

1st Place—Essay

Sunday Blessings

by *Nikki Laine Zinke*

He's either a crackpot or my ex-husband, I think, as the caller chokes out another "Nikki?" between sobs and sniffs and silence.

It is Sunday night. Late.

I lose patience. "Who *is* this?" I demand, too curious to slam down the receiver.

A big huffing breath. Another gulping sniff. "Greg. It's Greg. This is Greg. Nikki?"

My front teeth gnash the skin flakes on my bottom lip and I think: Oh God, oh no. I mentally dash through the possibilities: Tracy, his wife, my closest friend, and their lovely little Abbie had been in a car crash. A blaze had incinerated the Ressler family's Wyoming bungalow. Someone was dead.

"Tracy had her baby, Nikki," Greg says flatly. "Devon's fine. Devon's just fine, and..."

And things are not fine, I know. I know this even before Greg begins to pant and even before he bawls because we studied Matthew, Mark, Luke and John together in eighth-grade confirmation; and we sang "Fishing in the Dark," too many times, drunk and off-key, atop the second-train bridge or while driving Around-the-World or just hanging in Tracy's bedroom; and we battled valiantly together, we three, college flunkies with big dreams, through romance lost, failed career choices and the zigzag scramble that later gave us property taxes, messy diapers and Roth IRAs.

Something ugly is over there in Wyoming. I know this.

"What's going on, Greg?" I ask.

He's choking hard now, gulping and stammering about Devon again. "Devon's fine. He's f-f-fine and..."

"And what, Greg?" I ask in my best it's-O.K.-baby-I'm-here-for-you-now voice.

"He's perfect. He's going to be O.K.," Greg manages to say.

He is whimpering now, each syllable coming in a long tremble, like the yowl of a stray retriever after a swift boot to the ribs. I try desperately to understand, but his words stay thick and oily. I want to scream: Dammit, Greg! What about *Tracy*? But I don't, for fear of the answer.

Greg breaks then.

"They wouldn't let me see her or anything," he wails. "They made me go in the hall. They said, 'Get out,' and the doctor needed a scalpel and they wouldn't tell me anything."

He cries in that sucking and heaving kind of way where you can't get enough air to come in and you can't get enough tears to go out.

Oh, shit, I think. She's dead.

According to Greg, Tracy had been laboring successfully with only slight back pain when she decided *it was time*. Greg took her, along with the long-packed bag, to the town hospital where Tracy's second natural childbirth proceeded normally. And quickly. The nurses joked that if she didn't check into her room soon, the newest of the Ressler clan would make his appearance right there at the registration desk.

Tracy's dilation was swift and smooth, Greg says. Six, seven, eight. Got stuck at nine, though. Their baby boy was waiting.

Greg remembers watching as the doctor and nurses performed what appeared to be routine checks: Tracy was told to roll onto her side while the doctor listened to her abdomen through the stethoscope. The doctor glanced at the bedside monitors, then rolled her to the other side, this time a bit abruptly. Again, he listened with the stethoscope.

Suddenly, the doctor announced in a voice of shrill authority: "We need to get this baby out now. Right now! I need a scalpel!"

Maybe the doctor issued further orders, maybe a few even ended in "S.T.A.T.," but Greg couldn't say because

“scalpel” is the last thing he heard before the nurses ousted him from the family birthing room.

Following his eviction, Greg paced the hospital halls alone for more than three hours.

“Nobody would talk to me. I didn’t know if she was alive or dead or what,” he confides between quivering sobs. “Nobody would tell me anything.”

And so Greg didn’t know, as he padded those halls, his guts knotted in angst, that the doctor had knifed his wife with that scalpel, hip to hip. Greg didn’t know the doctor had gutted her while she was fully conscious and fully feeling, without any anesthetic at all. Greg didn’t yet know any of his wife’s terror.

There, in the homey comfort of the hospital birthing room, so carefully designed to mimic every generic aspect of every generic bedroom, Tracy felt the scalpel slicing quick and clean through her stretched abdomen. She felt her own blood, steamy-sticky-hot, rivulets drizzling down, down, down to the small of her back, where it pooled in blackened jelly clots. She saw peculiar Rohrshack patterns as bloody spatters spread and stained the snowy bedsheets. She felt the juicy heat of unknown organs as they slipped against the left side of her waist, where the doctor stowed them neatly outside of her insides and safely out of his way. She watched in horror as the doctor shoved his forearms elbow-deep inside her slashed belly and grabbed hold of the baby through her intact uterus, turning it and massaging it and telling her to push.

This was not the natural birthing experience promised by the slick hospital brochures. Tracy expected 21st century tears of relief and elation. She got 19th century triage.

“You’ve got to push, Tracy,” he ordered, still manipulating the child in-utero. “You’ve got to do it right *now*.”

As I understand it, this birthing room was typically cozy. There were floral art prints on the walls and feminine curtains on the windows. But there were no surgical

tools. When the birthing process stalled after baby Devon crooked up his face, when his heartbeat lapsed, when he was nearing death, the doctor had little choice but to immediately force delivery with the only tackle available: two gloved hands and the trayed-up scalpel prepped in advance for use in severing umbilical cords. There wasn’t time enough to move Tracy to a sterile surgical room, or even for the nurses to retrieve the sort of instruments required for a standard Caesarean extraction and its negligible five-inch incision. Instead, the doctor improvised with the stainless scalpel, an 18-inch abdominal slit, his own hands as manipulation tools, and Tracy’s astounding ability to still summon strength enough to push out the distressed child vaginally.

Devon is perfect. On the APGAR rating scale from one to 10, he’s a 10, Greg says. But Tracy lost a third of her blood during the operation that saved the boy. And, though her uterus remains safely sealed, her abdominal cavity was contaminated by an unknown quantity of hazardous pathogens due to the non-sterile conditions of the birthing surgery. Her red cell count, he says, is dangerously low. And her white cell count? Well, the hospital staff is battling infection by pumping her blood-direct with an extensive series of IV antibiotics. The antibiotic treatment will continue for three days and may be followed by a blood transfusion.

I listen, but I can’t believe it. I truly don’t understand why a modern hospital’s birthing room lacked basic Caesarian and emergency surgical utensils. No suction device? No forceps? It makes no sense and I begin saying so. But Greg cuts me off. He is grateful. “The doctor was wonderful,” he says. “He saved Tracy and Devon’s life. Thank God.” Because it is Sunday, or because I love Greg and Tracy so much, or maybe because of both, I stop short. “Yes,” I say instead. “Thank God.”

2nd Place—Essay

Week On—Week Off

by *Michael Hollett*

My father works two hundred miles north of my house in North Pole, Alaska. He keeps the Dalton Highway, a winding twisting deathtrap the state laughingly calls a road, in good enough condition for travel by semis and state employees. The distance causes him to work up north for a week and then come home for a week, which means my three brothers and I only see him for half of the year. While not a horrible situation, we really miss him when he is gone. When he's home he faces the much harder job of repairing the dents, holes and various other atrocities my three brothers and I have committed against the house. Dad always tried to keep a tight fist on the four of us, but when it came down to it, he was always there to sit on the floor with us and play Nintendo or to let us score the touchdown in a game of backyard football.

Winters are nine months long in Alaska and temperatures can reach sixty degrees below zero. Our house used to have one bathroom upstairs right next to my parent's bedroom. My younger brothers and I would stay up late and play video games or roughhouse. Instead of going upstairs and potentially waking up my parents, we would open the back door and pee off the porch. Well, when the snow would coat the earth and the mercury in the thermometer would rattle at the bottom, we would skip stepping to the end of the porch and pee right out the back door. Needless to say, my parents were none too thrilled to see the yellow snow in the morning. They warned us once, but when it happened again, my father sat us all down in his room and gave us an option. Either we wear a diaper for the day or get a spanking. It was a harder decision than it might sound. My father could swing the homemade paddle at Mach three. Jay, the second oldest, and I took the whipping, Chris

and Josh, second youngest and the youngest, took the diaper. The swish-swish sounds they made all day caused the crying Jay and I emitted seem worth it.

Dad loves playing tricks on anyone. One of his favorites is to look out the window during dinner and yell "MOOSE!" When everyone spun around in their seats, he would steal the dessert of someone at the table. One time at Pizza Hut, he asked me if that was my friend from school who just walked through the door. Unable to see the door, I stood up and walked over. Not seeing anyone, I walked back quizzically until I saw my plate, totally devoid of pizza, and my father, smiling smugly.

His tricks didn't stop on his boys; my mother and her sister were no exception. Aunt Cindy and my mom ran a mail route very early in the morning, so they constantly used their warning lights and blinkers. My father hooked up the blinkers of my aunt's Geo to her horn. They beeped all morning long; my father laughed for a long time after that.

As the oldest, I was always "the man" of the house when dad had to leave for work. It created a pretty heavy burden for a seven-year-old kid. When dad would leave every Tuesday, he would hug us all and tell me to look after my mother and brothers. The summer months were the worst because his crew needed to work overtime to fix all the roads, so he would be gone for three weeks at a time.

During one particular long three-week stretch, I told my brothers they needed to clean my room and pick up the yard. They replied almost in unison, "No, they're your chores, you do them."

"You better do them," I threatened, "because dad put me in charge. I am the man of the house, now get them done."

Well, that went over about as well as Germany invading Poland, with the same result. World War III started. Bombing raids of footballs and pillows ensued. The rat-a-tat-tat of Nerf Gun fire rang from the bathroom to the kitchen for days.

When my father finally came home and saw what we did to my mom, now a 30-year-old with gray hair and extreme facial twitches, he about hit the roof. It's a good thing he didn't, because it would have come down, considering the damage it had sustained already. My father sat all four of us down and asked what started the demolition. My brothers immediately retold the events of the last three weeks, pointing to me as the main culprit. I sat confident, knowing that my father would understand where I was coming from as a fellow "man" of the house. He didn't understand.

He sent my brothers out of the room, leaving only me. "Being the man of the house isn't about being the boss," he said, "but providing for and helping your family; being there and always putting them before yourself. That's what being the "man" of the house means." He then left me in the room by myself to contemplate what he said, and how long it would be until I could sit down, at least comfortably, again.

I stood stubbornly for a while, fuming, because I felt betrayed. After I cooled down, I realized that I was wrong when I ordered my brothers around. I also learned a lesson about responsibility and how to be a good "man" of the house. I think often about World War III, and the lessons learned. I apply them to my marriage today and will pass them on to my sons when they become the "men" of the house, provided there still is one.



My Father's Hands

by *Erin Jay*

Acrylic Painting

A Bitch of a Paper

by *Anthony Bryant*

“Bitch.” Over history it is probably one of the most hated words in the English language. In the past if a woman had been asked what she despised being called, I guarantee the two most popular responses would be “cunt” and “bitch.” Recently, however, “bitch” has made an improbable comeback. This once-despised word can now mean almost anything. And I think that’s bitchin’.

The word “bitch” has been around since the 1600’s, and for most of its history was associated with a female dog, as in, “My bitch had puppies.” I’m not exactly sure when we went from, “My bitch had puppies,” to “My girlfriend went out for milk and the bitch brought home a puppy.” But, it cannot be argued that “bitch” has come to have many different meanings.

A “bitch” can be a sidekick... usually the person who holds the lower stature in a relationship. A good example of this is Batman and Robin. While the crime-fighting duo are good buddies, Robin is surely Batman’s bitch. This is true in many TV shows. There is the star and there is the bitch. Jerry was the star and George was definitely his bitch. Elaine? Well, she could be a bitch, but we’ll discuss that later. It should be noted that when a friend calls a friend “bitch,” it is usually done without animosity, as in, “Hey, bitch, pick up a sixer on your way over.”

“Bitching” can be an adjective or a verb. Something “bitchin’” is good. You can have a bitchin’ meal, a bitchin’ car, or go to a bitchin’ movie. “Bitchin’” can also be bad. When someone is “bitchin’” they are complaining. I might think the sex I had last night was bitchin’, but if my partner was bitchin’ about it afterwards, that means only one of us enjoyed it. Me. Which is fine. That bitch shouldn’t be bitchin’ about it anyway, she owed me for letting her keep the damn puppy. Speaking of the puppy, she is a cute little bitch.

Something that is “a bitch” is hard to figure out or understand. At VCSU, a place of higher learning, this is probably the most commonly used form of “bitch.” That test was a bitch. That quiz was a bitch. This paper is a bitch. If I don’t pass this bitch, I am going to drop out of school. Around college and universities these are fairly common statements. Sometimes failure at a college is blamed on a professor who is a bitch, which brings me to the next meaning.

A “bitch” is not nice--someone who treats a person like they are unworthy of the bitch’s company. The world is full of bitches, but it should never be the goal of a person to be a bitch. If more than three people have called you a bitch in the past month, you probably are. Trust me. A common misperception is that a bitch is always a female (like the dog). Not true. If a guy treats you like crap, he’s a bitch just the same.

“Bitch” means so much more than its original definition. And, I’m sure over time people will find more uses. So, why is the popularity of “bitch” expanding? I don’t know if anyone has the answer to that. It could be that TV is easing its restrictions of borderline swear words like “bitch,” and put it in the forefront of the boundaries of foul language. Like a modern-day “fuck.” That’s my theory. Either way, it seems “bitch” is here to stay. Is that good or bad? Deciding could be a real bitch.

Bears and Monorails: A Love Story

by *Jared Tabor*

For millennia, bears have been some of our most trusted friends. Bears were the first animal to be domesticated by man, back in the good old days of 1942. They were meant to help us fight the good war against the Nazis, and they did a spectacular job. A platoon of bears almost single-handedly drove back King Ramses’ invasion of Portugal, preventing Germany and its chief

ally Egypt from seizing control of the Caribbean. This signaled the turning point in the war, signaling to the Germans once and for all that the colonies were in fact willing to fight for their independence and would not be intimidated by superior technology or a seven-to-one disadvantage in men. The bears were honored for their service with ribbons, parades, and bizarre product endorsement deals that to this day make people wonder what on earth Frito-Lay was thinking.

However, there is a dark side to this tale of heroism and bravery. The bears assumed they would be a permanent fixture of the Army. Naturally, they were rather displeased when Andy Warhol perfected the Assault Elephant just seven short weeks after Cary Grant signed the surrender papers onboard the U.S.S. North Dakota to prevent the U.S. from dropping more nukes on Cairo. The bears launched a massive wave of protests. Everywhere a person cared to look there were bears carrying hilariously crude signs saying things such as “GRAARARRRWARLL!!!” and “BRAARRWGHAWH!!!”. The Assault Elephants put a rather brutal end to this in one of the U.S. government’s more questionable uses of force, killing over 75% of the North American grizzly bear population and driving the rest into the noble nation of Canadia, which changed its name from Canada in 1867 because it thought that it would be a hoot. The bears actually began to enjoy the (forced) return to their former lifestyle, but their burning hatred for the U.S. did not subside. Indeed, it was passed onto their children, and their children’s children, and so on. Over time, the bears forgot the reasons for their hatred, and it expanded to all humans.

It might be asked why I drudge up old memories of these events. Well, a strange behavioral pattern has recently begun to show up in today’s current, more modern bears. They’ll be sitting in a generic grassy field, eating their favorite meal of trees, when all of a sudden they walk into town, force their way into a home, and take up residence on the living room couch in what may be a

genetic memory of the infamous sit-in protests that took place at one time throughout the nation.

As sad as their plight may be, no one has a use for a large, angry bear taking up the good spot on the couch along with the other two spots, which leads to an important question: how exactly does a person get rid of a grizzly bear? There are several ways of accomplishing this, but they range wildly in terms of cost, effectiveness, and tendency to enrage foreign nations such as North Dakota or Australia. The modern consumer, with a massive wallet and a five-second attention span, cannot possibly be expected to understand the subtle nuances of these varying methods, and that’s exactly why this guide exists. The Fire Method and Shotgun Method have become the most popular methods of bear removal, and this bear removal guide will compare the two, hopefully determining which one is better in the process.

Fire Method: The Fire Method is actually a small group of highly similar techniques involving setting assorted objects on fire. A person could set himself or herself on fire, they could set their house on fire, or they could set the bear on fire. Obviously, the bear shouldn’t be set on fire; that would be just plain cruel. Burning down the house is also a rather drastic step, in the sense of “IF I’M GOING TO HELL, I’M TAKING EACH AND EVERY ONE OF YOU WITH ME!!!”. The fire could spread to other houses in the area, and although the bear would likely be caught in the blaze, it’s not a given. That leaves the final and therefore best Fire Method: setting oneself on fire. This option is just plain idiotic. It is true that this fire will be the smallest and most controllable of the three, and the bear will likely be pretty scared by such an insane tactic, but that doesn’t mean it will leave. That’s the main drawback to all Fire Methods- the bear might go into a berserker rage instead of running away. Bears will defend themselves if they perceive something as being a threat, and lunatics that set themselves on fire and run around screaming,

“AGH!! I’M ON FIRE!!!” are pretty much guaranteed to be a threat.

There is a fourth Fire Method that is somewhat more effective than the other three, which involves setting smaller objects on fire, objects like pointed sticks. These objects are then swung around at the bear, hopefully scaring it away. The bear will perceive this as a threat and fight back, but at least the person will have a flaming stick to defend themselves with. This Fire Method has an advantage over the others in that it is the only socially permissible Fire Method that isn’t guaranteed to result in a horrible fiery death.

Shotgun Method: The Shotgun Method, as the name suggests, involves a shotgun, or ‘boomstick’ as it is called by some. As with the Fire Method, there are several sub-methods of varying effectiveness.

The shotgun can be used as a blunt club, which resembles the Flaming Stick variant of the Fire Method without the fire. This saves the cost of ammo, but isn’t very effective. Sometimes the bear won’t be interested in holding its position and will scurry away when attacked, but this is very rare and applies to all methods, making it a moot point.

The second Shotgun Method involves coughing up the money for some ammo and shooting oneself. This method is similar to setting oneself on fire in terms of overwhelming stupidity and ineffectiveness, but has the advantage of a lesser degree of suffering and a lower chance of the house catching on fire in the process. This is the main advantage of the Shotgun Method over the Fire Method: there is very little fire involved, making most Shotgun Methods significantly safer than most Fire Methods. This particular type of Shotgun Method isn’t recommended, however. Suicide won’t change the fact that there’s a bear on the couch.

The third Shotgun Method is by far the most effective of the group. It is similar to the second one, but the bear is shot instead of the human. This simple change in target dramatically increases the ratio of dead bears

to dead humans, making it easily the best Shotgun Method of all. The money spent on the shotgun and ammunition is money well spent in this scenario. Even if a person is highly experienced with the weapon, however, it can take several shots to finish off the bear. The trick is to ignore the giant, dark spots on the wings. These spots are a sophisticated defense that the bear has evolved during its 37 billion years in our dimension. These spots are meant to trick potential predators into thinking that they are the eyes of a much larger creature, such as an Ultra Bear or perhaps Mecha Conan O’Brien.

Of course, once the bear is dead, the corpse has to be dealt with. This can be difficult since most species of bears (except for the extinct Pygmy Bear) weigh several hundred thousand pounds and rely on anti-gravity hover pods to move around. Forklifts work well, but few people own one and they cost a lot of money to rent.

There are many different ways to approach the problem of bear removal. The Fire Method is dangerous and mostly ineffective, but highly affordable. The Shotgun Method is more effective, but can cost money. There are also various registrations, licenses, and permits to worry about, which can be a bit of a hassle. Therefore, I recommend the Fire Method on the basis that the only people dumb enough to actually take that advice should be removed from the gene pool anyway.

Lo Inevitable

by Bridget Birrenkott

Mutt-dogs barked at each other across the neighborhoods, traditional Spanish music resounded through the warm air, occasional dark-skinned people passed through the streets, but never alone—this was Mexico on a dusky summer evening before my senior year. More specifically, this was Porto de Anapra, the most poverty-ridden suburb of Juarez, a typical border town. From my view at the edge of a sun-faded balcony attached

to the adobe living quarters of *La Paz Centro de Albanza* church, I stood with my arms slightly outstretched, willing the sights, sounds, and feel of Mexico to permeate and saturate my every cell. My one week mission trip would end tomorrow, and when I returned, I wished to be able to shut my eyes, close off the frantic world, and transport myself back to the serene Mexico I love. The adult members and the two girls my age were thrilled to leave; they boisterously talked of their awaiting families, peacefully relaxed in the cool shade, and pleurably proclaimed their hard work completed. I was sad. In fact, my body felt heavy, as if laden with a suit of armor. I hated to leave my wonderland just yet. I didn't care an ounce if I missed the start of the school year, but nobody had given me a choice in the matter. My plane ticket stated in ink that I returned to North Dakota tomorrow. Leaving was inevitable.

I sank down onto the balcony's dry wood, dangling my legs and arms over the edge. I spent many an hour like this, absorbing a plethora of information about the typical Mexican life. Kids congregated when the sun sank over the horizon to play pick-up games of soccer, volleyball, and baseball; men and women steadily toiled in the heat with hard physical labor, and dogs wandered the sandy streets in gangs. My mind still refuses to forget the afternoon plagued by the stench of old intestines, a stench worse than that of deer hanging in the garage at home a few weeks after deer season. No one in the United States would have touched those almost rotting, juicy, dirt-caked innards; however, the fat Mexican diligently cleaned the intestines, immersing them in the same filthy water all day, working them over with his rough hands to make casing.

In spite of the differences and poverty, I loved Mexico, and my week there wasn't the only reason; I had been tumbling for years. I knew within my first year of studying Spanish that I would use it some day for more than recitation in class. For three years I studied diligently, yet still I wasn't ready to fall in love with a different

world, so I took precautions. I knew leaving home and not returning would be easier if I placed a steel gate around my heart, and I did. However, somehow, in unguarded moments, people, now friends, scaled up my walls and dove right in. Like Marta and Gabby, a middle-aged Mexican who dressed in baggy American t-shirts and faded, ripped blue jeans, now loved the Lord. The second day we were out on the animal-waste-infested sand street sharing the Gospel with people, they approached my partners and me asked not to hear the gospel, but for something quite different. I won't ever forget the attitude Gabby approached us with. "Can you build us a house?" he asked through our translator.

Completely seeming uncaring to the couple, Mark, my middle-aged, balding partner rolled his eyes at me as if to say, "These people aren't worth our time." He whispered to me, "No," but it was loud enough for all to hear. "We came here to spread the news about Jesus, not build houses. Let someone else do that."

I hesitated, not ready to let Marta and Gabby go yet, but Mark insisted our encounter with them was terminated. Our translator talked with Gabby while I stalled, digging around in my backpack. Gabby noticed the verse on my bag—a Spanish Bible verse I wrote on it before I left for Mexico.

"¿*Qué es eso?*" he asked, pointing. My translator translated, but I didn't need it. Perhaps I understood Gabby's outstretched finger, or even his Spanish, but deep down, I'm sure I just somehow understood that this moment deemed one of those life-defining moments.

I conversed with Gabby in Spanish with only occasional help from my translator. That afternoon, we talked about my backpack verse, my testimony, which made him cry, his hate for most Americans since they had money and cared little for him, and the saving gift of Jesus. Both Gabby and his wife asked in childlike innocence with tear-streaked faces for Jesus to enter their lives. Throughout the week my partner, translator,

and I studied the Bible with them, and when I said my good-bye to Marta, we clasped arms and cried. Mark and our translator hadn't gone to say that good-bye, and I still distinctly remember walking down the road crying with only a woman who spoke Spanish trying to comfort me.

Thinking of my experiences, I curled up in a tight ball, wrapped my arms around my knees, and just stared for a while. In the distance shone an enticing array of neon signs and streetlights. The stark contrast between these lights of El Paso and the rare, flickering, dull streetlamps of Mexico reminded me that this, truly, was a different world. I pondered what my life would be like if I were willing to give up the splendor of my former world for the common, ragged life I had seen lived out by the Mexicans and the missionary family at whose church we stayed. I desired a life in Mexico in my future, but also knew that complacency and comforts fight harder sometimes than the desire to follow God wherever He chooses to lead. I wasn't sure where my future choices would lead me, or, moreover, where I would allow Him to take me.

My senses, misery dulled from wondering if I'd ever return, came back after a while of deep thinking, and my brain again registered the sounds around me. The Mexican *barrio* (neighborhood) was like none I had ever experienced. No obnoxious honks from vehicles, no whirs and screeches from traffic flowing, no muffled TV conversations polluted this air. The occasional traffic ceased after sunset and no one owned a television. Instead, all through the night, terrible growls and frightening yips surrounded me because everyone in Mexico owned a dog. These creatures, full-bred mutts all nasty and tough, existed only to protect family and home. Yet by the end of the week, I grew accustomed to the barks as the sound of Mexico.

People passed in the street and molded into the blanket of darkness. Suddenly, I noticed a small breeze blowing. It felt cool on my warm skin while it dried the thin layer of perspiration that had built up

on my body. The wind was playful that night, teasingly tossing my hair about. A gust of wind flipped open my Bible, and the pages fluttered open to Jeremiah. I picked it up and read the passage. I reread it. Tears welled up in my eyes and spilled over onto my cheeks. The passage promised "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future.'" I re-realized then that God had a plan for me. With peace, I left Mexico the following morning because I didn't doubt. I will continue to trust because if it is in God's perfect will for me, returning to Mexico is inevitable.

December Sundays

by *Wes Staton*

The following essay is not intended to be a world masterpiece, like Montaigne's *Essays*, it is simply a reflection. Intended for no one but a future version of me, it is inspired by a professor who once told me it was important to note what I was thinking. At the age of 22 it seems all I do is think, and have no record of these thoughts to date. So, as I approach my college graduation, I figured now, December, 2004, would be as good an opportunity as any.

As the north wind whips the thin wall on my tiny apartment, the cold of a North Dakota December becomes almost audible. The dancing snow out of my kitchen window takes my eyes upward to the grey sky, and the smoke lingering out of a neighbor's chimney draws me directly down the brick pathway in the same fashion as St. Nick, and I find myself looking out of the fireplace of my youth.

I can still feel the heat swarm my body from inside as I sit between the fire and Auzzie, the family black lab. Watching the Buffalo Bills on television, constantly raising the volume in an attempt to drown out the thunderous snoring of my father, the ease of a Sunday preceding the Christmases of my

youth slowly comes to life. Memories of the smell of pine mixed with fire, the pretzels with horseradish, the games, my dad, and the anticipation for the upcoming break make their way back into my mind fresh as the day they happened.

“Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing Boy”

The smoke begins to thin as it lifts away from the top of the chimney, and the wind again whips the northern wall of my apartment, and whips me back to the reality of this Sunday. The second to last Sunday before my college graduation, and I find myself ready to sacrifice all I have accomplished to return to any given Sunday from my childhood. Any Sunday the concept of a Bachelor of Arts degree was unrecognizable. A Sunday when the pain of losing love remained a disgusting thought. A Sunday when the wars in the world held no significance to a football game. I held those Sunday battles so close I would often storm up to my room in a fit of dismay; during one Bills’ playoff game I retired to my room balling. Sometimes, I still attempt to believe the games are important, but I cannot fool myself for long. Similar to the snow weighing on the leafless branch across the street, the pressure of reality lays upon me, and it feels overwhelming. The significance of the daily news, the pressure of graduation, and my impending future now have me wishing I could retire to my room, and cry. With a sudden wind the snow lying upon the bare branch is blown into a gust. In that instant I am reminded that my mind is natural, and as in nature, when a clear image presents itself it does not remain for long.

“The Things Which I have seen I now can see no more.”

When I stop to think about it, I cannot recall the last time I was in awe of anything as ordinary, or extraordinary, as blowing snow; the snow resting on the tree is the clearest reflection I have noticed in a long time. On current Sundays, if I am not doing

homework, paying bills, or attempting to figure out what to do with my life next, my thoughts are on what I should be doing; I am 22. Already I feel this is not the way humans were intended to live. Constantly answering to professors, slinging drinks and serving food to pay for a cell phone I do not want, and not having the slightest inkling as to why. I will use college as an example. I have spent three and a half years, and over \$10,000 to obtain what society deems an “important” piece of paper. The sad thing is, I know less than when I started. Socrates said in his “Apology” that true wisdom is to understand you know nothing; if that is the case, I am the wisest man alive. I know nothing. As soon as my thoughts become clear, they are blown into a gust with the rest of a thousand feeble attempts to make sense of the forces at work in the world. These meager attempts to piece my world together are really the only thoughts that wake me every day, and would wake me regardless if I discussed them in a college classroom. Granted, information I have learned in college has given me the weapons to ask more questions, but they are questions that I believe either have no answer, or are not for me to find. So, like most others in our culture, I find myself stuck to an achievement timeline; graduate high school, graduate college, get married and start a career; all seemingly insignificant. During my education I have learned there are two ways to enter a history textbook and be deemed as important; one, become a famous general, the defense secretary, or the president. The other option is to create unexpected change. Considering that unlike Bill Clinton, I did in fact inhale, the first option is out of the question. So, I am left to create change, and believe me, I want to start a revolution. However, it would seem more plausible to cover the gap between Cuba and Florida than for me to cover the distance between wanting to and starting a revolution. So, despite this revelation, I still try, the only problem being where I should start. I understand if there is any chance for change under the current system that I am operating,

it is through mastery and manipulation of that system. Thus, as previously mentioned, I am stuck to a timeline of achievement. In order to accomplish what I desire, I must submit myself to the system that I hope to change, whether big or small. Realistically, even small change will do. I understand no matter how many of man's "*significant achievements*" I accomplish, I will not be able to solve the current war in Iraq, nor cure cancer, so I look to what is reasonable. What is reasonable is the ironic bane of my contradictory existence; I will create change through students in the very setting I have grown weary of, a college classroom. Understanding that unless I drastically cross the line, I will still not end up in a history book and through students I can hopefully gage my own significance through my importance to them.

"Thanks to the human heart by which we live,
Thanks to its tenderness, its joys, and fears,
To me the meanest flower that blows can give
Thoughts that do often lie to deep for tears."

The question of what these thoughts mean still remains, probably nothing. Whether they are too deep to gain anything from, or too shallow to mean anything, they perplex me. After all, I do not even understand why I care about my personal significance. As I said earlier, I would trade it for any carefree Sunday of my youth. Once more the wind violently gusts, this time rattling my window, and I turn and return to the final projects at my table.

Aperts Syndrome: The Beauty Within

For: Daddy, David, Jack, Jake, Josh, &
Mama

by *Audra Jo Karlin*

The following quote: "Life is just a mirror, and what you see out there, you must first see inside of you." You must first define yourself

before you can define others. I have accepted myself for who I am.

Say, have any of you ever looked in the mirror? The reflection will never be the same for everyone. Why? We are all different in more ways than one. I know that when I look in the mirror, I see something different than when people look at me. I see someone who has physical problems, but I also see someone who looks and acts like any regular person and accept herself for who she is on the inside. I was born with Aperts Syndrome. My brothers, however, were not born with it. My head, hands, and feet are deformed, and there is limited movement in my shoulders and arms. The eyes are set in my head differently and they also focus differently. The tear ducts don't always work right, and it may sometimes look like I am crying, when I am really not. The partial blindness in my right eye is due to doctors moving my optic nerve around during operations. The 85% hearing loss in my left ear and the 95% hearing loss in my right ear are due to the bones not growing properly and being fused together. I wear hearing aides to help me hear better because of it. And if the hearing aides aren't working right, I have a difficult time getting through the day. My hands...my beautiful hands, they are smaller than an average person's. There are no joints in my fingers—a natural curve was surgically put in. My feet will always stay the same. Each of my big toes is smaller than the rest and two of my toes on each foot are fused together. Even my face looks different. The outward structure and appearance doesn't even begin to describe all of the skilled hands that have worked so hard to get it like it is today.

Growing up, and even today, I have had people point and laugh, stare, comment about the way I look, everything. I was and am sometimes asked, "Why are your hands like that?" or, "Why do you look so funny?" What do I tell them? Do I tell them this was the way I was born, this only occurs in 1 in every 200,000 babies! No, I don't say anything. It is too emotional for me and it is

kind of hard to explain. Making friends is really difficult for me. The only friends I felt I truly had were the doctors I saw and the other families that had children with similar problems as me. I tried to make friends, but almost every friend I tried to make took advantage of me because I looked different. However, there are a few true friends that have been there for me and I am deeply grateful for that. I don't like it when people point and laugh, stare, and have comments made about the way I look. I used to cry about it, still do sometimes, but after a while I kept thinking "What did I do wrong?", "Is it my fault that some people are so damn close minded?" I just go on living my life to the

fullest potential and try and ignore the stares and comments. Nowadays I am able to go out for things that I am interested in and becoming accepted for who I am, not what I look like, and that suits me just fine.

When you accept someone who is different, it takes courage, and great respect of the person giving it and also on the part of the person receiving it. It also shows that you have a strong will and a good heart, and will become a good, successful person. Next time you want to judge someone by their outward appearance, look in a mirror and try to figure out what really matters and maybe you will find yourself in the process.