

Charlie Brice – Five Poems



Feature Poet

Mr. Wiley

He owned the apartment house on the corner.
A big, green monstrosity that somehow fit
into our neighborhood perfectly.

Mr. Wiley's apartment house was the last stop
on the corner before you crossed Dey Avenue
to get to the little playground with its slide,

merry-go-round, and two huge concrete cylinders
that sheltered us from the Cheyenne wind
and its menacing, hovering, adults.

Mr. Wiley always had a smile and a good word,
often uttered during a pause in mowing his yard
with his manual lawnmower. "Nothing to make

it stop except yours truly," he loved to say.
His son, Dave, was in his twenties, huge,
maybe six foot four, and "slow" as we said

in those days. Dave was as nice as his dad,
although my mother warned me to be careful,
"You never know what those people might do."

Mrs. Wiley had died long before I was anointed
with the spark of awareness. Her absence must have
made Mr. Wiley a lonely soul—not something we

talked about in those days. My mother once sent me
to check on Mr. Wiley. I can't remember why.
He asked me to come in. He said he was okay.

He was in his seventies; I was eight or nine years old.
We could always talk with each other. He sat in his old
brown leather chair under a standup lamp with a greasy,

worn, beige lampshade. He had a table there with a *Time Magazine* open to an article. I can't remember what we said to each other, but he was right. He was okay.

Infection

After The Magic Mountain
by Thomas Mann[1]

Hans Castorp travels from Hamburg to Davos-Platz in the mountains to visit his cousin, Joachim, an inmate in the International Sanatorium Berghof. A young healthy man on the verge of a career, Hans is a visitor, will stay for only three weeks.

The journey takes two days. He even passes through the Swiss village of Rorschach where he might change trains, herd buffalos, or evanesce into the smokey aroma of his favorite cigar.

Once atop the infirmary's mountain, Hans fingers his flushed cheeks, suppresses a cough, then another. He's special, not one of the consumptive until he becomes one. It gets to where he can't endure a hike, sing a song, or warm himself at night.

"Space like time engenders forgetfulness and time is Lethe." Remember when you'd see an old man groan and struggle to rise from his chair? Or an old woman rub her hands, grimace in pain? *That's not going to happen to me!* you thought.

Goose steps rattle cobblestones; streets lit with torches treacherous in the night. Germany: defeated, broken, infected. So many thought they'd climb mountains of nationalism, of anti-Semitism, and summit unscathed.

When you're hopeless and tired you find a savior, whether a little man with a pencil mustache or an overweight bully with orange hair. You think

you're paying a brief visit until your sojourn
engulfs you, traps you in the "colourless,
soulless, melancholy transition that comes
before the onset of night."

[1] Quotations are from, Mann, Thomas, *The Magic Mountain*, (H. Lowe-Porter, Trans.),
New York: Vintage Books, 1969.

Building a Weber Grill

First you have to unbox it. I've got a boxcutter that I can never find
so I slash and saw my way through the sticky-tape and cardboard flaps
with a steak knife. If I have any fingers left, I remove the top
of the grill, I think it's called the lid, and put it on the ground
upside down. Oh no, I'm supposed to put the bottom of the grill,
the kettle, upside down. Here I consider my lifelong relationship
with dyslexia where top is bottom, Cs, 7s, Ss, 5s, Ls and 3s are
all backwards (thank god for 8s and Os). In 1955, when I was
reversing everything, they didn't call it dyslexia; they called it stupidity.
Now I put something labeled the "ash catcher" on the bottom of the upside-down
grill. I grunt, turn it, push, and gnash my teeth to get it to fit. I wonder,
will it save my ash? *Look at the three legs*, the instructions command.
There's one that's different from the others. Take that one and jam it into
the predrilled hole in the kettle. Okay, the fuckin' thing doesn't fit. I get
a hammer and whack the goddamned leg and, of course, smash
the hammer into one of my eleven thumbs causing me to hoot
and hop around the back yard while holding my bleeding digit in front
of my crotch. My neighbor, Willard, who can build anything—put
a new floor in his downstairs bathroom last summer—runs over.
What happened? Do I need help? I tell Willard that I'm taking
a course at the university and am practicing the fertility dance of the Mountain
Arapesh in New Guinea. I can tell he doesn't believe me, but after spying
my bloody crotch, he runs back home. Once I bandage my hand
and change my pants I return to the instructions. I'm supposed to find
a metal triangle and attach it to all three legs to keep them together—problem is,
steel doesn't bend. I can't get the triangle to clamp onto all three legs. Here I
understand, in a flash, why Stephen Hawking became an astrophysicist:
it's easier than putting together a goddamned Weber Grill. It's also
why he became an atheist: surely Hawking realized that a benevolent god,
even a sadistic one, would never put a creature of his, namely Me, through
this impossible task. Finally, I work the wheels onto the legs and try
to attach the hubcaps, but they're too small. I ruin what's left of my
unbandaged thumb trying to force those plastic blackheads onto the wheels.
I imagine the wheels falling off, ribeyes and hot coals spewing onto my patio,
as my wife and the horrendously handy Willard watch me become
the undisputed heavyweight moron of the world.

Veronica

In the few years that I knew her,
Veronica was always an hour
late to our writing group when
the rest of the world rolled back
clocks for daylight savings time.

She'd walk into our room in the library,
head down, eyes aimed upward over her
glasses. She looked either ashamed about
her chronic indifference to convention, or
resentful that the powers that be had, once
again, befuddled her by fooling with time.

As a little girl, Veronica escaped the Nazi
scourge with her mother. In our writing group,
she wrote many moving and horrifying tales
of their ordeal. I don't remember the details

of her carefully crafted stories, but I have a surreal
image of Veronica, as a little girl, holding
her mother's hand, while they run past
bombed-out cities, dodge craters, burning
buildings, and gas chambers.

Over here, Veronica became a hippie
in California for a time, then attended college
where she distinguished herself, eventually
becoming a professor of literature at
the University of Pittsburgh. She was

a Shakespeare specialist. Think of that!
She traversed the ash-heap of history
to become an expert on the loftiest
exemplar of the English tongue—
Veronica's third or fourth language.

We found out that she died during
COVID. She'd tried, many times,
to overcome her cigarette addiction,
but where the Nazi's failed, big
tobacco succeeded.

I miss her sheepish/resentful look
as she walked in late for our group.
I miss her beautifully written and
terrifying stories about her escape.

Most of all I miss her finding my eye
after sitting at our big library table
and settling her clutter. I miss her
slightly salacious smile, flirting with
me a little.

I, of course, loved that.

Harvest

I want death to find me planting my cabbages.
-- Michel de Montaigne

Out here death is so bountiful. When the stalk starts to wither
the corn is ready. When the bloom falls to earth
fruit comes forth. When chaos dies order obtains.
Aphrodite turned her dead lover's blood into windflowers.
Adonis spent half a year as a corpse in Hades
so we could have spring! The roar of combine engines
carries the power of death to creation puts food
on our tables judders joy out of strife. Weeping
and reaping threshing and thrashing winnowing
that nourishes harvest the paradox
of fatalities that freshens fields to life.

Charlie Brice won the 2020 Field Guide Poetry Magazine Poetry Contest and placed third in the 2021 Allen Ginsberg Poetry Prize. His chapbooks, *All the Songs Sung* (Angel Flight Press) and *Old Wood Shop* (Impspired Books), and his fourth poetry collection, *The Broad Grin of Eternity* (WordTech Editions) arrived in 2021. His poetry has been nominated twice for the Best of Net Anthology and three times for a Pushcart Prize and has appeared in *The Atlanta Review*, *Muddy River Poetry Review*, *Chiron Review*, *The Honest Ulsterman*, *Ibbetson Street*, *The Paterson Literary Review*, *Impspired Magazine* and elsewhere.