Celebrations 2021

University of Mississippi Writing Project

University of Mississippi. Office of Pre-College Programs

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Celebrations

2021
short story, fiction, poetry, non-fiction, expository essay, narrative essay

A Celebration of Wonder

The Thirteenth Annual University of Mississippi Writing Competition
THE Celebration OF WONDER

WONDER (n): A FEELING OF SURPRISE MINGLED WITH ADMIRATION, CAUSED BY SOMETHING BEAUTIFUL, UNEXPECTED, UNFAMILIAR, OR INEXPICABLE.

Every year we celebrate a different theme. The theme of this issue of Celebrations is wonder. Specifically, the Celebration of the wonder we find in seemingly simple objects, conversations, and everyday life.

EDITORS Note

Since 2009, in coordination with the UM Office of Pre-College Programs, the University of Mississippi Writing Project has hosted an annual Celebration of Writing competition with a different theme each year. Many talented young writers and artists from across the region and the state have shared their work with us, and it has been our pleasure to see them go on to accomplish great things as writers and professionals. This year, for the first time, we are excited to share a selection of their work with a broader audience through our new literary magazine, Celebrations.

The magazine features our first, second, and third place winners from the 2020 Celebration of Wonder writing competition. In it, you’ll find a mix of essays, poems, and short stories from middle and high school students along with original student artwork. We hope you will discover wonder anew through the eyes of these writers as they notice all that is marvelous and strange – in nature, in the work of human hands, in relationships, and deep within ourselves. We couldn’t be more proud of their creativity and vision. Enjoy!
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I struggle to unlock the trunk of my mother’s car, squinting in the dark to make out the silver glow of the key slot. Part of me still can’t believe I’m doing this.

Every summer I can remember, my family has spent a week at our boathouse. It’s not fancy, but it’s ours. My favorite part every year is night fishing with my dad. But my dad went home early yesterday, and tomorrow morning we’ll leave too.

The car is already packed, my mom assumed I wouldn’t fish without my dad. I never have before, and the quickening pace of my heart reminds me that deep down I would rather keep it that way. Still, I manage to pry out my dingy fishing rod. The packed supplies should have been my excuse. I’m usually better at putting off things I would rather not do. Nobody is making me, I remind myself. But my dad is proud of me when I fish. It’s the only real father-son time we have. He knows I’m hesitant, but I hide most of my reservations around him. And I know he’ll be proud as I recount my night fishing tales for him tomorrow.

In the boat shed, I fumble for the lights, knowing I won’t be able to keep them on for long unless I’m willing to be devoured by mosquitoes. I grab a single heavy-duty glove.
I don’t like holding fish. I never have. I’m not particularly weary of wildlife. I’d even say I’m more willing to handle it than most. But I don’t like fish. Not quite sure why. The ones we catch here are small brim, not much bigger than my hands. But I can never seem to properly slide my hand over their spiny dorsal fins. The delicate space between my thumb and index finger feels tissue thin as their pectoral fins wave wildly. My grip feels stiff and brittle as they thrash, as if I’m suddenly weaker than a two ounce fish. The glove gives me control and my nerves wash away. I don’t wear it around my dad though, he thinks it’s silly. I switch off the lights. A splash in the distance and I begin to set up my line. Clasp. Weight. Hook. Usually my dad and I would use a bait fish. But I’m using worms. My stomach lurches at the prospect of catching anything large enough to swallow a blue-gill. I grab the rod to bait it, and my hand slides clumsily down the line. The barbed hook sticks my palm slightly, not enough to be stuck. I move more carefully after.

The dock is across the yard from the house. We have a small motor boat, but we don’t use it for fishing. Sometimes I like to sit in the parked boat while I fish, just to feel the gentle rock of the waves. Whenever another boat passes, its wake slams our boat repeatedly against the dock. My dad and I like to poke fun at the speeding party boats, because one day one will crash into a log. The “lake” is incredibly shallow. Only six feet on the sides, and you can stand in the middle. It seems like the shallow water would only shelter small fish, but the neighbors claim to have caught a 30 lb catfish.

Remembering this, I remove the sinker and fasten a bobber. It’s dumb, but I catch myself consciously hoping I’ll finish tonight without a single bite. I don’t remember ever being this scared with my dad. I feel like I’ve run a mile just sitting on the dock.

A series of splashes to my left and I pick up the rod. Click. I set it close to the dock, on the right. The bobber lands silently and I reel until I feel it set.

Maybe I should’ve worn a jacket. I didn’t notice the cold until now. I’m still not sure how long I’m going to stay out. I do want to fish, despite my fear. I hate that I’m so scared. I’m fifteen, not seven.

Thunk. Thunk. Thud. The beats between the impacts were irregular. I stand, feeling out each step with the toe of my sneakers to avoid tripping. It’s never this dark out at home, it feels like I’m in a closet with the lights off. Too dark to see where the air meets the water. I run my hands over the metal side of the boat. It slammed into the dock, but the water is still. No wake. My arm tenses as I push the boat out slightly and pull it back in. It doesn’t feel like there is anything under it.

Whirrrrr. I turn around and my bobber is gone. Ripples splish from under the dock. I pick up my rod slowly and for a moment I’m not sure which direction to reel. My fingers move without me
on instinct, reeling slightly. I’m relieved to feel that the fish is light. I’m not sure what I expected. *The thing that pushed the boat?* Why did I assume it was a thing? It *was* certainly just a rogue wave.

My cheap rod bends under the slight weight of the fish. It surfaces and I stare at it. It takes me a little too long to recognize it. A catfish, about eight inches long. I remember them differently, weren’t their eyes less defined, or their fins less round? But it has to be a catfish, with its whiskers and gaping mouth. The fish was strange in the dark. The contrast made its pale skin appear ghost white. I’m still not sure what is off about it. I know catfish don’t have scales, but rough skin. Its gills and mouth flapped wildly as it struggled for breath. Almost like it was screaming. Blood trickled down its side. Catfish are fleshy, so they bleed easy. Something about its body disturbed me. My stomach seems as soft and as easy to tear as the fish’s.

I fumble for my phone in my pocket and snap a picture. The flash startles the fish and it freezes. I can’t see the hook, so I decide to cut the line. Catfish have venomous barbs on their pectoral fins. They’re strong fish anyway, it’ll be able to spit it out.

I’m bothered by how lively it looks as it swims away, twisting from side to side. It looks like a corpse, I half expected it to float.

My foot pushes something over the edge of the dock and my heart drops. Peering into the water and seeing nothing, I slowly extend my fingers, careful not to disturb the water’s surface. Wondering what I could’ve possibly knocked in, I check with my other arm and feel my phone safely behind me. The relief fades instantly as I feel something fleshy and cold brush against my fingers. With a start, I throw myself back away from the edge. Peering over my knees, my breath returns as I make out the floating shape of my leather glove. I fish out the soaked glove and toss it onto the boat.

After setting up my line again, I cast it out further from the dock. The bobber is resting on top of the tackle kit, but I don’t remember taking it off. I wrap the line around a nail to make sure I don’t lose it. My dad isn’t careful, he’s lost a couple of rods to Lake Wilson. Remembering him, I pull out my phone and send him the picture. It takes a minute to send all the way out here. Still, I feel less alone.

It’s much colder now, I can even see my breath. Actually, *I should go inside now.* I feel satisfied. I stayed out here, even though I was nervous. It was a nice night to conclude my trip.

Finding my rod, I reel briskly. *Wait. Tug.* It’s faint but undeniable. My blood runs cold and thin like lake-water. My mouth feels viscous. I reel more but still don’t feel the weight of the fish. *Did I remember to set it?* I notice myself breathing through my mouth, like the catfish.

*Thunk. Pause. Thud thud.* My throat is raw, but I can’t seem to breathe any other way. I need to cut the line.
Go inside. The scissors are all the way by the boat. I thought the dock was shorter. My feet don’t even feel like they’re touching the wood.

Biting through the line doesn’t seem silly anymore. I drop the rod. **Tug.** I grab the line. **Tug.** It presses into my skin. Indents my fingertips. **Tug.** My teeth close on the plastic wire and my heart stops. Not a tug, but a pull. Purposeful. I’m not quite sure when my sneakers leave the dock.

**Splash.**
CRISP FALL

The breeze is ever so calming and sweet;
It carries a holiday with myriad tasty treats;
The crunchy leaves flow through the air;
As they sometimes get caught in our wind mangled hair;
The smell of pumpkin spice is ever so nice;
   And the fire cracks and pops;
As my mother brushes my golden locks
The flames roar with might as the ashes blow at the lightest touch of air;
The fire dances without the slightest care;
   And the memories keep on piling
They stay with you forever even in the midst of dying
Oh, how I want to stay here forever in the cold;
But I think as soon as it is young, the fall gets old;
The red on the trees turns to brown and disappears;
   I grieve at the sight of shed tears;
Fall is coming to an end;
Say goodbye to it my friend;
Winter is soon to take over;
And after we will see plentiful clover;
The seasons rally and root as the earth rotates;
   And in spite of this it motivates;
Others look forward to move on;
Whilst more things are already gone;
While some fade into the darkness of death;
   I breathe my last breath;
And I reflect upon my last crisp fall

MS POETRY | ANNSLEE YOUNG
A sharp pain bloomed in Fable’s side, an identical pang of pain in the same spot rung again. Again. Again. Again. Until she was forced to pull herself out of the warm, crow-black waves of slumber. Last night she had wandered into the small village; it was just like the rest, filled with happy villagers who did not notice the small, red-haired girl who had slipped into their midst. Now she laid on the cold cobblestones of the alleyway, staring up into the faces of two children. The girl looking down on her had luscious, frost-white locks of hair, thorn-sharp cheekbones, and slender eyes that were almost as black as the velvet cloak draped over her shoulders. The boy’s corkscrew curls were golden, his face round and smattered with freckles, and his smile was endearingly crooked.

“Are you dead?” The boy asked, looking down at a startled Fable. Her tongue felt swollen and no words formed. The girl slapped the boy with a milk-pale hand.

“No, she is not dead! The poor thing just opened its eyes. I cannot believe you would be so stupid, Loc.” The pale girl spat. She had the voice of someone whose veins brimmed with poison.

Chill spiders slithered down Fable’s spine. Ever since her father died, Fable had been on her own. She drifted from village to village, sleeping in alleys, and if she was lucky, an abandoned barn. She would beg for scraps, and when she overstayed her welcome, she would leave. In every town there were children. When Fable was very young, she would try to become friends with them. They would take one look at her shreddered, dirty clothes, her matted tangles of red hair, and the grime that coated her unnourished body, and they would either run away or throw stones at her. She did not know when she stopped being friendly. It was just as if one day she woke up and decided that being polite and taking the time to talk to the other children was pointless. She wondered what she would have been like if she was kind, if those children had been kind to her, but most of all she wondered what would have happened if her father’s ship had not gone down and he had not sunk to the bottom of the Tysin Sea. The world was cold, so Fable had to be colder.

The boy, Loc, extended a hand. Fable blinked. Once. Twice. Involuntary, she lifted her own quivering hand. Loc pulled her to her feet, which swayed weakly beneath her. The girl looked at her, then Loc, who nodded. The girl trailed a winter-cold finger down Fable’s cheek; her delicate touch left goose flesh in its wake. Fable’s eyes fluttered and her body seemed to lose its tethers to the earth. The world went black.

Fable expected to wake up in the ally, her body shivering with cold, but still in the ally. Instead, when Fable’s eyes opened, she was in some sort of study. Her gawky wrists were bound, and her too-thin body was tied to an overstuffed armchair with scraps of
embroidered silk. The walls were lined with leather bound books, and several more pieces of furniture sat in a neat circle around her, strewn with richly-dyed throw pillows. Fable yelped when a woman materialized out of the seemingly thin air in front of where she sat tied. The woman was tall and slender. Her dark hair was swept into an up-do, slate-gray dress buttoned up to her throat, and round eyes the color of the caramel candies Fable had seen in shop windows, but never had the money to buy.

“Who are you? Where am I?” Fable asked in a panicked whisper.

“To answer your first question, you may call me Miss Mab. To answer your second question, you are in Mapletoe Manor,” the woman replied smoothly. Questions swarmed Fable’s head like angry bees, but she asked only one.

“What is the Mapletoe Manor?”

Miss Mab’s lips curved into a smile, as she said, “A place you only find with a spool of thread and the humbleness to ask directions from a crow.” This woman is insane, Fable thought.

“Why am I here?” Fable asked the next question that popped into her head.

“Well, I would say that you find yourself in this particular place because you wonder. Dear girl, you may not know this, but those who wonder have extraordinary gifts. You, if I am not mistaken, wonder quite often about the past. There is no name for those of us who wonder, other than wonderers, but we have our own little system in the world.” Fable gaped at the woman; she did often wonder about the past. But how did she know?

“Fable, please do not gape. It is rude,” Miss Mab deadpanned.

“How do you know my name?” Fable asked, surprised that she was capable of speech.

“I have my ways, but that is neither this nor that. There is a reason you find yourself in this fine study.” Miss Mab fixed Fable with a look that said, Well, are you going to ask? Fable’s chapped lips parted, but before any words escaped, Miss Mab spoke.

“You are formally invited to a celebration of wonder.”

Fable stammered, choppy sounds pouring from her mouth. Never in her life had she been invited to anything.

“Wondering makes the world go round. It is a gift, something to celebrate,” Miss Mab stated. Looking at this woman’s sure face made something stir in Fable. She told herself, lying in the darkest of nights that wondering
was useless, constantly trying to bury it in the darkest corners of herself, but it always resurfaced like a cork in water. She was beginning to think that might not be a bad thing.

Downstairs, Mapletoe Manor was a beautiful wonderland of color; glowing lanterns bobbed lazily in midair, strange people in even stranger costumes danced and twirled about the huge manor, and tables spilled over with sumptuous foods. The dress Fable wore was loaned to her by the pale, freakish girl in the alley. The gown was like a tent on Fable’s bird-like frame, but the emerald-green skirt reminded Fable of a forest, and the fabric smelled of morning dewdrops and baked bread. She only had nice clothes when she was young, before the shipwreck. Wonderers, Fable thought, all of these people are like me. The next hours felt like a blissful, rosy eternity, time blurring with each twirl she took and each bite of delicious food she ate. She could have stayed there forever - warm, full, and among her own kind, the own kind she did not know existed until about an hour ago. Fable was admiring the fluttering wings of the persimmon-orange butterflies perched in a woman’s hair when a loud voice rang over the vibrant crowd.

“Fable?” Miss Mab called out. The wonderers parted, curious faces caked with makeup and glitter peered at Fable. Miss Mab beckoned to her again, smiling excitedly. The lacy, bottle-green peacock feathers gracing the neckline of Miss Mab’s costume brushed the woman’s pointed chin, set by the teal silks of her dress and the glinting diamond pins in her hair, the opposite of the conservative dress and bun she wore earlier. On shaky feet, Fable slowly progressed to where the woman stood, lip quivering pathetically as the wonderer’s eyes burned into her.

“Please welcome Fable, the newest wonderer!” Miss Mab crowed to the crowd, who erupted into clapping. Then, Miss Mab took Fable’s hands in her own; when she pulled back, a single rose remained in Fable’s hands. Fable stared at the silken, pink petals of the bloom and something electric and surging soared inside of her. The feeling kissed every nerve of her body with excitement until she was trembling like a tree in a storm. Suddenly the feeling was gone, and so was the rose. In her hands, Fable held a small mound of black powder that carried the sulfuric stench of smoke. Smoke made powder, she thought. The black powder drifted through her fingers, floating to the wood floor like dark snow. At once, the wonderers burst into cheers, causing Fable’s thin cheeks to flush red. Miss Mab twirled her slender fingers in the air, the powder lifting off of the floor and flowing towards her fingertips. Her hand closed around the floating powder, and a second later a small bird flitted out. The bird’s soft feathers were saffron-yellow and faded to hues of tangerine-orange and scarlet. The small creature cartwheeled around in the air before exploding into a shower of yellow sparks. That shower of sparks, in the middle of the celebration of wonder, sounded the start of Fable’s new life.
Mary sat in anticipation. The cold metal seat bit into her skin as the door closed. With a loud creak, she began to rise.

The Ferris wheel was the main attraction in the dilapidated amusement park, and she watched the slowly shrinking faces of the people milling around below as they waited their turn. The browning grass and rusting rides concocted an increasingly depressing view. Swinging her legs, she craned her head to look through the window as the gray and dreary sky neared. It was going to rain soon. With a resigned creak, the cabin began its descent.

As Mary stepped off the ride, she brushed her dingy dress off and made her way through the screaming, faceless crowd. Up above, the sky rumbled menacingly. The Ferris wheel began to ascend again behind her, the grimy cabins creaking and swaying in the wind. As she walked, Mary could feel the crowd thinning around her. A flash of white flitted across her vision. A rabbit? Was that... three ears? Impossible. Rubbing her eyes, she continued on her way, training her eyes on the dirt path and trying not to glance at the rabbit. The beginnings of a headache were creeping in; perhaps she should go home. Suddenly, a loud clap of thunder sounded, and the rain began pouring down in torrents. Stopping a moment to glare at the sky, Mary made her way to the shelter of a large, decaying tree, all the while grumbling about her horrendous luck. A bench crouched beneath the tree, beckoning Mary to rest her tired feet. All around her, the frantic crowd scattered and dissipated, leaving nothing but the rain. Amidst the quiet, the wind howled with sorrow through the abandoned park. Mary tilted her head back and closed her eyes. Distantly, the desolate melody of the merry-go-round floated through the air.

Ring-a-round the rosie,
A pocket full of posies,
Ashes!
Ashes!
We all fall down...

With a jolt, Mary woke up. The rain had stopped, and the sun shone on her upturned face. As if on cue, a large shadow loomed over her.
Staring down at her was what she could only assume was a man in a bunny suit. He sang,

“Well, well, well, what do we have here?

A face with no smile, but rather a bit of fear?

This won’t do, we can’t have that.

I must fix this at the drop of a hat!”

Mary scrambled off the bench with fright and looked around. Slowly, her alarm changed into newfound awe. The collapsing park had transformed into a child’s paradise; a brand new, top-of-the-line roller coaster track had replaced the old run-down one, sunlight beat down from above, and the trees seemed to glitter with little green gems. At the center of it all, the Ferris wheel stood, towering proudly over the whole park. People filled the streets, and food trucks dotted every corner. The roads were freshly paved with glowing yellow bricks; even the people seemed to glow. Everywhere she looked, there was color and movement. Laughter rang through the air like church bells. The man in the rabbit suit regarded her with a look. No... It wasn’t a costume. The rabbit was mechanical. Seemingly satisfied with what it saw, the animatronic began again.

“Welcome to Smile Land,

Where even the land wears a smile!

Everyone here lends a hand,

And we have fun all the while!”

Finishing with an extravagant bow, the machine waited for a reaction. In the crowd behind it, a man began to choke and collapsed with a scream. Blood streamed from his nose, and burns opened along his skin. All the while, the smiles of the people and the rabbit never faltered. No one paid him any attention. Mary stood, gaping, and the machine began again.

“The fun waits for no one!

With our premium pass, you can play a ton!”

Again, Mary showed no reaction.
I must leave here, she thought.

I must get away!

Away!

Away!

Away!

The rabbit seemed to get a little angry.

“We can assure you an enjoyable experience.

Are you not having fun?

Why, how curious.”

Once again, the rabbit waited. As the seconds ticked by, the machine became increasingly furious. Finally, it made a sharp, jerking gesture. Suddenly, Mary was riding on a roller coaster with the wind whipping through her hair and screams of joy ripping through the air. Mary began to panic, confusion lacing her mind. When at last, the ride slowed to a stop, she leapt out of her seat with relief. A wave of sudden fatigue and nausea crashed through her. Strange. She was not prone to motion sickness.

Blood leaked from the twitching body of a man.

Remember, Smile Land is always on your side!”

A robotic voice cut through the crowd: the rabbit from before, now handing out fliers to the people streaming by. A woman, head thrown back in laughter, walked by, clutching a child with one hand and grabbing a flier with the other. Suddenly, she lurched and collapsed, blood pooling around her. The child raced away. Neither the animatronic nor the crowd reacted. Mary tried to rush to the lady’s side, but she was whisked away again, this time onto a drop tower. The rabbit was seated next to her and turned to give her a wide grin. As the ride plunged, a child slumped forward in his seat. Burns scoured his arms. Again, Mary was whisked away before she could see anything, this time to a swing ride. Someone in the crowd collapsed, screaming while the rabbit sold tickets nearby. Once again, Mary was whisked away to another attraction before seeing anything.

But why do I want to look? she asked herself.

I should spend my time having fun instead.

“We hope you enjoyed your ride!”
Why does the sun never move? I get more time to play; I shouldn’t complain.

People are collapsing! It has nothing to do with me.

A couple laid, bodies cold, still clutching each other.

There is blood everywhere! Someone else will clean it up. I have no reason to care.

A woman screamed in agony.

What is going on? All that matters is that you can have fun.

A man slumped in his seat, blood dripping from his nose.

How did I get here? It doesn’t matter if I’m already here.

The rabbit grinned while behind a bundle of balloons.

What am I doing here? I was here to have fun, of course; I need no other reason.

A child screamed in pain, tears streaming down their face.

I must leave! There is no need; the park has good food, and I can have fun all day.

The rabbit handed her a bag of popcorn.

What was my name? I have no need for such a trivial thing.

The voices in her head told her, Leave, Leave, Leave!

And yet, they said, Stay, Stay, Stay!

A trickle of blood streamed from her nose as she stumbled around in a daze, nauseous and feverish.
At some point, she started to move on her own accord. Voices screamed everywhere she turned, and the sound of it burrowed into her brain and rang in her ears. And yet, one thing repeated over and over again: the Ferris wheel. Slowly, she made her way to the large wheel, silhouetted against the bright blue sky. She clumsily climbed into the cabin, and the door shut behind her. Her headache was coming back. With a sudden jerk, she began to rise.

Up.
Up.
Up.
Up.

As the cabin began to reach its highest peak, she leaned out the window. Burns opened along her skin. Thunder rumbled in the distance, and there was a faint sound of rain falling. With a final sigh, she flung her arms open and tumbled out of the cabin.

Down.
Down.
Down.
There were stars in my eyes when I arrived at the museum
My thirst of knowledge so deprived, for a sip I'd give a limb
I gamboled up the staircase finally free
I felt like a caged bird, who had found liberty

My wonder about the world was no longer in a tomb
It was now a beautiful seed, beginning to bloom
I went to the animal exhibit, my favorite room
Then I ran to the space exhibit and asked about the moon

I plied, “how does the moon affect the tides?”
My mom responded with, “God this is going to be a long car ride”
Despite all the answers she attempted to provide
My curiosity and wonder would never subside

The thoughts in my head began to permeate my mind
I had to find the answers to my questions fast, I was running out of time
Here’s where my wonder hit its prime
As sudden as Celosia, and as sharp as thyme

I realized it would never stop blooming
If knowledge was the thing it was consuming
This feeling would never come back, is what I was presuming
But little did I know its presence would always be looming
THE WONDERS OF THE UNIVERSE

HS ESSAY | AMINATA BA
1 out of 400 trillion.

On the night of October 15th, 2004, at 11:21 p.m., I entered into this logic-defying thing known as life. I emerged with nothing to my name but the hopes and dreams of two immigrants on the off-chance of 1 out of 400 trillion that the forces of this intricate and unyielding universe would come together to create me.

Me.

A child of supernovas, sowed by the seeds of stardust. A walking manifestation of the very perplexities that entangle the expansions of the cosmos. A procurer of a microbiome within my brain that replicates the intricacies of our universe.

A child.

In the early years of my life, I grew and learned and listened and explored the inner-workings of my consciousness through the lens of my youth. My development relied solely on imagination, on the flow of my mind to unconstrained, untainted depths and heights. Wherever I went, whatever I did, whatever I saw went through a conscious stream of imagination. The trials and tribulations left no tear on me as long as I had my mind in all its beauty. My imagination protected me. My imagination comforted and shielded me like a cozy blanket on a winter’s night. My imagination brought me a lifetime’s worth of knowledge. My imagination gave me an intuition that has yet to fail me. With my imagination, I was the master of my universe-- I was the master of the universe.

I was.
The further away I am from my childhood, the closer I am to losing touch with my imagination. As I near my 16th birthday, my mind is constantly racing with thoughts of the past. When I reflect on my past, my heart shudders along with me. My heart weighs heavy when I reminisce on my once strong bond with my imagination, which has since been hindered by the monotony of life and the suppression at the hands of the education system. Now, my perception has been warped to one that is somewhat nihilistic. A solemn shadow rests perpetually on my smile, hidden to the naked eye. I no longer feel connected to my imagination, for it is with me only in times of immense sorrow to distract me for a fleeting moment. Wonder is no longer a tool for me to adapt, to create, and to dream. It is only a medium of worry, and sadness, and pain.

**Wonder.**

As disconnected as I feel from my imagination, it is and will always be my permanent source of happiness. The only thing that brings me joy is wonder. Wondering about the well-being of my friends. Wondering about the happiness that may come to me in the future. Wondering about all the places my mind has traveled, but my body has yet to do so. Wonder has taught me to love. Wonder has taught me to enjoy. Wonder has taught me to challenge myself. Wonder has taught me that life is a microcosm of the universe. Like stars in the universe, we are forged from incomprehensible, yet spectacular conditions. We are composed of hundreds of trillions of parts, each playing an integral role in our functioning. Like the universe, our minds are vast and limitless, ever-expanding with knowledge and venturing into uncharted territories. As we get older, there are times in which we feel as if we are aimlessly drifting alone in a dark and cold place, seeming as though happiness is billions of light-years away. At times, we get hit by unforeseen circumstances that leave permanent craters on our souls and bodies, as if we were a planet impacted by an asteroid. When we die, our deaths mirror that of a supernova, sending shock-waves throughout the universe and leaving a final impact that lasts for years. Wonder has allowed me to travel farther into the realms of the universe than any astronaut will ever do so. Wonder is everything.
Ripped play-clothes, lemonade stands

The feeling of a grandmother’s warm and caring hands

Butterfly nets, bright blue skies

The brushy white clouds that hang over high

A puppy’s wagging tail, a pipe cleaner’s spring

Glitter stuck in short hair like feathers on a wing

Bright construction paper, climbing up the big trees

Packs of sparkly bandaids for when somebody scraped their knees

Summer hours spent on the playground, little stars in the big night sky

A child’s sweet laugh that’s light and high

Drifting from these simple times, being forced to say goodbye to those sweet days,

A childhood’s memories and its fleeting ways
Since Adama was five, she visited her grandmother, Isatou, for her summer holidays in The Gambia. Isatou was a griot and Adama had grown up around and enjoyed the stories her grandmother told through song. However, the death of Adama’s mother left a deep divide between the two. Adama could no longer feel the enchanting and captivating nature of the stories her grandmother told. In her eyes, they had become meaningless retellings of little substance. Nonetheless, Isatou was still devoted to her craft. She believed she was carrying on the stories of many other griots from over thousands of years while also retaining the legacy of her family; her mother had been a griot, and her mother’s mother had also been a griot. The art of storytelling coursed through her family’s blood.

Adama chose to stay home in Kanifing during her grandmother’s voyages to neighboring villages and countries to tell her stories. She preferred the sandy beaches and salty seas of the district compared to being her grandmother’s assistant in rural areas of the country. As Isatou prepared for her next journey, she began to cook for Adama so she would have food while she was gone.

“Adama, come help me make domoda, please,” Isatou called.

Adama did not feel willing to cook yet another batch of peanut butter stew, but grudgingly replied, “Coming grandma.”
Isatou prepared the chicken while Adama chopped bell peppers, onions, and tomatoes into small pieces. They worked in silence; the only noise in the kitchen was the sound of Adama crushing Maggi bouillon cubes with the end of a knife and the whirring of the gas stove. There was tension between the two, but it went unaddressed.

While she cooked, Adama daydreamed about how she would spend her last day in Kanifing. She would go to the beach with her cousin, Mariam, one last time, and they would stock up on sweets and souvenirs before they were to return to the United Kingdom. Adama rarely left the house during the summers that she visited The Gambia. She mostly left when forced to by Isatou when they went to visit her relatives, in which Adama would stay at their houses for hours on end as Isatou talked to everyone well into the night. She only left on her own to restock on Vimto and to go to the beach to dip her toes into the Atlantic Ocean.

Before her mother’s death, Adama frequently went on storytelling voyages with her grandmother. Afterward, however, she felt the art had lost its charm. She frequently stayed behind as Isatou traveled all over West Africa, having her elder relatives come to check on her while she stayed in the house by herself. Isatou’s voyages were when the two spent most of their time together. Now, they occasionally made small talk and seldomly had full-on conversations with each other.

“Adama, I’m leaving tomorrow morning, but you can still come if you’d like,” Isatou said, making a small crack in the verbal barrier between the two.

Adama paused for a moment. It had been the first time in thirteen years that Isatou had asked Adama to accompany her on one of her trips. Adama knew that her grandmother wanted for her to join her to see her family’s treasured gift in action for the first time in years. Isatou wanted for her to become a griot also, as Adama’s mother did not have the chance to. Adama could tell that her grandmother still held out hope that the family tradition would continue through her, but she could not bring herself to do it. Adama felt betrayed by the stories her grandmother told, and she also felt that many of them were untrue.

Adama often thought back to one particular story that Isatou told; it centered around a common African proverb: “Kindness is a language the blind can see and the deaf can hear.” Growing up, Adama heard the quote occasionally, but it was never featured in her grandmother’s work until a few months after the death of her mother. Isatou’s retelling featured a hunter, an antelope, and a lion. The hunter planned to poach the antelope while on an expedition. However, he saw that it was searching for food and decided to give it a handful of grass and let it go. A few hours later, a lion entrapped the hunter. As a reward for
“Kindness is a language the blind can see and the deaf can hear.”
sparing the life of the antelope, a mystical god granted mercy upon the hunter’s own life. During the performance, anger pent up inside Adama.

“Hadn’t my mother treated people with kindness?”

How come her life was not spared, even though she was kind to everyone?” she thought. Adama’s trust in her grandmother’s stories deteriorated, and she found it difficult to see the majestic nature of them again.

“No, grandma, I think I’ll stay here,” Adama finally replied after a long pause. She could tell that her grandmother felt defeated by her response. “Maybe next year,” she added, trying to give Isatou some hope.

The next morning, Adama awoke to an empty house. She plopped down on the sofa and turned on the television, flipping between channels. She sat there watching an international channel and using her phone intermittently until she heard a loud knock on the front door. She looked out the window, only to see her cousin, Mariam, frantically waving at her.

“Let me inside,” Mariam mouthed. Adama opened the door for her cousin, pulling her into an embrace. “Look who’s here early,” she said.

“I thought since you had the house to yourself, we could get an early start to our last day.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Adama replied.

The two girls left the house to go to the market in Serekunda. Afterward, they ventured to Mariam’s aunt’s house so Mariam could get the rest of her items, as she would be staying at Isatou’s house for the last day. When they made it back to Kanifing, it was almost 7:00 p.m. They hadn’t had time to go to the beach earlier in the day, so they decided to go and stay there for a couple of hours until the day grew dark.

They splashed their feet in the ocean, making sure to take lots of pictures on their phones to capture the moment. Adama picked up shells that lined the shore for her collection back home in London. Eventually, the two made their way to the car to go back to the house. However, something caught Mariam’s eye. In her peripheral view, she saw a small shack with a sign that read Griot Performances from across the street.

“Adama,” she pointed. “Look, they’ve got griot performances in that building. We need to go there.”

“Now?” Adama asked, beginning to
feel uneasy.

“Yes, now! Auntie Isatou does them, right? I’ve never seen one before, and I’ve always wanted to.”

Adama knew that it would be difficult to persuade Mariam against going to the performance. She desperately wanted to tell her that they should skip it, but she thought about the trouble she would have explaining to Mariam why she wanted to go home. Instead, Adama chose to stay quiet. Mariam took her silence as a form of compliance.

The performance house looked small on the outside, but its interior was fairly large. Its walls were lined with blue lights and the smell of myrrh emanated throughout the building.

Adama glanced around nervously. “Why are we here?” she asked Mariam.

“Because I want to see a griot performance! You don’t want to see one too?”

Adama grunted, though she wanted to scream, “No! I don’t!”

As the two seated themselves at a small table, a tall, gaunt man graced the stage a few feet away from them. The chatter in the audience ceased as the man began to play a kora. The sound was sweet and harmonious to Adama, but it also left a bitter taste in her mouth. She turned to Mariam and saw that her eyes had grown wide and had a curious glow to them. Her heart began to ache as the man continued with the music. She thought back to all of Isatou’s performances that she had attended and could almost hear her grandmother’s voice telling stories that accompanied the rhythmic patterns of the kora. Adama started to feel as she did when she was a young girl sitting in the audience admiring her grandmother’s work.

After the performance was over, the man gave a subtle nod in Adama’s direction. His warmhearted eyes had a slight glaze to them, as if they were beginning to water. Adama was bemused. “Why did he look directly at me?” she thought.

“Do you think he’s going to do another performance?” Mariam asked. “Let’s go ask him!” She grabbed Adama’s hand and led her outside before she could think of a reply.

“Oh, there he is!” Mariam pointed.

The uneasiness in Adama’s stomach had yet to dissipate. Once she was in front of the man, the feeling only intensified. The man was middle-aged with deep creases around his eyes and cheeks. The kind nature of his eyes was one that Adama found familiar, but she could not identify where she had initially seen them. She searched the man’s face for clues, but her search was to no avail.

Mariam tried to get the man’s attention
as he spoke with other audience members. “Excuse me, excuse me, sir! I was wondering if you would do another performance tonight. I found your first one deeply moving.” She tried her hardest to flatter the griot.

“I’m afraid that is all for tonight,” the man replied.

Suddenly, Adama felt an immense urge to ask the man a question. Before he turned his back, she hastily questioned, “What was your story about, sir?” She felt as if she had accidentally shouted at the man.

The griot turned around and smiled at her. He did not say anything in response, and instead put a small sliver of paper into the palm of her hand.

She blinked at the paper in confusion.

“What was all that fuss about? Do you know him, Adama?”

Adama was only able to utter a few incomprehensible phrases. She stood in the sand and felt the summer night’s heat against her ears as she found herself unable to move.

On the short car ride back to her grandmother’s house, Adama could only keep her focus on the griot. Her mind raced as she thought, “Who was he?” Anything that Mariam would ask her would only produce a brief response. She could barely register what Mariam was saying.

When they arrived, Adama sat on the edge of her bed. She knew that she should be packing for her trip back home, as she and Mariam were to leave at 2:00 p.m. tomorrow. However, she could not help but ponder who that man was.

Adama did not sleep for a minute that night. As the hours passed by, she felt a sudden yearning to hear the griot’s performance all over again. She continuously tried to close her eyes and force herself to sleep, but her mind was wide awake. She turned over and looked at the clock that sat upon the dresser. 11:46 p.m., it read. Adama looked down at the floor where Mariam was, only to find her fast asleep. She got out of bed and cautiously crept around her cousin.
Reaching for her sweatshirt, the slip of paper fell from underneath it and she picked it up when she realized that she never read its contents. Taking a deep breath, Adama carefully opened the paper. Scrawled in shaky handwriting, the paper read, “Winston Road.” Adama recognized the street name and reminisced on when her and Isatou visited that side of town to purchase a new kora. An image of the store they had gone to flashed across her mind: a grand, ornate shop with dozens of koras, balafons, and akontings covering its walls and floors.

“What could possibly be over there?”

Adama skeptically whispered to herself.

Though she was hesitant to leave the house, she slipped on her shoes and quietly left. The streets had an orange glow to them. Adama saw only a few people scattered across the area that were closing their stores and preparing to go home.

She could feel a wave of fear washing over her, but she did not turn back.

“Winston Road isn’t too far from here,” she thought to herself. “I’ll be safe.” However, she was unsure whether or not she would be safe in the dark night.

Adama spent ten minutes walking from her grandmother’s house to Winston Road, though it felt much longer.

She could only recall 3 buildings that were located in that part of town: the instrument shop that she had thought back to; a produce market; and a motor parts shop. As she continued to walk down the street, she heard a strange noise. It sounded as if someone was plucking the strings of a guitar to produce short bursts of sound. She walked in the direction of the noise, only to find herself in front of the instrument shop. She hadn’t been there in years, and the shop now appeared dilapidated and much smaller than she had pictured it when she was younger.

Adama paused at the corner of the shop where the plucking sound grew louder. Now, the sound went from short and discordant to melodic. She then recognized the music as the sound of a kora. The feelings she had earlier at the griot’s performance resurfaced; she found the music alluring, however, she still had a bitter taste in her mouth. She followed the sound of the music, as she was unable to resist its beautiful melody.

Cautiously, Adama turned the
corner. She saw a cloaked figure sitting against the wall and approached it warily. Before she could come within four feet of the figure, it rose slowly. Adama recoiled nervously, prepared to run back to her grandmother’s house.

“Please don’t hurt me, please don’t hurt me,” Adama repeated under her breath.

The figure extended its hand, to which it revealed a brown, calloused palm. Together, the two walked down an alleyway that led to a large courtyard that Adama had not seen while she was walking in the area. In the middle of the courtyard, a handful of hibiscus flowers rose from the ground. Then, colors of purple, pink, and blue painted the night sky. The same tune that Adama heard at the performance began to play, but the music now sounded as if it surrounded her and was now within her. While Adama tried to figure out what was happening before her eyes, the figure began to take off its cloak. Underneath it was a woman around forty years of age, who had the shiny eyes that Adama saw on the griot and a crooked smile and button nose similar to her own. At that moment, Adama recognized the being as her mother’s spirit. Her mother maintained a straight face as Adama gawked at her. Adama believed that she was hallucinating as her mother stood before her basked in a golden glow.

“Adama,” her mother said, gaining her attention.

“Look up.”

In the night sky, Adama saw a story. A hunter, an antelope, and a lion appeared, the last story she saw her grandmother tell. Seeing it again years later, Adama instantly saw the spark she believed the stories were missing since her mother had passed. She stared into the night sky as it began to play out more stories that she had seen as a young child. She stared in awe of what lay above her. The music accompanying the story began to change, and each new song would start with the sound of a kora, a ngoni, or a khalam. Adama was now immersed in the world of storytelling that she had once adored as a child. She couldn’t take her eyes off the beautiful night sky as the stories persistently changed within the colorful background. Once they were over, Adama looked to her mother’s aged spirit again.

“Adama, you have seen the beauty and the fantasy of the stories of a griot,”
her mother said softly. “I understand that my absence has taken that beauty away from you, but I want for you to be aware that the feeling that you have from these stories--that exhilaration and ecstasy-- is unlike any other. Understand that there is an importance in storytelling for mankind’s culture, traditions, and imagination,” she continued.

Soon thereafter, Adama’s mother’s spirit soared into the sky and disappeared with a click. Adama sat on the ground and could only think about what she just saw. She felt a vibration within her bones and could feel tears emerging from her eyes with a smile spreading across her face. For the first time in thirteen years, Adama felt absolute bliss and felicity.

The sun was beginning to rise over the beach as Adama walked home. During the walk, she reflected on Isatou’s past performances. She looked back in amazement of the work that her grandmother had done; her grandmother’s gift gave its viewers those same feelings of complete happiness. It was a feeling that was unmatched to anything else, one that could never be challenged.

As Adama quietly entered the house, she heard the sounds of traditional instruments while her grandmother played them in the back sitting room. Adama peered into the room and watched eagerly as her grandmother planned her next performance.
Ever since the beginning of time, humans have wondered. Humans have spent hundreds of hours contemplating various philosophies, why we are on the huge rocket planet hurtling through space, and whether or not God cares about our tiny insignificant lives or even if he exists at all. The manifestation of all of this question poses the question: what is the meaning of life?

We do not need to wonder what the meaning of life is, maybe the meaning of life is to wonder.

Scientists may claim that the meaning of life is to unlock as many mysteries of life as humanly possible. They may say that life’s greatest purpose is to enrich your brain with knowledge so that even the most complicated of questions is answerable with facts and logic. But, this too requires wonder. Firstly, the quest for knowledge requires the thirst for knowledge and the desire to dare to question conventional wisdom. The very act of questioning requires the individual to be curious about something. Even the greatest minds of the last century did not underestimate the power of questioning reality itself. Issac Newton once said, “I seem to have been only like a boy playing on the seashore, and diverting myself in now and finding a smoother pebble or a prettier shell than ordinary, whilst the great ocean of truth lay all undiscovered before me.” Newton knew the intrinsic value of wonder while also acknowledging that many discoveries may lie untouched due to our inability to even conjure up the correct questions to ask. Innovation is hindered if scientists do not dare to wonder. It seems like the very purpose of life is to question reality and the circumstances surrounding it.
Existentialism is a philosophy of life that states that the existence of the individual dictates their own development through free will. Therefore, life itself is only what you make of it. Life is not about where you are going, instead it is infinitely more important how you get to the final destination. Søren Kierkegaard, one of the modern-day fathers of existentialism, once stated that, “life is not a problem to be solved, but a reality to be experienced.” Reality cannot be fully experienced without questioning reality itself. Wondering is the innate desire to be curious about the state of reality. Addressing life as a series of rigid problems and solutions, can inhibit an individual’s ability to ponder. However, the ability to question our very existence is a unique human quality. It seems like the purpose of our minuscule lives in this vast universe is to question the very reason we are here at all.

Throughout the centuries, humans have always searched for a purpose to their life. The question of why we are here at all is heavily discussed in various religions. The sole purpose of religion is to find ideals that give life meaning. At the basis of all religions is the inherent need to fit certain societal ideals, and many people find their purpose by fitting in with their peers. The act of group prayers and ritualistic traditional practices brings together groups of people to wonder about the greater meaning of life. In Buddhism, for example, the meaning of existence is to minimize suffering by rejecting the attachment to material possessions. The first Buddha, Prince Siddhartha, reached this conclusion through enlightenment. The Buddha became enlightened by meditating under a Bodhi tree, and he contemplated the experience of living. Finally, after seven weeks of sitting he reached his answer. On the other hand, maybe the purpose of all of our wondering is the sense of foreboding regarding our inevitable death. Nearly all religions have some form of lore regarding life after death. Perhaps it is the inescapable wonder of humanity that spurs our infatuation with our own mortality. Abrahamic religions preach about a form of heaven in the afterlife, while Hinduism and Buddhism teach about the intricacies of reincarnation. Religion itself is humanity’s response to the ongoing search for purpose.

Wonder is a fundamental aspect of humanity’s quest for the meaning of life. Through science, philosophy, and religion humans desperately try to grasp onto some semblance of order to give their minuscule lives significance.

*Wonder may be the most worthwhile action that an individual can perform, and the spirit of wonder has endured through all of time.*
THE BURNING SOLES OF MY FEET

HS POETRY | CALLIE MATTHEWS
Today I sat beneath the sun
and let its teeth sink into my outstretched legs,
my arms tucked beneath my back in shadow.

Today I reached for the endless sky—
fingers outstretched in all of their insatiable greed—
and imagined myself taking off my shoes and
stepping into the sky’s cool
blue body like a pool made for swimming.

Today I watched timid green leaves
bask in a golden sunset,
a school of pink-stained clouds swimming above
my head as I eyed haphazard bumblebees
and imagined a place unknown.

Today I pulled off my shoes,
my socks,
and stepped into the sky—
burning the soles of my feet
unexpectedly
in the melting pool of sun while
searching for a place
I’d never find.
In the Defense of Wonder

MS ESSAY | IZZY SELLERS
It is such a mysterious, curious thing to grasp. Wonder is one of the most important emotions someone can have. And wonder in the sense of being awed or spellbound can lead to wondering about what the revelation means for the future. When you wonder, you feel like you can accomplish anything. Your heart starts beating a little faster than usual. Your eyes become wide and sparkle from within. Your brain starts working and the gears start turning and thinking about anything and everything. But not for everyone, since some people lose that feeling. Too often, the older you get, the less in touch with wonder you become. For you feel like you can’t imagine doing something because you have a family to take care of or you have tons of responsibilities and “can’t risk it right now.” You have the world knocking on your door telling you must go and make money and you can’t have fun. You lose the excitement of life when you don’t wonder.

I have big plans for myself and I’m always wondering about my future. Since I was a little girl, I always had at least one person telling me, “You can’t do that. It may be too much for a girl” or “you need to stay at home and let the men work.” It makes me so infuriated when I hear that. Just because I’m a girl or just because I may not be as tall as you doesn’t mean I can’t be a surgeon or go to work. So, I always wonder what it will be like when I win an award for being the best surgeon. I am always thinking about what will happen if I push the boundaries.
My father has type 2 diabetes and stage 2 heart failure. He and my mom have sacrificed so much just so I can be sitting here today, in this classroom, writing about wonder and trying to make a difference in the world. When my dad was just starting his baking business, he was showing my grandfather the building with all the seemingly countless machines and workers. My grandfather asked, “This is a huge risk Wayne. What if you don’t make it?”

My dad, with his dazzling eyes, looks at him and says, “What if I do make it though? What if I make it?”

My grandfather then admitted he wished he could have pushed the boundaries and taken a risk. My dad is always wondering what he can do for this family and how to make the best possible decisions. When I fear taking a risk, he always tells me this story and says to “go for it.”

Albert Einstein had to push the boundaries and let people think he was crazy before they could see he was a genius. Susan B. Anthony had to wonder, had to push the boundaries so women can vote. To cure cancer, diabetes, world hunger or anything, we first, must wonder. This is the problem with our generation. No one wonders anymore. No one dares to find a better solution. Instead they just go to the internet, search, and hope they find a solution to their problem. If everyone would wonder and take the next farthest step and want to make a difference, not for the fame, but for the better good of Earth, then maybe we would be able to take the next biggest step as humankind. Then the world would not be as cruel. Then we might solve world hunger. Then we could end homelessness. If everyone just tried and wondered, just took one more step, we then would be able to make this place a better home for our family, friends, neighbors, for everyone! This may seem like a crazy idea, but we have to start somewhere. So, I will be the first one to take the next step towards a better place. I wonder though, what if my essay started the next biggest thing just because I entered a writing contest?
I watch as the young boy skips by,
His eyes sparkling and his mind racing
With the fantasies of all the other naive children.

But I am not a child, nor am I naive.

My eyes do not sparkle with imagination,
But instead they are dull and filled with contempt.

Jealousy flows through my body as I watch him,
But deep down, I cannot truly hate him.

I tried to douse the flaming dreams that lived inside of me,
But they never really died.

This childish feeling that people call “wonder”,
Is something I have tried to ignore,
Even today as an old man.

Those kind of foolish fascinations
Are for the unsophisticated. Right?

But it still makes me think,
Why should you try to grow up so fast,
If it makes you unhappy?

Maybe, just maybe, I was meant to
Take the opportunity of imagination.

But I did not.

So here I am, old and sad,
Envying the boy who did.
MIDNIGHT
BY THE
Pearl

HS SHORT STORY | LAUREN STAMPS
There was something special about living so close to the Pearl River—something that I couldn’t quite describe to someone without sounding like I had lost every last piece of glass from the broken marbles in my head. The moss hanging from the oak trees dangled over the running water like God’s hands resting their fingertips in the stream of their own creation, and the spider lilies sprung up every autumn without fail, sucking the water from the river like a youngin’ guzzling down a soda pop. Chirping frogs, crickets playing their bodies like violins, and the soothing sounds of the rushing water pulling itself over the jagged, red rocks could coax anyone into a beautiful slumber.

And that’s how it was most nights—being welcomed by the branches’ waving shadows from my window into bed with my husband, who usually arrived drunk as a skunk before the nighttime Mississippi ambiance pulled him into a deep sleep, much like a pine tree needle being carried gently by the river that he oh so adored. We would wake up in the early mornings to the songs of bluebirds and chickadees, tweeting happily as they flew in and out of their nests, twirling around in the humid air. I was always told I was like a child who never grew old, and now I had a child of my own growing inside me, waiting to hear the same chirps and see the same glistening river I did every morning.

I liked to view myself as one of those birds, gliding every which way, living each hour like it was my last, and feeling every emotion that came to my mind as strongly as I could. So when the other side of my bed grew cold and empty for longer every night, my heart grew hot and beat faster than the second hand on the birch clock hanging from the peeling cabin walls. It wasn’t until I’d hear the creak of the front door my heart would simmer down. The missing warmth and weight of the bed reappeared along with a deep sigh from the man I loved.

“You’re home late again,” I muttered, my face still buried in a feather pillow.

“I know, Dove,” He groaned as he buried himself in the blankets, “won’t happen again.”

“That’s what ya’ said last time.”

“I know, Dove.”

My fingers fiddled under the covers until I found his. After wrapping them around one another, I moved a caring thumb up and down the base of his palm. Sighing with contentment, he pulled me closer and brought his forehead to my collarbone.
While the mattress springs croaked like the frogs outside, I closed my eyes.

“This isn’t going to make up for it, mister,” I said, giving a smile he couldn’t see.

“How about you an’ I head down to the ice cream parlor tomorrow evenin’?” He responded with a chuckle.

“We have a few spare nickels ‘round this place somewhere, right?”

“Probably so.” I sighed.

“That’s my girl.” He whispered, giving me a quick peck on the cheek as I drifted to sleep, the anxiety seeping away slowly along with the sounds of the rushing water.

“That’s my Dove.”
When I hear the word “wondrous”, I immediately think of caves. To me, there are many wonders in the world. Sure, the technical wonders of the world are famous monuments and statues, but I have other wonders in the world. The planet Earth is full of wonder and is very interesting. There are many things I would like to explore as an adult. When I was a little kid, I dreamed about exploring caves, and I still do. There’s something about the darkness and the unknown that fascinates me.

Sea caves and land caves are the two main types of caves that are wondrous to me. The sea cave is an amazing and wondrous thing to explore. You never really know the mysteries of what are inside. The pictures and videos I’ve seen of people exploring sea caves were unimaginable. It was one of the most wondrous and beautiful things I’ve ever seen. I also love to learn about what creatures lie inside the caves, waiting to be found. While sea cave diving is dangerous, it is very worth it.

Land caves pique my interest more. They seem more fascinating too me. I’ve always wanted to go spelunking. Spelunking means exploring caves. I want to know what the caves have in them, and what they were possibly used for.

Spelunking is very dangerous. Many people have died after getting stuck in a crevice or just falling in a cave. It is one of the most dangerous sports in the world, but it also comes with a wondrous and beautiful reward. You get to see so many pretty things in the caves, including crystals, creatures, and different kinds of rocks. Often people see massive crystals growing in caves. They are wondrous. Sometimes the crystals can be 300-400 feet long! One thing you must remember is, if one crystal is loose and you step on it that could cause a chain reaction and a lot of other crystals could fall too. There are many types of creatures in land caves, including bats, different fish and crayfish if there is a body of water in the cave, salamanders and many more creatures. I believe that if we dive deeper into caves, we can find new species of animals and things we never knew existed.
THE INTRINSIC VALUE OF Wonder

HS ESSAY | CAYLEIGH GARRARD
Through the institution of the ideological conception of wonder, this mental process retains its integrality in the developmental understanding of both the internal and external worlds. Wonder has greatly influenced the modernized advancement and technologies through which we contribute most of our industrialized nations. Wonder has greatly impacted the modes of expression and progressive dialogue through which we institute profound, interpersonal relationships. Wonder has greatly informed the mechanics of the world-defining scientific theories and revelations, yet, simultaneously, governs evocative discussion regarding governmental and political views. Wonderment is an innate, perpetual desire that is preserved within varying forms of existence. It is a force that is found amongst each living being—incessantly driving the everyday thoughts, actions, behaviors, and beliefs of the ubiquitous compulsions of the human mind as well as the interactions within the tangible world. Through greater exploration of mankind’s inquisitions, the world will progress further into a societal sphere that encourages the power and resourcefulness of the desire of knowledge through the pursuit of curiosity.

**To wonder is to live.**

If the world was one in which true wonder ceased to exist, the entirety of the present civilization would turn constitutionally sedate. The ability to wonder has prompted the discoveries of the greatest curiosities of the mind and earth; it has stimulated conversation and discourse that has sanctioned intrinsic enlightenment. The vast developmental success, brought upon by wondering, underscores it as irrefutably consequential in a functioning, adaptable, and a liberal populace. Thus, without the implementation of wonder, society would become an expansive citizenry dominated by passivity and invariability. In this society, deprived of wonder, there would be little innovation, observation, and ingenuity. A world devoid of the functioning to pursue one’s own natural curiosities would lead to unrest of the masses. Wonder is a part of our congenital makeup; without wonder, there would be no earthly progression, technological progression, or cultural progression. This society would only serve as a semblance of the present reality of the world, maintaining a superficiality in the representation of false depth and dynamism.

Thus, the ability to exercise one’s wonder acts as a fundamental part of the world in which we live today.

It is through present activation of the mind, to explore the depths of its own distinctive curiosities, that possibilities and imaginations, once thought intangible, become actuality. Thereby, through the mind’s inborn desire to understand and perceive information, communities separated by differences are enabled to listen to one another and gather understanding, researchers are enabled to explore the great profundity of the earth and grasp issues such as climate change and global warming, and technology
moguls are enabled to express their conjured ideas of the most efficient technologies through pocket-sized computers and self-driving cars. Wonder allows the progression of a nation, and it is found at the very core amongst every being. It leads the world into realities that were once deemed impossible, while, simultaneously, meeting those once impossibilities with even greater magnitude. Through pursuit of one’s natural inquisitions, there will be an endless reach towards learning, understanding, and improving. This internalized growth is then further projected outwards through relationship development, professional development, and as an overall development in the way in which one views and approaches the world.

While the ability to wonder is found amongst everyone, much of society fails to utilize or even acknowledge this process. In failure to enact wonderment, one will maintain a present reality that does not fully reach enrichment and or true flourishment in contribution to society. Thereby, it is of foremost essentialism that the world as a whole begins actively cultivating wonder. To effectively begin this implementation, it is important to immerse oneself in true points of interest and passion. Through greater practice of pursuing self-desires, one is enabling the furtherance of achieved curiosity and intended knowledge. This seeking supplements one of the most substantial facets of attaining true wonder - the habitual practice of questing for pure apprehension. Hence, learning is a key component of wonder. It is through the incessant desire of knowledge, that one furthers their innate curiosity and overall redefines their specific sense of wonder. This enhancement serves as an invaluable investment.

The celebration of pursuing desires through wonder will spur an extensive, developmental transformation that will alter and further improve the lives of a given population.

It is indisputable that the capacity to wonder is found within the living beings of nations alike and different. The deeply-rooted, intrinsic importance of wonderment accelerates the development of the world encompassed by the brain as well as within the physicality with which exists independent of the mind. Wonderment has elicited the progression and continuation of the pursuit of knowledge through exploratory means. When there is commemoration of wonder, the world shifts from one in which praises stagnancy to one in which adorns advancement, reconstruction, and interminable development. Through the prioritization of celebrating the mind’s desire to seek curiosity, the world will meet the ceaseless broadening of growth through continuous acquisition of experienced knowledge.
Henry sat down in the cold, white waiting room. He hated waiting, especially in hospitals.

Suddenly, Henry felt aggressive tapping on his knee. He looked up from his magazine to find a blonde-haired boy, no older than seven, staring at him with bright, round eyes.

“May I help you?” Henry asked, clearly annoyed.

The boy inched closer to Henry, leaning over the single empty seat between them. “I just wanted to say I think your hat is funny.”

“Excuse me?”

The boy looked at Henry puzzled. After a few seconds, the boy’s face flooded with realization, and he shouted very slowly, “YOUR. HAT. IS. FUNNY.”

Henry scoffed. “First of all, you don’t need to speak like I am some old man who can’t hear--”

“But you are an old man.”

Henry’s jaw dropped. He was shocked the little twerp had the guts to insult him so blatantly. Despite this, Henry decided to let it go. There was no use in arguing with a seven-year-old. He took a deep breath and went back to reading the landscaping magazine.

Click. Click. Click. Henry desperately tried to ignore the noise.

Click. Click. Click. Henry diligently focused on reading each word on the page.

Click. Click. Click. Henry couldn’t stand it a moment longer.

In a burst of anger, he slammed the magazine on the table and glared at the boy. “What on earth are you doing?”

The boy stopped clicking the pen. “I dunno.”

“Well please stop. It’s very distracting.”

The boy shrugged his shoulders and placed the pen on the coffee table in front of them. He then started twiddling his thumbs. Henry looked over at the bored boy. No matter how much he didn’t want to, he couldn’t help but sympathize. He took another deep breath and decided to try a different approach.

“So, what brings you to the hospital so late?”

“I’m getting a little sister.”

“That’s exciting.”

“Not really. I wanted a brother instead.” The boy crossed his arms and pouted.

Henry smiled. “You know when I was your age, I didn’t want a sister either, but she ended up being my best friend.”
“Really?”

Henry chuckled. “Yes, really.”

“But what did you guys do together? I thought girls only liked makeup and dolls.”

“You are quite mistaken, young man. Girls like all sorts of toys and games. In fact, my sister was the one always begging me to go to the park and play capture the flag.”

“Wow! Your sister seems really cool!” The young boy exclaimed, “I sure hope my sister is like that.”

As Henry was just about to remark on his relationship with his sister, a blonde-haired man walked up to the young boy.

The man knelt down to meet the boy’s eyes, and asked, “Ready to meet your new sister, Ronan?”

Ronan glanced at Henry for reassurance. Henry gave him a thumbs up and smiled softly. Ronan smiled back, grabbed his dad’s hand, and walked out of the waiting room. Henry was left alone, listening to the faint hum of the lights above. Before too long passed, he snapped out of his brooding, picked up the landscaping magazine, and began to read again. About thirty minutes went by until a nurse walked in.

“Are you Victoria Williams’ brother?” the nurse asked Henry.

Henry furrowed his eyebrows and stood up, “Yes? Is something wrong?”

“She asked me to come get you.” the nurse rested her hand on Henry’s shoulder, “Her treatment just isn’t working. There isn’t anything else we can do.”

The words crushed Henry’s heart, but he managed to nod his head and follow the nurse into his sister’s room. Victoria was lying peacefully in her bed with long tubes and beeping machines surrounding her.

“The machine is still beeping, that’s gotta be a good thing.” Victoria joked.

“I’ll leave you two alone,” the nurse said.

Victoria sat up in her bed, “Tough crowd.”

Henry sat down. “You know, you don’t always have to joke about these things, Vicky.”

Vicky fiddled with her hospital bracelet, “Yeah, I know. I just wanted to lighten the mood.”

Henry interlaced his hand with Vicky’s. Vicky looked up at Henry. His lip began to quiver as he stared down at their hands.

“You’re the only person I have left, Vicky. I don’t know what I’m going to do without you.”

Vicky squeezed Henry’s hand, “Don’t talk like that Henry. You’re gonna be just fine.”

Henry went home that night devastated. Vicky had been his best
“Henry with peonies, your order is ready!”
friend since the time she was born. She was his rock: she made him laugh when he left like he couldn’t; she brought him food when he didn’t feel like he deserved eating; she even lifted him up when he went through his divorce. Henry was nothing but a distant loner without her. What was he going to do without her?

The next day, Henry decided to pick up peonies for Vicky at the local flower shop. Henry wanted to order online to avoid unnecessary social contact, but he couldn’t figure out how to work the darn app; so he ended up going in person. As soon as Henry walked in, he was engulfed in the aroma of a thousand different flowers. It took him so off guard that he almost lost his balance. Nonetheless, he entered the building and began his search. As Henry was scanning the flowers, he noticed a small, blonde boy in the distance. Henry rubbed his eyes to make sure he wasn’t imagining things. The boy was still there. Before Henry had a chance to sneak out of there, he heard the boy calling after him. Henry winced as he turned around.

“Hey! You’re the old guy I met at the hospital!”

Henry scoffed, “Would you please stop calling me--”

“I recognized you from your silly hat.”

“Stop calling my hat sill--”

“So, who are you buying flowers for,” Ronan winked, “I didn’t know you had a crush!”

“No, no, no. It’s not like that at all, I--”

Ronan interrupted again, “Hey, I just remembered I don’t even know your name!”

Henry rubbed the bridge of his nose. He could not believe he had to deal with this boy two days in a row.

Ronan waved his arms at Henry. “Hello? What’s your name?”

Henry inhaled harshly, “It’s Peter.”

“That’s a nice name,” Ronan remarked.

Suddenly a bell rang at the check-out line. “Online order for Henry! Henry with the peonies!” the man from the desk shouted.

The store was completely empty excluding Henry, Ronan, the cashier, and a few old ladies. Henry couldn’t decide if he should speak up or not. He glanced at Ronan, then at the cashier. Ronan, cashier, Ronan, cashier. Ronan stared at Henry as if he were crazy.

“Henry with peonies, your order is ready!” the cashier called out once more.

Henry groaned and walked up to the cashier. Ronan gasped and ran up to Henry.

“Peter, you do know they said H-E-N-R-Y, not Peter? I know you have bad hearing and all, but I thought you would at least be able to hear that.” Ronan said as he tugged on Henry’s shirt.
The cashier looked at Henry in confusion. “So you aren’t Henry? You’re Peter?”

“No, I’m Henry.”

“But my nephew just said your name is Peter.”

Henry glared down at Ronan. “It’s - it’s a long story, but I swear my name is Henry,” he pleaded, “I’ll get out my driver’s license to prove it to you.”

Henry whipped out his driver’s license from his wallet and showed it to the cashier. The cashier shrugged his shoulders and handed Henry the flowers. Henry turned around to find Ronan standing right in front of him, looking up innocently.

“But if your name is Henry, why did you tell me it was Peter?”

Henry couldn’t help but fall for the child’s puppy-like eyes. He bit his lip and glanced around the room, searching for an excuse among the vibrant flowers. He felt the poor boy’s eyes watching him.

Henry exhaled in defeat, and he finally looked down at the boy. “I lied to you because I was annoyed with you. I’m sorry Ronan.”

“But I- I was just trying to be nice!”

“I know! I’m truly sorry Ronan. It wasn’t your fault.”

Ronan’s chin trembled as he sucked in a sob. Henry stepped closer, causing Ronan to run away, crying to his uncle.

Although Henry felt pity, he didn’t feel it enough to wait around and see what Ronan’s uncle had to say. Henry scurried out of the building like a mouse avoiding a cat. When Henry got home, he flopped onto his creaky bed. He felt horrible for making a seven-year-old boy cry. In all his years, he had never done something this heartless. Henry stuffed his face in his pillow and groaned. The next day would be better. He would make sure of it.

The following morning, Henry arrived at the hospital to visit his sister, flowers in hand. At least yesterday’s trip hadn’t been a complete waste of time: the peonies were breath-taking. He knew Vicky would love them. Henry softly knocked on Vicky’s door and walked in.

“Rise and shine Vicky, I have a gift for you.”

“Henry!” Vicky pushed the button to make her hospital bed sit up, “Are those flowers for me?”

“Why yes they are,” Henry handed her the flowers.

Vicky sniffed the peonies. “Thank God, you got the nice smelling ones.” Suddenly, Vicky’s phone buzzed.

“Someone’s miss popular.” Henry joked.

Vicky gasped as she read the text. “Oh my gosh! I completely forgot about Beethoven! You need to take care of him for me, Henry.”
“Beethoven? That big, slobbery dog you named after a movie?”

“What? It’s a good movie.” Vicky laughed before having a coughing fit.

Henry rushed out of his seat to help. Vicky waved her hand in dismissal as she coughed.

“I don’t need you babying me just because I’m about to die.” Vicky hoarsely sassed.

Henry looked at his shoes. “I’ll take care of Beethoven.”

Vicky’s voice returned to normal. “You will?”

“Stop acting so shocked Vicky. Of course, I will.”

“Make sure to take him on a walk every day. Saint Bernards need a lot of exercise. Plus, it’ll be good for you to get out of the house.”

“Not if I run into that boy Ronan again.”

“Who’s that?” His sister questioned.

Henry explained how he met Ronan and how he had made Ronan upset. His sister shook her head in disapproval.

“You seriously made a seven-year-old boy cry?”

“Yep. I mean he did interrupt me like three times.”

Vicky gave Henry the death-stare, then jabbed her finger at him. “Promise me if you see him again, you’ll be kind.”

Henry groaned like a child losing an argument. “Fine. I promise.” Henry saw no harm in accepting the promise. What were the chances of him seeing Ronan a third time?

“Now go take care of my dog.”

Henry left the hospital, bought some dog necessities, and picked up Beethoven from Vicky’s house. He then clipped the leash onto Beethoven.

“Ready for a walk?” Henry exclaimed.

The dog lay down on the ground in response, drooling all over the floor.

Oh boy, Henry thought. With much effort, Henry eventually got Beethoven to the park. The warm sun, slight breeze, and gentle sway of the trees made Henry glad he came. As Henry began his walk with the stubborn dog, he noticed two blonde figures playing catch in the distance.

No, it can’t be. Henry refused to believe he had coincidentally gone to the same place at the same time as the boy three days straight. He debated whether or not he should find a new park, but in the back of his head, he knew he couldn’t break his promise to his sister. Henry sighed and continued walking towards the boy. He scratched his head wondering how he could make up for what he did yesterday. Ding! A light bulb went off in Henry’s head! He knew what to do. Henry
dragged Beethoven around the park, scavenging for any materials he could find. Beethoven suddenly came to a halt, almost pulling Henry down with him.

“What now Beethoven?” Henry whined.

Beethoven turned around and began following a scent. Henry shrugged his shoulders and followed along. Eventually, Beethoven arrived at a bench and lay down under it. Henry sat down as well.

He stuck his head under the bench “Seriously? You were looking for a place to nap?”

Then, Henry caught a glimpse of a red piece of fabric near the dog. He picked it up and sat up in his seat.

“This is perfect!” Henry beamed.

He ripped the fabric in half, tied each to a stick, and headed towards Ronan.

“Hey, Ronan! I have something for you,” Henry called out.

Ronan turned around and raced towards Henry. Henry didn’t know if he was coming in anger or friendship so he prepared himself for impact. Ronan flew right past Henry and plopped down next to Beethoven.

“Your dog is so cute!” Ronan exclaimed while flopping the dog’s ears.

Henry stumbled on his words, not knowing whether or not he should tell the boy how it was technically his sister’s dog. “Oh, erm, thank you.”

“Oh!” Ronan stood up, “You should meet my sister!”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to intrude on your--”

“Everyone say hi to Henry!” Ronan giggled, “Or should I say ‘Peter’.”

Henry’s face grew red.

Ronan giggled, “It’s ok Henry. Don’t feel bad. Sometimes old people are just mean.”

Henry’s face grew tomato-red.

“Time to meet my sister!” Ronan said as he pointed at his sister in his mother’s arms.

“Wow,” Henry glanced back at Ronan, “She’s a lot cuter than you.”

Ronan playfully elbowed Henry in response. They both chuckled.

“Anyways, what were you going to tell me?”

Henry pulled out his two sticks.

“Nice... sticks?

“They aren’t just sticks Ronan. These are flags so you can play capture the flag with your sister like I did with my sister.”

“Cool! We should play right now!”

“I don’t know about that Ronan. My
back isn’t what it--”

“You’re the one always telling me you aren’t an old man. Why don’t you prove it to me?” Ronan taunted.

“Oh, it’s on little boy.”

Henry spent the rest of the day with Ronan’s family playing capture the flag, feeding the ducks, and chasing around Beethoven. Henry couldn’t remember the last time he had a day that exciting. When it was time to leave, Henry said his goodbyes to Ronan.

“Promise me we’ll have another play date?” Ronan asked with his pleading, puppy eyes.

Henry rolled his eyes. “Promise.”

Henry waved goodbye at his new friends and took Beethoven home. The following day, Henry arrived at the hospital to tell Vicky all about his day. Henry once again knocked softly on her door. She was sound asleep when he walked in, so he kept his voice to a whisper.

“Hey Vicky,” he gently shook her arm, “Time to wake up. It’s almost one in the afternoon.”

Vicky slowly opened her eyes and grinned at the sight of her brother.

“Hey Henry. What’s up?” She yawned.

“Actually, a lot,” Henry began.

Henry proceeded to explain everything he did yesterday with bright eyes and passion in his voice. Vicky smiled.

“I just wish it didn’t take me dying for you to remember how to live,” Vicky said bittersweetly as she squeezed her brother’s hand.

Henry let out a teary-eyed laugh.

“You already kept one of my promises, ready for another?”

“I guess.”

“Promise me you’ll treat every day like you did today, with kindness.”

“I promise.” Henry embraced his sister the best he could without getting tangled in her tubes.

“I love you, sis.”

“I love you too.”

As Henry left the hospital, he noticed his reflection in a mirror. It made him stop in his tracks. He lifted his newsboy, leather hat and stared at it. He smiled to himself. His hat did look pretty funny.