

The Philosophy of Charlie Parker

by Elaine Chiew

If the sky is charcoal, it's laundry day. If it's cornflower blue, it's football in the empty square behind the school. If it's white like duck feathers, Hinckle Finckle will visit. If it's burnished gold, it's oscar wieners for dinner (we love oscar wieners and consider it a special treat). And if it's fiery red, Dad will be home. Welcome to the philosophy of Charlie Parker.

What color's the sky, then, Charlie Parker?

White.

What kind of white?

It's runny egg-white.

So is it gonna turn duck feather at some point?

My brother stares at me solemn. Nuh uh. Hinckle's not gonna visit for sure. He found a poem on the bus. He sent God to tell me. That's too bad. Sure could do with a Hinckle visit today.

Tell him I got a new song for him. That'll make him come for sure. If I learn him the new song, then the sky won't be fiery red for another three days. My brother hugs his knees like he's cradling stones from the river.

Learning a new song, I know, is a good thing. Not a jump-up-for-joy, hallelujah kinda thing, but nevertheless, a good thing. But God never listens to Charlie Parker.

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I don't know why my brother insists I call him Charlie Parker. I don't know who Charlie Parker is.

There's an old black man living opposite us, though, with white bristles all over his cheeks and tight white spirals on his head. He wears double-layered glasses; we call him Fish-eye behind his back. When he coughs, which he does a lot, brown spittle fly and he looks like to choke. He's real friendly with my brother, but his name's Tallboy.

Tallboy likes to whistle tunes; when he whistles, the birds gather. On his window-ledge, his birdbath, the railing on his tiny terrace. Sometimes, they fly into his bedroom, perch on his bedstead, flit around the room, knocking themselves silly against the walls, the pictures, the hanging lamps. Birds have small brains, you unnerstand? Tallboy says.

We sit on his terrace reading old maps together. Tallboy likes to point out secret places. Places he says exist but don't show on maps. There's Willie Bobo, right next to Mobile, Bucky Pizzarelli, near Tuscaloosa, and Chick Corea, right along the Tombigbee. And then, there's Charlie Parker. And it's located right next to Montgomery.

A town named Charlie Parker? Get outta here. My brother's excited. He slips one hand under the armpit of the other and pumps his elbows up and down.

Yeah, they named a town after you. And you named after a jazz

legend. Bet you didn't know you was famous, heh? Tallboy chuckles.

And that's how we learned that Charlie Parker was a jazz legend.

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Tallboy tells us in Charlie Parker town, they've got a sun so secret it only comes out in disguise, wearing leather overalls like a smelly butcher, or sometimes he comes out with an incredibly straight razor, old shaving mugs, popping peanuts from an old wooden barrel. And he'll cut your hair and shave you clean for seventeen dollars.

Charlie Parker frowns. So how do we get there?

Why do you want to go? Tallboy smiles, and you can see all the sooty cracks and gaps in his teeth.

Hinckle might like to go.

Hinckle's clean as a spring chicken, I said. He can do no wrong.

Still, he'd like to see the secret sun. That'd be something to clap your eyes on, alright. My brother does everything Hinckle tells him.

Tallboy says he'd like to go, too. He hasn't seen the secret sun for many years himself. So, we set a day to go, all three of us. We'll catch the bus to Jackson first, and then, Tallboy says there's another bus at the depot we'll have to catch, but he's forgotten the number. We'll have to ask around, but not to worry, there's bound to be some old cracker-ass who still remembers.

And then, Dad's home again. No more talk about going to Charlie Parker town for awhile. The sky is fiery red everyday, sometimes

mixed with charcoal; Mama makes us beat the carpets she's washed as they dry in the sun, and Father beats us.

Hinckle doesn't visit when Dad's home. Dad doesn't like us hanging out with black folks. He calls 'em "niggers". But Hinckle tells my brother not to listen to Dad.

So we sneak out to visit Tallboy. We don't talk much. Tallboy just sits around tamping tobacco into his pipe, chewing the pipe-stem over and over, looking at us. When the sky looks like it's molten lava (not that I know what molten lava looks like, but I seen pictures), Tallboy would play jazz for us from his records. I like the ones with singing. Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holliday, Carmen McRae. If my brother can be a Charlie Parker, I don't see why I can't be Billie Holliday. I like her name best, it's got rhythm.

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Dad's on the road again. The sky, which was putrid and boiling, turns duck feather white.

Our eyes meet and we know, today's the day. Today's the day we'll see the secret sun.

We run over to Tallboy's house, first thing. He's rummaging around the tray-table on his terrace. Without my lenses, what kinda witness would I make? He squints, hands flapping over everything, rustling, tapping. And so that's how we found out that Tallboy is nearly blind without his glasses.

The sky's white today and Hinckle's coming and Dad's gone. So can we go to my town today? Charlie Parker gasps, chest heaving and falling with too much hope.

I find Tallboy's glasses in the toilet. He must have taken them off

when he went for a shower. Tallboy puts on his glasses and immediately, his eyes swim into focus. What ya say? He snuffles and mumbles and clears his throat. And then, he says, well, um, you see, we can't today coz I ain't pay the bills yet and I gotta run into town and get my prescription.

Charlie Parker's face falls. Can we go tomorrow?

I'm older, and I can see we ain't gonna go tomorrow. And we won't go the day after, neither. I'm older, and I suspect there ain't no secret sun nor Charlie Parker town. There ain't no Hinckle and the sky's full of empty patches of space where you really can't say what the color is.

Listen, young pipsqueaks, I promise, I can't take you today, but I'll take you someday. Tallboy holds out his pinkie, and we all do the pinkie hook together. It's a promise, he nods, no lyin'.

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Dad's home again and the sky looks vanquished —the color of burnished gold -- and then Charlie Parker complains that there aren't any wieners, corn gives him the farts and chicken makes him lethargic, and Dad says I'll teach you lethargic and that's that.

Tallboy lets me touch his head full of wirebrush bristles, but it feels just like soft fuzz. I had no idea. He chuckles. See here, thing can look and feel different. Surprise ya, like that.

Tallboy finds a chucked can of paint from the dumping ground behind the seepwillow and helps Charlie Parker paint his rusty bike and fix the pedal with a piece of saddlestrap. Then, Dad tells us not to hang out there no more, or he'll show us.

But later in bed, Charlie Parker and I muse that Tallboy is wise.

Many things appear one way and act another. Cough syrup. Looks good but tastes awful, says Charlie Parker. Amoeba and paramecium, things we're studying, I say. Things you have to take on faith, like religion. Golly, Charlie Parker says, when you start thinkin', there certainly are lotsa things that surprise ya. Wigs, star-thistle, Moms and Dads.

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We never did go to Charlie Parker, though. Not because Tallboy wasn't trying to keep his promise, but because he died pretty soon afterwards. He had a bad heart. Always needing prescriptions. He didn't always get his check in the mail on time. Things can surprise ya like that.

His sister came up from Mobile and we saw her after the funeral throwing away Tallboy's old maps into a black trashbag filled with things from his house.

Can we have that? Charlie Parker says.

These old papers? Take 'em. Roaches were laying eggs on them old crackly papers.

We touch the maps like something sacred. Go on, now, Tallboy's sister says.

That's where they still are, pinned up on Charlie Parker's sawdust board with pushpins., Everyday, he marks a spot on it with a red Bic. They are the towns that Hinckle's been visiting on his great Alabama road-trip. And those dots, well, some days, I swear, especially when the sky's fiery red, those dots look just like a secret armada of ships, sallying forth to battle.

