

It's Funny

Senior Paper

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For a Degree Bachelor of Arts with
A Major in Literature at
The University of North Carolina at Asheville
Spring 2016

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Afternoon Errand

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Go to the store, pick up the refreshments, don't forget the ice, drop Sammy off, come home, and finish preparations for tonight. These instructions ran through Harold Busch's mind as he slid the key into the ignition, cranked the engine; the sleek, black Lexus's engine convulsed and brought the car to life. For a moment the engine revved then rumbled quietly as he shifted into reverse and prepared to back out of his driveway. Harold sang the actions of the car in his head: *Click goes the key, vroom sighs the engine, catch says the gear, and slowly out we go.* His vehicle pulled out of the driveway into the street and began the same, sequential turns down the familiar, sycamore lined streets to the local Mr. Jiff's supermarket. A self-described philosopher, Harold mused to himself about life and his role in the world. Often, these reflections and meditations visited him when engaged in the mundane obligations of suburban life, such as a last minute grocery run for the party he was to host later that night. In fact, these thoughts consumed him so much so that within five minutes of his departure he forgot who accompanied him on this trip to the store. Seated in the back of the Lexus was Sam, Harold's nine-year-old son and sole progeny from his first marriage. Sam's presence in the rearview mirror surprised Harold more than once over the fifteen-minute drive to the store.

Sam played with the window control on his car door to pass his time in the car quicker, much to Harold's chagrin, but the father tried to be ore patient with his son. Harold normally would not tolerate the strain excessive use put on the window motor, but Sam's therapist had informed him that his son needed patience at home. His abilities in school afforded him classroom advancement, but Harold's heated temperature could

stifle the child's thoughtful nature. He liked to believe that Sam had gotten his intelligence and thinking nature from himself, but this belief remained challenged due to Harold's own academic history. Sam was in advanced classes, but at his age Harold was far from a gifted student. He had been a remedial student who nearly repeated fourth grade after he had been required to repeat the third grade. Resentment began to creep over the father's mind while his son continued to play with the car window.

Sam tried to get the window as close to closed as possible but still open enough to let air in. Or, he would see how quickly he could switch between raising the window up, down, up, down, back up, now stop, and has it ended at half way up or halfway down? When the black, slender vehicle turned out of their subdivision, Harold glanced in the rearview mirror to study his son's reflection. Harold's dark eyes observed Sam's green eyes, dirty blond hair, tanned skin from his junior soccer league, and a rounded nose. Harold's own hair was dark brown, his skin pale – the most light he received was from the florescent lights in his office – and his nose slender and long. One of the few – if not the only – physical traits Sam and Harold shared was a shorter than average height and smaller frame. Although Sam was nine, it was not uncommon for him to be mistaken for as young as six or five. Although physically diminutive next to his peers, he excelled in academics, which his elementary school teachers confirmed to Harold when Sam had won the fourth grade spelling bee two years ago by spelling “precocious.” Harold remembered when Sam won. His first thought was of how he had been disqualified from childhood spelling bees within the first round in every grade.

Harold decided to put Sam in therapy after he and Sam's mother divorced. While he envied his son's natural ability, he still loved his child and sought to make sure the

divorce and subsequent remarriage had not affected him too much. At times, he wondered if the child blamed himself for the animosity between his mother and father. Unable to speak openly or honestly with his son, Harold's resultant guilt and shame blistered his mind like fresh embers on bare skin. The father attempted to distract himself from his child's condition. He mused over international conflicts and socioeconomic class struggles until he forgot Sam was even in the car with him. Still, when his eyes drifted to the child in his rearview mirror, a combination of regret and jealousy blanketed his heart.

A slave to appearances and habits, Harold relished the party circuits of suburbia. Every other Saturday evening demanded his and his new wife's presence at a neighborhood friend's soiree, and every four months brought the obligation round to Harold to host a dinner party for his work colleagues, friends, and neighbors. All of this contributed to the never-ending tessellation Harold Busch called his life. Last time, the Morris' hosted; the time before that, the Cowell's; next time would be the Henson's turn; but this Saturday, it was the Busch's. Because the duty to host belonged to Harold, he was now obliged to go to the store to pick up additional refreshments that were out of stock at his house. This was a routine he went through every few weeks, but something made this trip different. A heated day in August brought the typical, balmy Saturday experienced along the banks of the Cuyahoga River in Cleveland, Ohio. The river was certainly no different. It rolled along just as it always had. Sure, every now and then the unexpected river fire had occurred, but even that failed to halt its routine; for that matter, the routine pollution remained up until not too long ago, which had resulted in several rolling infernos through northeastern Ohio. What was it that felt so different about this

particular afternoon? Maybe it was the nature of the party that Harold was preparing for. Yes, that was it. It was the party, but not just the party. There were other parties, but the main event of this party made it quite unique: The baby.

Harold had been married and divorced, and while Sam was the progeny of the former union, Sarah was the one-month-old result of Harold and his blissful, younger wife. That was what made this party, and thereby this day, so different for him. Not the typical social gathering held every few weeks, but this party was the official debut of their new daughter. Harold was on his way to the store and afterward to his sister's house to drop Sam off. *Give Aunt and Nephew an opportunity to bond.* Sam's absence also allowed Sarah to take center stage and prevented Sam from developing jealousy towards her. *Maybe it would even help Sammy come to terms with the situation,* thought Harold, who, after all, wanted no animosity instilled between his children. Other than Sam's presence, the festivities that night, and Sarah's public debut, Harold approached this as another routine outing that fit perfectly in his structured life. Only the balmy temperature caused Harold any great distress. *Christ, it's hot. Hope this new Ralph Lauren is sweat resistant.* Harold checked the rearview mirror, as he did every four minutes, and again the sight of his son in the back seat caught him off guard.

"Go to the store, pick up the refreshments, and then drop you off with your aunt," Harold said. "That's all there's to do today, right, Sport?" Harold forced a smile at his son's reflection in the rear-view mirror in anticipation of a response. Sam stared out the black vehicle's window, which he continued to roll up and down. "I said, 'isn't that right, Champ?'"

"You said, 'Sport' the first time. Not 'Champ,'" Sam said.

“Nobody likes people who correct everyone all the time.”

“Is that why you don’t like me?” The window rose and fell at a quicker pace.

“Son, you know that’s not true.”

“You like *her* more than you like me. That’s why you’re taking me to aunt Caroline’s. ‘Cause you like *her* more, and you want your adult friends to know *she*’s the favorite.”

“Samuel James Busch, don’t you use that tone of voice to speak about your sister.” Harold’s knuckles turned white as his grip tightened at ten and two on the steering wheel. He listened for the sound of the window motor fouling up, which would lock the window at whatever height it happened to be until he could get to the Lexus dealer.

“She’s *not* my sister.” Sam now switched between attempts to roll the window all the way up, all the way down, or rapid movements up and down without reaching the bottom or the top. When the long, black car crossed a speed bump in Mr. Jiff’s parking lot, a distinct whir from Sam’s door. The sound of gears grated against glass followed and caught Harold’s ear. In response to the sound, Harold floored the jet-black car into the nearest parking spot and slammed the brakes in time to avoid taking down a grocery cart coral.

“Shut the goddam window, all the way, right now, leave it shut, and don’t touch that fucking button again!” In his aggravated outburst, Harold pitched his Blackberry to the front passenger’s seat floorboard. He took seven deep breaths, like Sam’s therapist suggested, shifted the car into park, and attempted a half apology to his son. But, he muttered more to himself than he spoke to his son. He explained his outburst away to himself rather than the recipient of his lapse in composure. While he apologized, Harold

engaged the window lock button on his door then made sure all windows were closed tight. After he parked and assured his son he would be back soon, Harold got out, told Sam to wait in the car, locked the doors to the long, black Lexus, and walked across the broiling asphalt to the entrance of Mr. Jiff's. *I'll only be a few minutes*, he thought, *and besides he needs to settle down and cool off*. When he entered the grocery store the refreshing cool from the air conditioning shocked him. In the two-minute walk from the car to the store's entrance, he had failed to notice how oppressive the air outside was.

He made his way around the store in silence and picked out the items on his list one by one. For a brief moment, a vague nostalgia and euphoric comfort overcame Harold. His mind wandered into a haze of memory and catharsis. It was an ideal situation, in Harold's mind at least: He was back in a familiar routine. His life was getting back to a calm state of being, and he could finally relax in the blissful doldrums of normalcy. He strolled through the aisles—took in the familiar surroundings with mild interest. The once forgotten store became familiar to him again, and that familiarity brought relief. He even considered buying a cigar to congratulate himself on a party, soon to be, well done, but he remembered the promise he made to give up any and all tobacco products as a part of his new health regimen. Harold placed the last item on his list in his cart, but he thought it best to make at least one more lap around the store to see if any worthwhile deals or other needed goods popped up.

Harold passed the produce aisles, then the pet aisles, the soft drinks came and went not long after that. But, before he reached the frozen food section, he made a decision he did not fully understand. When he approached the cleaning aisle he stopped, turned, crossed halfway, and stopped for a moment in the middle of the aisle. This was

peculiar to Harold because he had no intent to purchase any sort of cleansing agent for himself. Odder still, as far as Harold could reason, was that at the opposite end of the cleaning aisle was the baby and toddler section. The curious juxtaposition never struck Harold before: Sterilizing agents at one end, products designed to help raise newborns at the other end, and Harold Busch caught somewhere in the middle. Harold was not entirely sure why he did this, but without a second thought he continued up the aisle and crossed to the other side of Mr. Jiff's. He knew he had no need for any cleaner but maybe, he believed, he needed something for his baby's big night. At any rate, he resumed his casual, absent-minded stroll.

Harold reasoned life was good as he continued his light saunter around the old store he knew so well. *Maybe it's just me*, he thought, *but life gets far more complicated than it should ever get. Really! People get so over worked and stressed and bent out of shape and all sorts of trouble that they fail to realize what really matters. If we all could just get into nice, simple routines, life would be so much... oh what's a word? Hmm, "amiable?" No, that's not it. "Auspicious?" No, that's far too tragic sounding. It sounds similar to "auspicious"; I know that much. Austere! Yes, that's it! Life would be much more austere if people would simply accept a pattern to live their life by.* Harold's step became brisker as his ego swelled with satisfaction over the use of this clever word. *Yes*, he thought, *surely, only a brilliant intellectual, such as myself, could have thought to use such an ingenious word!* Harold turned another aisle and ran cart first into Jane Milton, a soon to be attendee at his party that night. Jane's career as a trust fund manager made her someone to have at social functions. Besides, the fact one of her more significant accounts lived next to Harold's house and had roped her in to attending meant more

networking options for Harold to capitalize on. Ever the social butterfly, he took this opportunity to socialize and began to talk with Jane about his exploits despite the housing market collapse.

“Yes, it certainly seems everyone in the financial sector is in the hot seat, eh Jane?”

“Yes, quite. Well, glad to see you,” Jane said through a strained smile. At fifteen years Harold’s senior, she had mastered the ability to make people she disliked believe she valued them. Still, she had lost some of the energy and patience necessary to keep up her façade of fondness when it concerned someone she had no dire need to keep on her side. Harold didn’t quite make the cut. “Absolutely cannot wait for tonight’s festivities. You’re busy with last minute shopping, I’m sure, so I’ll let you go now. See you later tonight.” Jane’s best efforts to get away from her future host failed. Harold insisted he possessed more than enough time to socialize and catch up. He so distracted himself with his insistence that he failed to notice Jane roll her eyes.

“Oh no, it’s no trouble, Jane! I can chat; after all, it’s only a few minutes between friends. Besides, anything to stay out of the heat, right?”

“Very well then ... How are things?” Jane cursed under her breath at how close she came to escaping Harold Busch, but again he failed to notice the slight as he droned on about the simple delight of hosting.

“Phenomenal! Absolutely phenomenal. Oh, let me show you this hysterical email I received.” Harold reached for his Blackberry. For the first time, he noticed its absence. He wondered where it had gotten to, and he briefly felt as if there were something else he

had forgotten. But what? “Well, I seem to have left it elsewhere. I’ll have to show you later tonight. If I remember, of course.”

Jane sighed with relief that she was spared Harold’s inane sense of humor for now, but that relief subsided when she realized the inevitable had only been delayed. Her façade slipped and a wanton eyeroll escaped; however, Harold was too invested in his own rhetoric to notice this slight. Still, she erred on the side of caution and decided to add an affectionate term the second he left an opening for her to speak. “Well, lovely how things are so nice for you, darling.”

“You know what they say, Jane, one in the hand is worth two in the Busch! Ha! Get it?”

“Jesus Chri—excuse me: Another zinger, Harold!” Jane wondered if this might be hell. It certainly was hot enough outside to pass for the inferno.

Harold chuckled, “Well, I got that one from my father, so I can’t take all the credit. It’s like he use to say…”

Jane wondered whether or not Harold’s father was as dim as he was, but she dismissed the notion that stupidity or brilliance are hereditary when she considered how gifted Harold’s son Sam was. And so, little more than half an hour into the conversation, Jane asked Harold a question that brought reality down on him: “How is Sam these days?”

“Sammy? Oh, he’s doing just fine, thanks. Matter of fact, he’s right…”

Realization and absolute horror bolted through Harold after his momentary confusion. He spun around and ran through the store towards the exit; sweat blistered from the pores in his forehead. Mr. Jiff’s, no larger than any other grocery store, grew—

extended to the length of an Olympic track pulled on a straight line. The ground beneath Harold's feet grew further and further away with every step he ran, and the exit to the asphalt oven where the cars baked laid at the end of the stretch.

"Is everything alright, sir?" an employee asked when Harold sprinted past him. In his haste, he knocked the unwitting employee into a pyramid of coffee cans that then tumbled and crashed to the floor. Harold exploded through the automatic doors of the mini-mart and knocked them off track when he launched into the parking lot; frenzied, he dashed to his waiting black Lexus. When he spotted the small crowd gathered around his car, Harold's worst fears were confirmed. He shoved, ripped his way to the front of the assembly and gazed where a fellow patron had smashed in the rear window to the stretched vehicle. Harold fell to his knees in the crucible parking lot when he saw the grocery bagger, who had assisted a near-by customer, desperately trying to resuscitate Sammy's small frame. One, two. Breath, breath. One, two. Breath, breath. Some speculated whether the boy was dead or not. Another patron ran to the scene with a bottle of water and poured it over Sam's face. After minutes of CPR and the fresh water, the child stirred. Harold wept and clutched his son to his chest. Between sobs and gasps, Harold muttered: "Dad's here, Sam. Dad's here, now." An ambulance arrived at the scene. Some of the onlookers struggled to pull Harold away from Sam's body, so the paramedics could do what they could.

Transported to a hospital, Harold waited for hours to hear what the doctors had to say about his son's condition. The party that had occupied his mind so much had been left in the hands of his wife who was now forced to debut heir new daughter on her own. The attending physician called Harold into his office to explain what had happened;

while Sam had not been in the vehicle long enough to die from heat-exhaustion, he had been in there too long to not suffer brain damage.

“I’m sorry, sir,” the doctor said, “but Sam will need assistance for the remainder of his life.”

Harold sat in silence while the news of his son’s permanent condition sank in. Numbly, he listened while the doctor explained the need to set up a home care station and how many families live with similar situations and the readily available resources of support groups. Harold was unable to focus on what the doctor told him. All he could think of was how his son would be pulled from school. He would never advance to his full abilities.

“I did this to him,” Harold said. The doctor told Harold not to blame himself – especially with an upcoming child negligence suit – but Harold accepted the blame he gave himself. More than that, Harold wondered if he truly had not meant to leave his son in the car on one of the hottest days of the year. He wondered if he had condemned his first born on accident or if he meant to hurt his son in the one area Harold knew he could not compete with. Harold was left to guess at his own guilt, and deep down he believed he left Sam in that vehicle with the hope his son would become less than he was at his age. Harold just continued to say, “I did this to him.” And he meant every word.

Classics

Andrew T. Wyche

Levon's '92 Dodge Spirit pulled up to the curb, shuffled, shook, backfired once, and came to a rest in front of the venue. He popped the truck open and pulled out his decrepit guitar case that held his acquired electric-blue Fender Telecaster. He opened the door, glanced around the barroom, and noticed it was empty—save a cluster of twenty-something's and a trio of distinctly middle-aged suburbanites out for a happy-hour that ended two hours earlier. The hip twenty-something's beheld Levon while he stood in the doorway. His faded jeans, slightly too long, scrunched against the tops of his worn out sneakers, and the tattered pea coat he had purchased in his youth hung open, unable to close over the gut that had grown in over the last two decades. Short, white whiskers salted his five-o'clock shadow, and the bright orange toboggan that covered Levon's bald spot blazed against his ashen complexion and dark eyes. Unable to restrain themselves, a handful of the twenty-something's mouths compulsively curled in derision. Levon thought he recognized the look on their faces: A look he saw on his pastor's face whenever they spoke before Sunday worship. Truth be told, the smile on his pastor's face had been neither scornful nor derisive—it had just been forced. What Levon had failed to notice, whenever the two spoke, was not the pastor's forced smile but his glazed eyes. He had listened to Levon before every Sunday service for over a decade; after all that time, the pastor had mastered that ability to tune out others but still maintain enough awareness to smile and blindly comment—proof he truly had listened all along.

Guitar case in hand, Levon approached the bar, confirmed with the bartender he was in fact scheduled to play that night, turned towards the stage, and ascended the

sagging steps to the rostrum. The stage rested against the left-hand wall of the bar and was empty with the exception of a few amps, a mike stand, and an old piano pressed up against the wall with a faded piano bench pressed underneath of it. Bought used for the bar shortly after it opened, the piano had faded and its white keys had since yellowed and cracked. The mike stand and amplifiers could be removed and put back, but the piano remained a semi permanent fixture of the stage. Some imagined it would remain there until the venue either closed down or was bought by new owners. While the guitar was his instrument of choice, Levon was more than proficient at piano. But he also knew this old assembly of wood and wire must be beyond out of tune, and it almost made him wince to know such a great instrument could fall to such disrepair and function as little more than adornment for a stage.

After he opened the guitar case and exhumed the Telecaster, he set the open case at the foot of the stage then dropped a crisp, single Jackson on to the dulled felt inside the case—a tactic meant to encourage donations. In addition to the crumpled bill, Levon added a flier he printed at home with his address and phone number along with his rates for music lessons. He took extra care to include a list and pictures of the instrumnets Levon could teach students to play: Piano, guitar, bass guitar, and violin. The patrons continued to murmur amongst themselves in a dull buzz while Levon adjusted the amplifier. In their whispers, he felt he had heard those tones before, or rather overheard. While he turned the keys on the guitar to bring the strings in tune, he fought back memories of the tone of voice he recognized. It was a tone, he recalled, the choir director had employed when she gossiped with the pastor's wife.

“He simply never shuts up! He just rambles on and on about his old mother, his absentee brother, or his nephew’s failing marriage.”

“I know, I know,” said the preacher’s wife, “but what can you do but put up with him? He just seems so lonely. The only people he sees are his mother, members of the congregation, and his music students.”

“That’s another thing! Ten dollars an hour for music lessons? How does he survive off that? Harry Chapin charged the same amount in the 70’s. And, teaching out of his mom’s basement? It’s just pathetic. Do you know how long he’s lived with his mother?” Levon had shuffled off to his usual pew, his mother at his side, before the preacher’s wife had answered. Early onset Alzheimer’s had begun to affect his mother around the time he had turned 40, and when her condition had worsened over the next year he moved back home. No one else had cared for her, and he had refused to see his mother languish in a geriatrics home. When Levon had moved back home, his mother had offered him use of her Oldsmobile – she was incapable of driving it – but instead he had bought his brand new at the time ’92 Dodge Spirit. To him, that Spirit had embodied the remaining vestiges of his independence. For almost twenty years he had taught music out of the basement of his mother’s house. And it was true: He barely eked out a living; however, he gave music lessons not for mere income but to cling to his passion. He taught music to inspire and hone gifts in his community, and the basement he taught from was his domain. Boxes, file cabinets of sheet music, forgotten projects, an old recliner, an older woodstove, assorted instruments, and hourly students were the only company Levon had, but it was all the company he wanted.

In an effort to clear out some of the clutter from his domain, Levon had rediscovered the electric-blue Telecaster under boxes of music theory and DIY home repair guidebooks. He had refused to recognize it as *his* Telecaster because it had been bequeathed to him upon the death of a former bandmate and lifelong friend five years earlier. Although Levon had played at the funeral, he had been unable to recall what he had played in memoriam. All he had recollected was numbly strumming out a song after the eulogy. When the will was read, Levon received his friend's favorite guitar: The electric-blue Fender Telecaster. Stuck in the strings of the guitar was a three-word note: *Keep the faith*. The note had been a veiled reference to "Keeping the Faith" by Billy Joel—the last song the two had performed together. After he had rediscovered the guitar – and the note – Levon had decided to perform with his friend's Telecaster once more. And so, he booked his first gig in years at the music hall where he was about to play.

Strings in tune, amplifier cranked to the proper settings, Levon began to play his way through the modest setlist he prepared. Plucking out the opening notes, he started to sing "It's still Rock & Roll to Me," another master work by Billy Joel. A few patrons who recognized the song were amused yet perplexed because the original song featured almost no guitar and hinged instead on a saxophone solo during the bridge; however, this posed no problem to Levon. It took nearly two weeks, but he had transposed the sax solo into a guitar solo and played his cover from memory. Each note the saxophone was meant to whine out became a power chord for him to hammer when he kicked the overdrive into effect. The toasted suburbanites gave a raucous cheer and raised their glasses, sloshed wine and craft beer onto their table. The twenty-something's bobbed their heads, and some speculated what kitschy record shops might carry a vinyl of the original. Levon

struggled to sing at first—he rarely sang in his younger days even then sticking to his role as lead guitarist. But, he managed to push the lyrics through the gravel in his vocal chords, which transformed Billy Joel’s jazzy, rockabilly number into a bluesy southern rock ballad. Besides, he made the guitar sing for him. Soon as he finished the first song, he immediately broke into Bruce Springsteen with “Glory Days,” a better song for Levon due to the more prominent guitar part and his naturally raspy vocals. As he performed for the barroom, the revived musician dreamt his setlist might impart a greater truth to the twenty-something’s about aging and living in the past. To this end, he made sure to belt the line about being left with nothing but boring stories, which solicited even more shouts from the middle-aged trio.

He was on the last song, something more modern for the youngsters: “Scar Tissue” by the Red Hot Chili Peppers. He took a few minutes before he started the finale to retune his guitar and grab a swig of water. Then Levon noticed one of the twenty-something’s break away from his cluster, walk to where the guitar case lay at the foot of the stage, open his wallet, pull out a fifty, wave it towards Levon so he saw it, bend over, and place it in the case with the twenty. Grinning, Levon stepped back up to the mic and began to play. He knew his pipes could neither feasibly nor pleasantly imitate Anthony Kiedis, so he resolved to play an instrumental version of “Scar Tissue.” Levon poured all he had into that song. Through the solitary opening notes, he struck out the memories of the pastor, pastor’s wife, and choir director; with every chord, he taught and inspired his students to play the music they loved; as he hammered out the chorus, he drowned out the twenty-something’s conversation; over the bridge, he laid his friend to rest; and finally, with the outro, he promised his mother he would always be there to take care of her until

the very last notes of her song rang out. Guitar firm in his grasp against his torso, doubled over, eyes shut to the world, so he was focused, Levon let the final notes ring out for a moment and fade into their own silence.

Levon looked up from the strings. Save for the bartender and the now blacked-out-in-their-booth-suburbanites, the bar was deserted. In fact, the trio of suburbanites failed to notice the instrumental altogether and caterwauled a drunken rendition of “Glory Days.” But this didn’t bother him: He played his songs and paid homage to his bandmate using the Telecaster left to him. Levon switched off the amplifier and unplugged the guitar. He got down from the stage, bent over his aged guitar case to remove the money, and lay the instrument to rest. When he looked into the case his jaw fell in disbelief, and the Fender Telecaster slipped from his hand, struck the ground bottom first, and sent a crack up the face of the guitar’s electric blue body. Instead of the \$70 he expected, Levon found two singles and a note with three, simple words: *Go home, Granpa*. He was so distracted and taken aback by the unexpected switch that he failed to notice his flier about music lessons was also missing from his guitar case.

Telecaster settled in the trunk of his car, Levon slumped into the driver’s seat and attempted to crank his Dodge Spirit only to discover it would not start. The lights came up, the radio croaked out Buddy Holly, yet the engine – despite his efforts – refused to roll over. After twenty minutes of twisting the key in the ignition, the car ceased to shutter. Levon stepped out of the driver’s seat, collected his guitar case, left a note on his car window, and walked the eight cold miles home. When he walked through the front door, he saw his nephew snoring on the couch with a warmed over beer in hand. Levon’s mother was awake and called to him as he passed by; whether or not he heard her, he

descended the slumping basement steps, placed the guitar case on the ground, and crumpled against the cracked leather upholstery of the worn out recliner by the old woodstove.

The next day, he had his Dodge Spirit towed to the nearest auto-garage and followed in his mother's Oldsmobile. Leonard Cohen's "Waiting for the Miracle" hummed on the radio, but Levon didn't notice; a song that normally moved and inspired him washed over him unregistered. After he parked the Oldsmobile, he walked into the front of the garage where his Dodge Spirit waited. The entire auto-garage was no bigger than the bar where Levon performed the night before, and a lone plastic lawn chair next to the garage door functioned as the waiting room. For three-and-a-half hours, the mechanic, a wiry man with a full head of gray hair and a few years on Levon, rooted through the engine block. With a shout of insight, the mechanic spat an auburn stream of tobacco juice on the ground.

He turned to face Levon and said, "I foun' the pro'lem: Crankshaft's busted. That's why the lights come on, but ya engine won't roll-o'er. I can fixit, but it'll cost more 'an the junker's worth. Sorry, boss." So, that was that. After twenty years, Levon's Dodge Spirit was finished. Some piece, some part, buried deep within his Spirit – wholly integral to its function – had broken, and Levon could do nothing to make it perform again. He thanked the mechanic for his efforts, paid, and made arrangements to have the car hauled to a scrapyard. He walked to his mother's Oldsmobile, took his seat behind the wheel, cranked the engine, then sat still for a moment. John Lee Hooker, the artist who first inspired him to pick up the guitar, moaned out his blues through the speakers.

Levon's right hand – calloused and bent from decades of music – tuned the radio to static, dialed the volume as low as possible, and rode home in audible silence.

When Levon returned home, he was surprised to see another car parked in his family's driveway. Orange leaves fell and strummed the top of the unfamiliar vehicle, and Levon parked on the lawn next to the new car so as not to block in the unexpected guest. When he walked past the driver's side window, Levon did not see anyone in the vehicle, but he caught sight of a young woman seated on the stoop leading up to the front door. Lean frame, a flannel shirt, long and wavy brown hair, and a prominent, lean nose, the woman could not have been any older than 24. Next to her on the steps rested the flier about music lessons that had been taken last night. When Levon approached the steps, the young woman stood up with the flier in her hand.

“Excuse me, sir,” she said, “Sorry to arrive unannounced, but when I called earlier I got no answer. I saw you play last night and thought you were really good and I wanted to play alongside you on that piano, but I haven't taken lessons since I was twelve and never really made it past playing chopsticks, so I asked my friend to go up there and grab the flier, so I could possibly get lessons from you.”

Levon continued to look at the twenty-something in silence and waited to hear where this was headed.

“Anyway, he told us after we left how he switched your money and left that note. I got him to give me the money, so I could return it to you.” The young woman held out the folded Jackson, but she also included an extra ten spot in her hand. “I read that you teach lessons for \$10 an hour, and I hated seeing that old piano unused onstage, and I

really wanted to join you up there, so – if it’s okay with you – would you teach me piano?”

Levon studied the woman. Normally he would jump at the opportunity for a new student, but after the trick her friend had pulled the night before he was not as trusting as he had once been. Silence surrounded the two as the young woman held the \$30 outstretched with one arm and Levon considered instructing her in piano. After a few minutes of silence – with the occasional squeal of a breeze – Levon relented and agreed to teach her piano. The young woman introduced herself as Stefani, and Levon led her into his house, past the living room where his mother dozed, and down the stairs to his workspace. Seated at the piano, Levon asked her to show him what she could play. Stefani tapped out a few scales and progressions, but her lack of experience was not completely apparent. Levon smiled as he watched her fumble over the black and white keys on his keyboard. He could not help but remember when he first learned to play the piano: Seated at his mother’s side in the living room just upstairs. Whenever he took on a new student, Levon enjoyed showing off on whatever instrument the student hoped to learn—to show them what they could be able to play with enough focus and time. When Stefani exhausted her knowledge and ability on the keys, Levon stretched his fingers and began to tap out the closing piano part to “American Pie” by Don McLean. The young woman sat awestruck and excited to learn how to play classics like this one and newer numbers, and Levon enjoyed the almost lost thrill of giving another the gift of playing music. A gift his dozing mother had given him so many years ago.

the Artist
Andrew T. Wyche

“God is an Artist,”
She told me.
“Isn’t it obvious?
The earth: His canvas,
the cosmos: His pallet,
the seasons: His paint,
each new moment: a masterpiece!”

I agree, of course,
God is an Artist.
Like a good Artist,
He died for his work.
Like a great Artist,
He was killed by his work.
God is an Artist;
however, He is a better Writer
than He is a Painter.

He wrote you,
and He wrote me.
God is a Poet most of all.
He: the Poet, we: the poems,
and you: His masterpiece.

You were His most magnificent
work, but you *were*.
The Artist outdoes
Himself again:
The only poem He wrote
more stunning, more moving
than you was Us.

He wrote Us together,
wrote the Connection we share,
created His magnum opus when
He wrote me to you.

To Dream Again
Andrew T. Wyche

*“I’ll hide within my poems as I write them
Hoping to kiss your lips as you recite them.”*

– Amareh, 11th Century Persian Poet

Tis not too late, to put to bed
Dull desire and rouse rich reality:
To life wake with wondrous dreams
Of better things!—than the mere
Passing of hours.
To attain a small bit of Infinite,
Which exists within us All,
Yet so often remains untouched.

Don’t you know, love?
Don’t you know how?
How much you mean?
I suppose not. It’s impossible;
Impossible for any
To plumb those depths.

Were my affection composed of water,
It would be vast, endless ocean
And filled with riches long forgotten;
Were my attention Westerly Wind,
It would scatter all poetry
And odes as leaves before the Spring;
Were my care a roaring fire,
It would spread with intense desire
To mock sun and emblazon earth;
Were my devotion a mortal human,
She would attain godhood and
Empires would kneel before Him.

Were my affection a fish of the ocean,
It would be scaled in jewels and
Gleam for none but you;
Were my attention a bird in night’s sky,
It would soar beyond melancholy moon and
Sing to none but you;
Were my care a blazing, empyreal being,
It would streak and sear infernal past and
Shine for none but you;

Were my devotion a wild beast of earth,
It would be beautiful yet feral and
Tame to none but you!

Until world's end and cosmos collapse,
Until Heaven on High yields unto
Utter, inevitable nothing,
I *want to* hold you through all,
So through all
I know—truly know
There is some speck of existence
Lasting eternal without respite.

With me yet apart from me,
Dream—but dream no longer
Of “one” or “another,”
Dream until “I” becomes “We.”

Where did the affection go?
Andrew T. Wyche

Where did the affection go?
That warm glow – igniting fires from Boléro –
Is now a faded ember.
And, when I hear your name,
It cannot even simmer.

Shame ... Such a shame.
That once dazzling flame made tame
By time, by fate, by chance meetings,
By whatever. How to get through existence
If the heart can be stolen with mere greetings?

Maybe if I had some great resistance—
Something beyond myself, beyond my substance.
Then would my heart know contentment?
Resting in peace with love
Rather than wrestling resentment.

Heartbreak Haiku Series
Andrew T. Wyche

I fell in love with
You and your sob story just
To be left sobbing.

I gave you my trust
And, for your part, you gave me
Insecurity.

You turn me on! And,
You turn me upside down! And,
You turn my stomach!

I remember I
Knew how to make you smile; now,
I just make you sigh.

You pretend to care,
I pretend to move on, but
The damage is done.

Hindsight
Andrew T. Wyche

I've made my bed,
I can suffer to lie in it.
Aches and memories
Offer no pardon or respite.

A bed of spikes against my back,
Rusted, bloodied under flesh,
Isn't worse pain than knowing
I chose this rest for myself.

A lavish king-sized bed,
Cloud-packed pillows, and
Sunset warmed covers is less
Comfort when I've sent you from it.

Yes, my bed's been made, so
There's nothing else to do.
Though the bed I'd rather make
Was the bed I'd made with you.

I never looked Down
Andrew T. Wyche

until I reached this town.
I always looked forward
until I came here.
Now, I look at the Open Sky
and long to fly to the Sun;
more often though
I look down, furrowed brow—beaten.

Neon Crucifixes call—shriek
“All welcome!” As the tenants—
boastful bastards—
Turn masses
singing songs of endless
Love for all the while Cursing...

Those scorned become scornful
Monsters of necessity
wretches driving to become wretched
And in their hate fueled haze
Dilute love and truth
With greed and lies.

I never looked down
Before I reached this town;
Where else
Am I supposed to look?

Sanctimonious Troupe
Andrew T. Wyche

And in ungodly positions they fold—
Dance, twist, turn, bend; all the while,
What hypocritical beliefs they hold.

Of seats and souls, one is cheaply sold.
Faustly, pious pirouettes—so vile,
And in ungodly positions they fold.

Peace and *love* they claim to uphold—
Traucherous jargon used to beguile.
What hypocritical beliefs they hold.

Just as choreographed dancers are extolled—
Religiously lip-synched answers become the style
And in ungodly positions they fold.

Saintly sane few, to dogma, don't enfold.
But lambs can prey with wolfish smiles.
What hypocritical beliefs they hold.

Ballets of Belief unfold—
Deranged disciples demand foul trials.
And in ungodly positions they fold—
What hypocritical beliefs they hold.

Political Ideals
Andrew T. Wyche

Little, angry Politicians
shaking their heads.
Never questioning,
never listening,
just filling us with dread.
We don't see as they,
who are so fitted,
oh so witted,
to size it up and say:
"What must become,
lest we all be dead!"

They stand for nothing,
but, by God,
do they stand against!
"Against the alien and
the queer and the color
and the immoral!"
Against a woman's choice
and a minority's voice
and a person's identity
and a worker's benefit
and a soldier's return.
So please,
you deluded heathens,
heed their cry:
"We'll drop the Bomb,
so all is calm!"
And nothing's left to die.

Patriotic Act: An Army of None
Andrew T. Wyche

Oh say can you see,
By the dawns early light,
That charred, old truck husk
At the roadside's far right?

And that sand dune might cover
An Insurgent, Taliban, or another.
"Forward, Private O'Toole! We must be sure,
So, for Flag and Country, please endure!"

The shot is heard: *POP*
His skull resounds: *CRACK*
A desert spattered with crimson rubble,
And Private O'Toole slumps on his back.

In a cold, steel box,
While the crowd mourns his soul,
A flag obscures his memory
As another fills his role.

Career Thoughts
Andrew T. Wyche

I love to learn!
Nothing could possibly be better.
Dickens or Machiavelli – does it matter?
Any author I cannot spurn:
They're my companions, each in turn.
A life with others: a ghastly fetter.
To live life for love: intellect shall shatter.
So, for your company, I don't yearn.
I don't care the price I pay
(My gifts and talents are so rare!)
To the absolute top, I'll shove
My way. I'm an ass, you say?
I scarcely could care;
Why should I "learn to love"?

Eating **Strawberries**
Andrew T. Wyche

First,

find the right spot,
search her over to spot for
spots – any bruises, bumps, blips, or
anywhere the sleek skin
might be broken –

Next,

once you've found none
keep looking for the right *zone*
somewhere the waiting form
rises to meet your mouth,
begging to be bitten
—lookcarefully—

Don't

pick a spot too
tender, too firm, too waxy,
too ripe, too sunken,
too—there's the one!—

Now,

bring the swollen
flesh underskin to your puckered,
waiting lips: slowly open up,
slowly place your face to brace
the crisp breach and
break;

Then,

placing her tender body
to your mouth, slowly, thoughtfully
draw your lips back digging teeth
into skin and (voila!) She yields
soft, succulent flesh and juice for
your waiting palate.

[Look on]
Andrew T. Wyche

Look on our works, ye Mighty, and rejoice!:
We can tweet without a song,
We can communicate without connection,
We can write each other all day long,
And still not say a thing!

Look on our works, ye Mighty, and rejoice!:
We can market a thousand screens,
We can be made to laugh and cry and want,
We can tap a thousand gruesome, beautiful scenes
And still not feel a thing!

Look on our works, ye Mighty, and rejoice!:
We can preach and spiel,
We can mesmerize and hypnotize,
We can lie and cheat and steal,
And still not gain a thing!

Look on our works, ye Mighty, and rejoice!:
We can study innumerable subjects,
We can learn uncountable lessons,
We can construct merciless objects,
And still not know a thing!

Look on our works, ye Mighty, and rejoice!:
We can drink and snort and fuck all night,
We can stress and fret and yearn all day,
We can go the limits of our might,
And still not strain a thing!

Look on our works, ye Mighty, and rejoice!:
We can have a spouse, a home, a children,
We can buy a car, a house, accessories,
We can feel our guilt admonished within,
And still not own a thing!

Look on our works, ye Mighty, and rejoice!:
We can treaty and make peace,
We can conquer and make war,
We can claim the globe piece by piece,
And still not save a thing!

Longing
Andrew T. Wyche

Dazed in red light lounges,
Smoking hookah; fashionable, laced with bone marrow.
Belching out immortally drowned dreams;
Embers smolder— Simmering the cum of
Lying in love while Loving transmutes lying
And the starving, intellectual Stomach consumes itself.
Festering hopes of a haven lost—heaven is never there.

Psycho-pathetic, prophetic pedagogues
Spew boundless, vile verbiages:
Bullshits upon bullshits upon bullshits upon
The carcasses of wasted youth and spirit;
Upon potential, not purified, but putrefied by
Pseudo-holy, pious pyres until
Smoldering, charred carbon remnants redolent of joy
Are ground into a bone-meal for the Unholy Eucharist by the
Higher echelon of hierarchal education.

All the while, socially unconscionable politicians
(Those deaf leading the blind)
Rally together to sodomize the mute—
Whose screams are a collective, agonizing silence and
Becomes the neoclassical, folk dirge;
Becomes the neo-“Battle Hymn of the Republic;”
Becomes the lube of a *Free* and *Brave* war-mechanism;
Becomes the oil for corporate Cadillacs.
Liquidized groans dripping down cog and cock alike
Until our collective unconscious is drowning –
Drowned! – in the debt of our sold integrities
And whored souls.

Artists – poets, painters, musicians –
All cower with wondrous fear of the world and themselves.
Until, no longer bearing the weight of their own soul,
Releases in creative orgasm, creative birth the bastard of bastards: Truth.
The truth that no truth will assuage their sorrow and longing;
Terrified to stagnate, to become parodies of themselves.
Commit self-destructive suicidal acts:
In dramas, in paintings, in music, in love,
In a dance of life culminating in temporary embrace.

The vase body, holds the vaporous soul,
Inhaled by the world, expelled into smog of disillusionment.

Teenage angst and frustration and rebellion distilled
Until quiet complacency is left – soon dispersed.
My aspirations have departed me – abandoned me.
And now, I only crave weed and tea to numb my discretions.
All over, my heart won't sleep: It beats for all it's done,
It beats for all it dreams; mostly, it beats because that's all it knows,
And yet, on it beats for much more not yet known.

Evolution of a Poem
Andrew T. Wyche

In waves
of oceans
desire we
drown, pulled
crashing and
thrashing down,
down, down.

– OR –

In waves of oceans desire we drown,
Dragged crashing and thrashing down, down, down.

– OR –

In waves of oceans desire
we drown – pulled,
pulled
crashing, thrashing, bashing
down drown,
down

Passing Daze
Andrew T. Wyche

The smoke ring rises,
Lingers a moment longer,
Then silently sinks.

creek
Andrew T. Wyche

“I refused to leave without a poem,
So I sat and waited ‘til I caught one.”

(clears throat)

Watered glass, a molten mirror
with surface clearer,
runs and rhymes o’er
stillier stone.
Always the same, yet
ever gone.

It's Funny
Andrew T. Wyche

It's funny, when you're ten-years-old, and your family laughs while your mama drunkenly swigs from a bottle of Scotch,
Collapses to the ground: sputters, coughs, gags on fire—

Then, you're 15, and your mom grins through seven glasses of wine while family photos drift across the computer screen
Smiles, laughs, remembers times that never happened but are real for her—

Suddenly, you're 17, and your mom is plastered and babbles nonsense in front of your friends, so you make excuses
Lying, trying, covering and crying, enraged over what she's become—

Now, you're 21, and you're the one skunked out on cheap beer and liquor in the recliner because you live at home and nearly failed out of community college—
But you rouse at 2AM to the sight of your mother's form – not really her, but her form – staggering back and forth from study to kitchen to study to kitchen to empty glass to full glass to empty glass to full glass to empty to—

Eventually, you'll be 23. You've left home to attend school elsewhere, gain perspective, about to graduate. You come home and all pretense is gone—she doesn't shuffle to the kitchen anymore.

Instead, she's passed out in her home office chair, slumped forward over the desk. Two empty boxes of wine rest at her feet, half full glass of chardonnay clenched in her right hand, and her face of consternation lays broken over letters on the keyboard.