All fine, thanks, Scott.” (Joan is our grown daughter. Two grandkids.) I was trying to walk the line between being laconic and rude, on the theory that this was a way to hurry things along. More likely, it was a way for me to feel less helpless.

“How’s retirement treating you, Marty?”

Two months before, age seventy-one, after thirty-seven years, I had finally quit being an advertising copywriter, to concentrate on the things that matter, like reading the paper more carefully and finishing the crossword puzzle. In other words, I couldn’t face another day of trying to think up drop-down jingles to harass Internet users, or ridiculous TV spots to make viewers laugh while we sold them garbage. Of course, I had also made pots of money. My most famous contribution to American mass culture is probably the print ad I created for the Official Tourism Website of the Commonwealth of Virginia: “Yes, Santa Claus, there is a Virginia.” You must have seen that one, which they still run every January, with the picture of tired, sweating Santa lolling in his sleigh. Actually, it was a knock-off of an old Coca Cola ad. Trivial and not particularly original, but clever, that’s me.

“Can’t complain, Scott,” I replied. “As busy as ever. You know. I’m working my way through the list of things I have to do (and don’t want to).” This, of course, included coming to his office.

He chuckled. “I know. Ashley and I call that the ‘honeydew’ list: ‘Honey, do you mind mowing the lawn today? The sheep has indigestion.’”

That last quip was top-notch Scott. Not insincerely, I chuckled back, but said no more, hoping he’d get started again. The trouble with being retired, I’d already realized, is that it’s harder to pretend you’re on a tight schedule. I thought of flexing my jaws a few times to indicate my readiness to return to action. He made no move.

“How’s Mary’s crown holding up?” He had put it in the previous month. It was perfect, of course.

“Well, you know,” I rashly quipped, “uneasy lies the head, etc.” A joke like that is probably a vestigial occupational hazard. He looked alarmed.

“What do you mean? It doesn’t fit? What’s the pr ...”

“No, no, Scott. Sorry, a joke, a bad joke. Mary says the crown is perfect. Beautiful. As usual.”

However, my mistake was rewarded. Looking a bit miffed, but without further ado, he stood up, reinserted the sucker, and we got back to work.

Bottom Left: Recto

And I got back to Charles Goldstein. Charles did not walk, he meandered. On a cold early

Spring afternoon about fifteen years ago, he, Mary, and I had gone to Pocantico, the Rockefeller estate that permits visitors to walk around the lake and through the woods, where the plentiful horse droppings along the bridle paths remind the visitors “whose woods these are” —and aren’t. (My own origins are plebian.) Since Pocantico is near Charles’ parental home, after he had given us a nice lunch and a quick house tour (for my benefit), the three of us drove over to the estate. This plan had been formed when he had surprised us with a phone call. We were always dropping him notes, asking him to call when he visited the area, but he almost never did. A few years earlier, he had generously given us a week’s loan of his wonderful cottage in a hamlet not far from Arezzo. The notes were our expressions of gratitude.

Relatively speaking, we had a good time that day. Mary may have enjoyed it more than I did: hers was the Goldstein connection. From when she was six until thirteen, her mother had worked for Charles’ parents at the antiques shop. Every summer, the Goldsteins would invite the family, including her older brother Fred (and a hundred or so other people), to their posh annual lawn party, where she got to know Charles (who was her age) and his own older brother, Bill. I liked to imagine the four kids in their dress-up clothes, darting around the lawn, throwing food at each other, and playing hide-and-seek in the big garden. Later, Fred and Bill went to the same college, and they are still in touch. As I said, we had a relatively good time that day. Mary is on the shy side, so what I experienced as an awkward conversation may have seemed normal to her. We were walking around the beautiful, irregularly shaped lake, ringed by trees just coming into blossom or leaf, when Charles asked about my work.

“How’s the advertising game these days, Marty? Do you find it interesting?”

Mary was walking between us, so the conversation went over her head —only literally, of course.

“Well,” I said, “some of the history is sort of amusing. Do you know about Freud’s nephew?”

“No, I don’t know about Freud’s nephew. Please tell me.”

“I think his name was Edward Bernays” (his name was Edward Bernays), and he was one of the inventors of both public relations and advertising.” (True.) “He created a campaign to sell cigarettes to women, in the 20’s, I think it was.” (It was.) Rockefeller was one of his clients, by the way.” (Also true.)

“You don’t say.”

Poor Mary must have heard the unfolding anecdote dozens of times. I owe her a little something for each repetition. “Well, yes. He dressed up hundreds of models and actresses as society dames, and paraded them down Fifth Avenue. Every single one of them was puffing away and carrying a placard that read “Torches of Freedom.” As I always did after springing the punch line, I chuckled. Mary tried not to look too long-suffering.

For a few moments, Charles did not reply. His brow furrowed. Then, he flashed his alarming grin, rictus-like, bony head, balding, lips (thin) pulled back, a rat’s face in a mouse’s body. “Hmm,” he said. “Well, yes. That’s completely disgusting.”

Should I have felt chastised? I did, but I just gave him my “that’s life” shrug, and let it go. Next we drifted into one of the silences that seemed to mark every conversation with Charles. After another minute or two, silent time was up: he looked as uneasy as Mary looked and I felt. So he broke the spell, sort of.

“This is a lovely place, isn’t it?”

What could you say to that? “Yes, very. What kind of tree is that over there?” Or “Look at that cute squirrel! The little gray one?”

Something else of note happened near the beginning of that same London visit when Mary quoted Mrs. Roosevelt. One morning when we came down early, a young African was sitting in the breakfast nook with Charles, drinking coffee and laughing. The man was tall, thin, encased in an oversized tan car coat, and strikingly handsome. To me, he looked like one of those musicians or wallet sellers from --Mali? Senegal? After a few polite words with us, he shook hands with Charles and took his leave. Charles explained that the man had needed to see him about an exhibition and that he had a plane to catch, so he had come to the house early. This was one of the first times Mary and I wondered whether Charles was gay. Not that we cared; we just wondered.

Top Left: Verso

Can you escape any cleaning without pain? I raised my finger, Scott stopped, and he pulled out the spit sucker.

“I’m so sorry, Marty,” he said, removing his goggles and looking pained, himself. He really does hate inflicting pain, which must be a major problem for a dentist.

I rinsed several times, until the green water turned from red to pink. “Don’t worry, Scott. I mean, what are you supposed to do?”

He shrugged, still looking pained. “There’s a deep pocket in this part of your mouth. I had to do a lot of scraping beneath the gum line. But I’ve almost got it now.”

“Better just get it over with, Scott. Let’s go.”

I reinserted the sucker, and very slowly and carefully, inflicting a bit less pain, he resumed. As he worked and talked away, I thought, but did not (of course) say, “When you saw there was a pocket, why didn’t you just stop and put on more of the anesthetic, you dumb bastard? Or is all that gentleness crap just an act, you fucking boring brain dead passive-aggressive mother fucker?”

That was the kind of childishness that got me through the five or ten minutes it took him to finish the quadrant. I always wonder if Scott can read my thoughts as well as he can understand my incoherent attempts at speech. I did know enough not to say, “Uh oo aw ere uz a ocket eye int oo op...”

“Finally!” he announced, removing the goggles again and smiling. “Rinse. Another break? The worst is over, the rest should be easy.” I must have looked surprised, because he sheepishly added, “Oops, they taught me never to say that, in dental school.”

“Don’t worry, Scott, you have an excellent chair-side manner.”

“‘Chair-side manner.’ Ha ha, very good, Marty. I’ll have to remember that one.”

As we continued working our way around my mouth, forging ahead, tacking and scaling, and bound now for the final quadrant, a ridiculous metaphor popped into my head. We were Master and Commander, headed for the Galapagos (the final quadrant), there to see the promised tortoises. And what were these tortoises, in the metaphor? Who knows? Who cares? Except, on a smaller scale, Charles looked like one.

A week after the memorial, I thought I saw him on a street in midtown. I say “thought,” because it was his back I thought I saw. I missed the light, so I impatiently watched the back, small, slightly rounded, and clad in a fancy khaki windbreaker a little too big for it (the back), moving away in a crowd. When the light changed, I hurried after, but too late, I had lost him. It would have been just like Charles to use spycraft to disappear in a situation like that, when someone was trying to ascertain an important fact about him –whether he was really dead.

The early evening memorial, on Monday, May 5th, 2008, at the antiques shop, had been crammed with busy, clever-looking people, mostly antiques and arts people. Or so said our source, an old college classmate of Mary’s who, coincidentally, had worked for the Goldsteins, then been inherited by the people who bought the shop when Charles’ dad, who outlived his wife by a decade, finally passed at the (ripe old) age of whatever. I had never met Charles’ parents, so what I have to say about them comes from Mary. His mother had been a popular, sociable woman, fat, ugly, loud and lovable, but not really into mom-hood, or so the story goes. As for Mr. G., Mary remembered him from the childhood parties as a man who could eat a peach without getting juice on his chin.

Like many other memorials, this one began with lots of food, drink, and milling around. Our confidante pointed out a few of the semi-famous and a few who were “brilliant.” She seemed a little hectic today, perhaps because she had really liked Charles. (Mary and I do not know whether she has a significant other.) Predictably, the theme of several conversations I overheard was how shocking the death had been. Since many of the guests were older than Charles (had been), some considerably, their voices were loud, so it was easy to eavesdrop. There seemed to be a fair amount of superstition mixed in with the expressions of shock. Few people like to be reminded that they can die at any moment, especially as the odds grow shorter. The catered refreshments, however, were top-of-the-line. Trying not to look too happy, I gorged on my favorite finger food, three or four pig-in-a-blankets with deli mustard.

After about half an hour of milling, eating, and drinking, we were called to order by Bill Goldstein. Standing at the street end of the room between the undraped floor-to-ceiling windows, he abruptly opened the ceremony, if that’s what it was. He spoke briefly and calmly about, yes, the unexpectedness of Charles’ passing, and pointed out how little even his family had known about him. I was surprised by Bill’s matter-of-factness. Yes, he is a shrink, so perhaps he has been schooled to dispassion, but he is also a very warm, feeling sort of guy, big and fat like his mother, the anti-Charles. I only know Bill slightly, through Fred (my brother-in-law), who missed the memorial because he was in Washington arguing for or against some piece of legislation. When he had completed his remarks, Bill pulled a rabbit from his hat.

“This is Mark Mitchell,” he said. “Mark probably knew Charles better than any of the rest of us.”

A very fit man in his mid-to-late fifties, medium height, shiny bald head, tan and California-looking, edged through the standing crowd toward Bill, who shook hands and stepped aside. By now, the sky was turning indigo. Mitchell wore fancy jeans, a shiny black turtleneck, and an expensive-looking tweed jacket (no elbow patches).

“Hi,” he said. “I’m Mark Mitchell. Oh, Bill just told you that.” A few in the crowd tittered. Mark spoke uninflected, educated American, and he was visibly nervous, sweating and shaking. “You’ll have to excuse me. I’m nervous --for two reasons. First, I was Charles’ lover for about seven years. And, second, I don’t think most of you knew he was gay.” He paused for a moment to make eye contact with some of us, then added, “Well, yes, he was, you know.”

Having regained his composure, Mitchell took it from there. Soon we were all in the palm of his hand. Later, though, I might as well admit, I had second thoughts, and thinking back now on what he said, I’m so incensed that, although the memorial was only about six or seven months

ago, I can't even remember most of his actual words.

The gist was that Charles had spent much of his early adult life cut off from his own sexuality and wealth. When Mitchell met him, in 1978 (how? where?), Charles, in his early thirties and a few years out of graduate school, was living in a dark, tiny apartment in London, futilely sending out resumes for a museum job. Early on, Mitchell pointed out that his parents could secure a good position for him with a single phone call. He quipped to us that Charles' own efforts had been "like fishing with a drop line in the middle of the ocean." Ha! Ha! He then told us how he was the gardener (my metaphor) for Charles' belated sexual flowering (or de-), and how he persuaded him to approach his parents' friends in the London museum world, which is how he got the job at The C & D. He also persuaded him, as he put it (the vulgar twit), "to start living large": Charles bought the house and embarked on a course of quiet philanthropy that was an extension of his personal generosity. The part of the story I like best came near the end. In ostentatious pain, Mitchell related how, after several years, he and Charles had split up, because "even then, Charles was never emotionally capable of giving me the commitment I needed." Whatever that meant. Arithmetic suggests that the African came along about seven years later. Good for Charles! I hope there were others. I obviously haven't tried to mute my intense dislike of this speech. I think I find it so distasteful and implausible because the narrator is the hero, the fearless liberator, and because nowadays the narrative arc has become such a (tired) cliché'.

At the time, however, most people seemed to react very positively, coming up afterward to offer their thanks, while Bill stood to one side, a fixed, inscrutable smile on his face. What these people's motives were, I can only guess. There was probably some guilty homophobia, but many of the attendees were themselves clearly gay. (I worked with gay people at the Agency for years, so I don't consider myself naive about this.) Many of us may even have enjoyed the muted salaciousness. A more innocent motive could have been the pleasure most people take from stories that appear to resolve mysteries. Mary and (to my shame) I were among those who waited on the receiving line afterwards to introduce ourselves and to warmly thank the speaker. Even worse, at one point during the speech I had been a voluntary participant. Early on, Mark had invited his auditors to interrupt him with observations and reminiscences, and when he reached the generosity theme, I raised my hand, and he called on me.

"I'm just curious," I said. "Over the years, how many of us present here tonight ever had the loan of Charles' house in Tuscany?" Two-thirds of the audience raised their hands, and there was a murmur of appreciative laughter.

Top Right: Verso

The cleaning was over. That is, the processes –paste, polish-- that mark the end of a cleaning, and I had been presented with the complimentary dental floss and toothbrush. ("How nice and clean your mouth is now, Marty," said the new blue toothbrush. "Keep up the good work!" added the un-waxed floss.)

"Well," said Scott, rubbing his hands together. "That's it, then." Another job well done. But, as I started to climb out of the chair, still perching on his stool, he stopped me in my tracks. "Before you go, Marty, do you mind if I ask you something?"

He sounded serious, so I sat back down. And he was serious -very. His younger son, age fourteen, had developed, in Scott's words, "a very bad problem." It turned out that, whichever one he had been, Pride or Joy, he had recently stopped being that.

"Adolescent-onset schizophrenia, bi-polar disorder," Scott recited in a miserable monotone, in answer to my "What's the matter?"

What can you say to that? I shook my head, letting my sympathy speak for itself. I confess that I also wondered, selfishly, why he had told me. Since I had been his patient for more than a decade, I shouldn't have been surprised, but I was. It occurs to me now that Scott is a much more open, generous person than I am. Then, I did say something. It sounded cold, but it just came out. "How can I help you with this, Scott?"

He shrugged and actually wrung his hands, looking as if he wanted to cry. "I don't know, Marty, I really don't. I'm at my wit's end. I seem to be sharing it with every one of my patients, even the ones I hardly know" --implying that I was not in that category.

Polite, useless conversation may have been called for: "When did you find out?" Or "How's Ashley taking it?" But that's not my style. "Are they prescribing lithium?" I asked.

"Yes," he said miserably.

"Do you have confidence in his doctor --doctors?"

"Yes." He spoke so softly I could barely hear him.

I looked him in the eye and shrugged, meaning, "Well, then, you have to try the lithium."

He put his hand on mine. "I know, I know. You're a smart man, Marty. Thank you very much."

And that was that. We stood up, he saw me out to the waiting room, nodded goodbye, then turned around and slouched back into the bowels of the office, back to the treatment rooms.

During the hour-and-a-quarter that the deep cleaning had taken, how could I have missed what must have been signs of Scott's burden? Had there been a stridency to his boastfulness about his family? Had his patter been more insistent than usual, maybe even a little hysterical? Had the sharp pain I felt when he was working on the pocket been caused by shaking hands? I can't say.

In the weeks that followed, there were two more Charles sightings. In both cases, I caught up with "him," then saw that I had been mistaken. I began to wonder how this delusion, if that's what it was, would end. They say it takes time to really believe in a death, especially an unexpected one, but that eventually you do. Then, the sightings stop, and the ghost wanders over into your dreams, accepting a more conventional role.

In Honolulu once, where I had gone on a company junket, one of the bosses from another branch was leaving on an earlier plane than everyone else. A few of us dutifully went out to the airport to see him off. As his plane disappeared, a friend from New York and I realized how awkward it had been saying goodbye to him.

"It's a lot easier," remarked the friend, "if you like the person."

I can't even say whether or not I really like(d) Charles Goldstein. But I kept chasing his back. Didn't I really believe he was dead? I can offer a few reasons for this semi-delusion: the suddenness of his demise, my doubts about the memorial speech, and one or two others. It boils down to this: I think I wanted Charles to be unknowable again, and to be alive, so we could keep on not knowing him.

Coda: The Four Quadrants Revisited

Almost seven months passed. To preempt another deep cleaning, I made an appointment with Scott (i.e. his receptionist) for a routine one. By now, my mental landscape had shifted.

Charles Goldstein's siren song was becoming less insistent. I saw look-alikes with decreasing frequency, and had reached the point where my reaction was, "Oh, God, another one!" Yes, I did have a dream in which Charles was part of a composite figure, half-attractive, half-annoying. It was a silly dream, and since most anxiety dreams have a large generic component, you don't really need to know any more about this one.

I was still struggling to make my peace with retirement. I read, I shopped, I cogitated. In September, Mary and I spent a lovely three weeks in Turkey, bookending a trip to the Black Sea region with three, then four, days in wonderful Istanbul. Without getting into a travel narrative, let's just say we were amazed at the layering of history in Turkey, which made Rome's seem like last night's TV news. There was also one of those small mishaps that surely befall many aging tourists: we forgot to return the key to our Istanbul hotel room. Then, when I mailed it back from New York, I had a fantasy about triggering a security investigation, the kind of fantasy that is another sure sign of you-know-what.

I'll spare you a tooth-by-tooth account of the second cleaning, which transpired on Tuesday, December 2nd, a week ago. The hygienist had the grace to avoid even unspoken expressions of "This is more like it." Scott seemed muted, melancholy. When (to atone for the unfeeling behavior of my previous visit) I asked about his son, he said the condition had turned out to be "blessedly mild." After a dicey start, they had regulated the lithium dosage, and he now seemed to be "managing better, thanks. Rinse, please."

"I'm sorry, Scott, I'm sure it's still very upsetting. But I'm glad things are looking up."

That was all I had time to say, but it loosened his tongue. As we resumed navigating the tartary coasts, he surprised me. After an unsurprising opening ("How's retirement these days, Marty?" Marty: "Urrrh rugg."), he made a little speech that completely caught my attention.

"You know, I can't imagine doing this forever. Don't get me wrong, I still love it. But I'm starting to think about the future. Hey, I'm almost fifty-eight."

Fifty or fifty-one, I would have guessed. My nasty streak prompted a mental comment: "Not on me, you won't, Buster, not with failing eyesight and shaking hands." But I was interested.

"No," he continued. "Honestly? What I like most about my profession is relieving people's pain. But I've been thinking, 'What next?'"

As best I could, I interrupted. "Errr erry ood aa ii." ("You're very good at it." I'll skip my subsequent replies.)

"Thanks. But what else am I qualified to do? I guess I could volunteer for Habitat for Humanity, but how would that make use of my skills? Lots of people can drive nails or hang sheetrock as well as I can. Or," he added sheepishly, "I suppose I could volunteer on an Indian reservation. But, frankly, I'd be depressed working on all those rotten teeth and stinking mouths every day, trying to repair the ravages of alcoholism and methamphetamine abuse." He paused the cleaning again to let me rest my jaw –or so he said.

I seized the moment. "Look, Scott, you're a good man. You could do wonders on an Indian reservation, I think you'd get a lot of satisfaction. Or why not teach somewhere? If you wanted to be altruistic about it, you could try to find a situation where you'd work pro bono with poor students, maybe dental students of color." (I thought the last phrase was funny, but I knew he wouldn't.) "Believe me, Scott, with your skills and dedication and your kind nature, you'll land on your feet."

He smiled and patted my hand, then went back to the scraping. The whole job only took about half an hour. When he was finished and was escorting me back to the reception area, a bright

idea popped into my head: I quoted Melville. Why? You really want to know? As an indirect reinforcement of sympathy? Associationally, with the Turkish vacation? As a demonstration of my deep cultural superiority to my interlocutor? Or as an attempt to maintain parity (retired advertising shill vs. active, top-flight dentist)? It was, as they say, overdetermined. Oh, yes, the quotation ...

The lawyer-narrator of *Bartleby, the Scrivener* is speaking with Turkey, his aging clerk, who gets drunk at lunch every day. From a blend of self-interest and altruism, the narrator suggests cutting Turkey's hours (and wages). To this, citing his advanced age, the clerk responds by begging his master's indulgence. Then, he utters the words I quoted (with the necessary context) to Scott: "With submission, sir, we both are getting old." As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I realized how apt they weren't. Then, I saw the puzzlement in his eyes, but he recovered fast and went into his default mode: grace

"Thanks for that, Marty," he said. "See you in six months, we'll send you a card." We shook hands, and he helped me on with my coat.

Out on the sidewalk a few minutes later, I felt a pang of mortification and began to beat myself up. What if acting like a fool turned out to be *my* default mode? After all, as they say, there's no fool like an old fool. Not only had I realized how stupid the Melville quotation was, but something else that should have been obvious finally dawned on me: Charles Goldstein may well have died of AIDS, and clever Marty may have been the last one to realize it --except Mary, perhaps, unless she had her own reasons for not mentioning it.

While I was in Scott's office, big wet flakes of snow had begun to fall. I hurried to the subway on the next corner, and, as I carefully climbed down the iron-clad steps, it was as if I were fleeing my own insights.

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News from **Ron Singer** (www.ronsinger.net): *A Voice for My Grandmother* (October 2007, Ten Penny Players/bardpress, chapbook, second printing, ten reviews); retired from teaching (January 2008: 1964-2008); Featured Poet, *New Works Review* (Fall 2008); three poems, *Poetic Voices Without Borders-2* (2009, anthology); more writing up, out, or forthcoming at *The Avatar Review*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *Cantaraville*, *Defenestration*, *Gander Press Review*, *Great Works (UK)*, *Hampden-Sydney Poetry Review*, and *Paper Street*; *The Second Kingdom: Three Novellas* (March 2009, Cantarabooks LLC, e-book).