

## What Wonder Can Do

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*I don't write out of what I know; I write out of what I wonder.*

Lucille Clifton

### 1. Axolotl (*Ambystoma mexicanum*)

**A**n axolotl can help you smile, even if a white girl tries to tell you what you with brown skin can and cannot wear for makeup. You smile and smile, even if your smile is tight. The tighter your smile, the tougher you become.

This salamander has the best little smile of all of the smiley animals with no bones. The axolotl (pronounced AX-OH-LOT-ULL) is also known as the “Mexican Walking Fish,” but it isn’t actually a fish—it’s an amphibian. Axolotls are one of the only amphibians that spend their whole life underwater and are neotenuous—they grow up without going through metamorphosis like other famous amphibians, like say, the frog.

The most striking axolotls are the ones that are pale pink with black eyes (leucistic), but in the wild they are usually brown and black and can sometimes pop out of their eggs into the loveliest, spooky shade of gold-albino with pink eyes.

In ninth grade, you remember trying out various shades of Wet n Wild lipstick in the locker room after gym class. Your mother never let you wear lipstick, and boys had not yet begun to notice you. You only wanted to experiment and hold color up to your cheek the way one would hold up a dress to a mirror. You had no reason to paint yourself because trying to sneak it at school and keep checking if it was on through study hall and home ec while learning to make monkey bread was more trouble than it was worth.

Still, these tubes of bright color clacked in your friends' purses and sounded like dice. "I don't think someone with your skin . . . tone . . . should wear red. You might want to try this instead," said the girl who didn't have another single brown friend. She handed you a pale, cotton candy-colored lipstick that of course made you look wan and parched. The only brown folks she ever knew were on *The Cosby Show*. You adored her and didn't want her to stop waiting for you at lunch time so you could sit together in the noisy cafeteria, so you smiled and said, "You're probably right." But even from that brief application of fire engine red lipstick, you fell in love and yet slightly feared that slash of red, a cardinal out of the corner of your eye, the bright definition and outline of your mouth. A mouth that was used to being so quiet, only speaking when called upon. A mouth that had to hide when you knew the answer because you didn't want anyone to roll their eyes or mutter "teacher's pet" like they did years prior. You wiped off the red lipstick from your mouth with some wadded-up toilet paper and tugged your lips into a smile and left the locker room with the chalky pale lip balm instead.

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An axolotl can help you smile even if someone on your tenure committee puts his hands together every time you meet on the other side of campus, does a quick, short bow, and says, "Namaste!" even though you've told him several times before that you attend *United Methodist* services. The axolotl's mouth is pulled naturally into what we humans would call a smile. Wide and thin, it

runs from one end of the axolotl's face to the other, curving at each end ever so gently upward so that it regularly looks like it knows someone is about to throw a surprise birthday party for you, and you are the only one not in on the joke.

Perhaps second in distinctiveness only to the axolotl's smile is its distinguished external gills on stalks that fan across the back of the its head, like a crown of fuchsia feathers radiating from its neck. The average axolotl grows to be just over a foot long and dines on all manner of worms: blood, earth, wax. It also fancies small crustaceans, insect larvae, and even small fish for a meal.

Scientists have taken to studying axolotls for the regenerative properties of their limbs—all without ever developing scar tissue to hide their damage. They even can rebuild their jaw if it gets broken in a cave. Scientists have crushed their spinal cord and even that regenerates. *Scientific American* reports that you can cut the limbs at any level—wrist, elbows, upper arm—and it will make another. You can cut off various parts of their arms and legs a hundred times and *every* time: the smile and a bloom of arm spring forth like a new perennial. Just when you think nothing can grow back after such a winter, the tiny, pale shoots burst *through* the sloppy ground after a difficult and heavy sugar snow. An impossible wound begs to differ with its body and says, “I’ve got another. And another.”

And why is someone cutting off a salamander leg a hundred times or more? What does one say at the table after a day like that on the ninety-fifth day of cutting off a limb? “Just five more to go, honey, and we’ll close up the report!” It’s hard to remember axolotls are endangered when you see them “smile” at you in aquariums, their pink gills waving as they study you and your own fixed mouth.

What is particularly sad about these guys is that the International Union for Conservation of Nature’s list of endangered species has determined there are no more axolotls naturally found in the wild. They used to swim in abundance in two particular lakes in Mexico but, after searching for several months, there haven’t been any documented cases of finding any wild axolotls since 2013. One of the lakes has been drained as a result of the growth of Mexico

City, and the other is recently overrun with carp, which gobble up axolotl eggs like M&Ms. Mostly axolotls are now found in various aquariums and fish supply stores to be sold as pets.

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Don't let the axolotl's "smile" fool you—they are pretty ferocious and sometimes even cannibalistic. Always the axolotl will warn you with his clawed hands that look like pink stars. And when he eats, when he gathers a tangle of bloodworms into his mouth, you will understand how a galaxy first learns to spin in the dark, and how it grows.

**2. Questions While Searching for Birds with My Half-White Sons,  
Aged Six and Nine, National Audubon Bird Count Day, Oxford,  
Mississippi**

If we are going to look for birds all day, is anyone going to be looking for us if we get lost?

I thought you said God has his eye on every sparrow, so why are we counting when He already knows?

Is there a bathroom nearby?

Why won't you let me bring my telescope? There might be birds flying way, way up there, but we can't see them and then we'll mess up The Count.

Why do lady cardinals look so sad and boy cardinals look like they are going to a party? Is it because the boy cardinals have to learn how to dance so they will be popular?

Someone at school said bees are going missing and if we don't see any more bees, we're going to go missing, too. Is that true?

I don't want to be missing. But if I do, can I be missing with you, Mommy? Then I won't be so scared.

What about Daddy? I don't want Daddy to be missing.

What is camouflage?

If I wear red and stand next to a cardinal, would you be able to see me or would you only see the cardinal?

But isn't that scary for the boy cardinal? They can't camouflage on anything except a red wall. Or my red shirt. Lady cardinals are lucky! You can hardly see them.

Mommy, you are like a lady cardinal because you are brown.

Why do you have better camouflage than Daddy?

Right now, I have medium camouflage.

But will I be brown or white when I grow up?

Why do some white people not like brown people?

But don't worry, Mommy, you can hide in the forest from those bad people. You have good camouflage.

Can I have good camouflage even though I'm mixed?

At school we have to hide under our desks in case of bad people. We did that last week. It's called Lockdown! We have to be quiet like what we're doing now when we wait for birds.

Are there people who will hunt kids?

If hawks are circling around us, does that mean they think one of us might be good to hunt?

Is there a bathroom nearby?

Why is the redbud tree not called a purplebud tree? All the flowers are purple. It makes no sense.

Do hummingbirds ever get tired from flying and just want to swim and float in the water once in a while?

Is there anything for them to snack on when they are flying above the ocean, or do they just snack on air and pretend it is a flower?

I think the blue heron is very suspicious. He's so frozen, I feel bad for the frogs and fish that trusted that he is just a bird statue.

If I saw a bunch of turkey vultures looking at the house with their wings out, I would think something scary is going to happen.

I would think they just wanted me to come out and play.

Remember when we watched that lady put a tag on a hummingbird? I bet he didn't like that and when he got to Mexico, the other birds laughed and asked, "What's wrong with your ankle?" Then another lady painted a bird on my face and you made me wash it off at night. I was very sad.

Do birds have eyelids?

Do they ever close them when they fly?

Do they know how to wink at us? Because I think I saw a brown thrasher wink at me but I didn't tell anyone.

Is there a bathroom nearby now?

What happens if there is a bird count when I'm forty and we don't find any birds?

Will you be missing when I'm 40?

Will you be missing when I'm 50?

Mommy! What if there were a hundred more green birds in the forest right now, and we just didn't know it? And they were all camouflaged and watching us with our notepads, and we couldn't see them and they were giggling and telling each other our bird count is all wrong?

Birds don't giggle.

What if they are winking at each other, then?

### 3. *Catalpa* (*Catalpa speciosa*)

Catalpa trees can help you record the wind, and most of the wind's good, mighty slap is the crash from its heart-shaped leaves. Catalpas stand as one of the largest deciduous trees at almost sixty feet tall and are full of long bean pods and flat seeds, each with wings to help it fly. These bean pods inspire some to call it cigar tree, trumpet creeper, or Catawba. A catalpa planted too close to a house is a disaster, but how much disaster can it be if it gives good tonewood for guitars? All those songs call out to moths, like the sphinx moth who lay about 500 half-millimeter eggs at a time on these heart-shaped leaves, leaves with a spit curl at the point, not unlike a naughty boy from the fifties whose first drag race ends in defeat and milkshakes. A catalpa can give two brown girls in western Kansas a

green umbrella from the sun. “Don’t get too dark, too dark,” our mother would remind us as we ambled out into the bright Kansan sun. Every day after school, after the bus dropped me and my younger sister off at the doctor’s quarters at the Larned State Hospital, our classmates staring at us as the bus pulled away, I’d unlock the door from a key tied to a yarn necklace I wore to school and we’d go inside, fix ourselves snacks, and finish worksheets on fractions or practice spelling words. We’d wait till our mom called to say we could meet her in her office, a call that meant she was about ten minutes away from being done for the day and we could walk about a block or so to the administration building on the hospital grounds. Catalpa trees dotted the wide prairie hospital grounds and watched over us as we made our way to Mom’s office.

My sister and I knew not to go anywhere near the fence line wrapped in barbed wire, home of the criminally insane, whose inhabitants sometimes were given basketball privileges outside and behind three layers of barbed wire. Occasionally I allowed myself to look at them when I rode my blue banana-seat bike past, and sometimes one would wave.

Catalpa leaves can provide a juicy diet for caterpillars before they turn into sphinx moths. These leaves are the moth’s only source of food and, if left unchecked, the caterpillars can completely defoliate a single, mighty tree. Kids in the central plains know these “worms” as good spending money. The caterpillars (also known as catfish candy) make prized fishing bait; catfish and bluegill gobble them without seeming to get the least bit suspicious about how one suddenly started thrashing in the water.

Sometimes my sister and I gathered up coins for the vending machine in the lobby of my mom’s office. In 1986, a Little Debbie brownie cost a precious thirty-five cents, precious because what little allowance we received was never consistent, and so we couldn’t count on it for gummy bracelets stacked up my arm in imitation of Madonna, or to save up for jelly sandals, or to buy the occasional ice cream sandwich from Dairy Queen. But sometimes my sister would find just enough to split a brownie between us. After greeting the receptionist, riding the elevator up a few stories, and walking past the pool

tables and lounge, we'd greet our mother with chocolate bits in our smiles. "Cavities, cavities," she'd cluck and would drop what she was doing to hug and kiss us hello. I only pieced it together years later—how a good portion of her day was spent trying to help patients who hurled racist taunts ("Get out of here, Chink!") and violent threats against her. How did she manage to leave it all in that office and switch gears to listen to the ramblings of her fifth- and sixth-grade girls and their playground dramas, slights, and victories? I don't even remember her talking about this while she came home and then made us a hot meal from scratch. I only recall scanning her journals while she was in the shower or brushing her teeth. If not for those little peeks, I never would have known what she endured.

A foot-long catalpa leaf can cover the face of a sixth-grader. Especially if she gets stared at all day, sometimes even by the security guards patrolling the grounds. When you find yourself underneath one, you have your choice of green masks. The largest catalpa tree in Mississippi is just across from the campus Starbucks in the middle of the University of Mississippi. A brass plaque announces it, one of the centerpieces of the campus's "tree walk," a map of notable trees all over campus. The branches of this catalpa stretch horizontally almost as long as a bus, and have to be reinforced in several areas from metal supports so the branches that are almost pulped at the center don't fall apart and land on an unsuspecting coed.

For me, catalpa trees always meant shade from bright sun and shelter from unblinking eyes. I thought I'd want to hide plenty of times once I moved to the South, and for the first time in my life, I haven't ever needed to. My mother is retired now. She plants trees with much smaller leaves and tends to them after her daily walk. When I walk by this catalpa tree to and from teaching, I make note of which leaves could cover my face entirely if I needed it again. I keep walking.

#### 4. Firefly (*Photinus pyralis*)

What a firefly can do is light a memory and light a path toward tending the earth. It is the final week of our stay at the Grisham House, a ten-month

residency at the University of Mississippi where my family temporarily luxuriates on seventy-seven acres of land outside Oxford, Mississippi. Outside, in so much alone space, my sons can see the stars in majesty for the first time without light pollution. They pick out constellations readily because my father has shown them how. They see the stream of stars, the Milky Way, and marvel.

But the treat in this final week is the abundance of fireflies. With the lights to the estate completely turned off, we see, at first, nothing, but patience is rewarded and the illumination dots the already humid May air.

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It is this way with wonder: it takes a patience and it takes putting yourself in the right place in time. It requires that we are curious enough to suffer the small distractions in order to find the world.

When I make National Poetry Month visits to elementary schools, I sometimes talk about fireflies to conjure up memory and sensory details of the outdoors. Recently in a class of twenty-two students, seventeen had never even seen a firefly—they completely thought I was kidding around and simply inventing an insect.

I asked them what they did for fun in the summer in that crepusculo-pink time just before dinner. For me, growing up in the Midwest—kickball, tag, riding bikes—anything really, until our parents flicked on the porchlight.

Their answer: video games and movies. Always indoors.

One of the saddest days of my teaching is when I had to bring up a video online of what a firefly looks like, to prove they do, indeed, exist, and what a field of them look like at night. *Seventeen of twenty-two had never seen a firefly glow.* Never caught one to slide into an empty jam jar, never had one glow in their sweaty hands. Granted, there has been a national decrease in fireflies over the last decade, but each year, there are fewer kids who are just playing outside. The number of students who can tell the difference, for example,

between a maple leaf and an oak leaf has dwindled over the last decade in my college-level environmental classes, too.

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So what can we do to connect the idea of wonder to our lives? I think the best thing you can do is to model curiosity and wonder yourself. My writing students always know what I'm actively researching and studying, and I know what flora and fauna *they* are interested in because that's just how we banter at the beginning of each class. We have the privilege and the honor of being hero to so many kids, either by being parents or teachers or even just neighbors or a friendly face they see at their local bodega. Children watch us always on how to model some shape of a life. Those of us who've spent any time outdoors could take the time to share kindling and spark to ignite kids' curiosity. And when that curiosity burns and turns to wonder—the world gets a grown-up who is willing to fight for this environment, a grown-up who I promise you will have less of an appetite for destruction of this planet.

I hope I never ever stop being curious and feeling like a student on this planet. Scientists still don't know how, when, or why fireflies decide to stay visually silent. Even though a field of tall grass can teem with fireflies, the space and time between flashes have grown longer over the years. My sons want to know the answer to these increasing silences, too. When we started looking for a new house in Mississippi, one of the only requirements my sons had (besides having other kids nearby) was to make sure they could still catch fireflies outside. And there are always whippoorwill songs and cephalopods to marvel over. I still need to learn the color names of all the shades of blue in the Aegean Sea—so much bounty and life I want to record on the page.




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This annual essay, inspired by the work of Meridel Le Sueur, was funded by the generous contribution of Margaret Wurtele.