

## Disordered

Holden, my six-year-old son, stirs in bed. I hear a thump on the wall, bits of a song: “Sunshine, lollipops, and rainbows, everything...”

I walk into his dark room. “Morning, Sugar. You hungry?”

“You hungry?” He matches my intonation. Flipping over, he smiles and pushes off his comforter. I plop down on the bed and wrap my arms around him.

“What do you want for breakfast?”

“Want for breakfast,” he returns. I pull away a bit, looking him in the eyes.

“Break-fast?” I say.

“Yes!” Holden punches the air and breaks out of my arms.

“Omelet or pancakes?” I walk toward the door.

“Pancakes.” He pauses. “I don’t like pancakes.”

“Omelet?” I look for recognition in his eyes, for understanding.

“Omelet!”

“Okay,” I say, my voice trailing down the hallway.

“Mom! I’m hungry *now!*” He follows me. “I want pancakes.”

I’m six years old and already a language teacher. I chase my new classmate from Laos across the playground, zigzagging between groups of plaid-clad girls skipping rope. I grasp his coat. This is the game: I trap him until he says a word in English. But which one? A jet soars overhead in the blue sky. I point to it. “Airplane,” I say. Was he perplexed? Annoyed? Concentrating? Scared? I recall the deep shine of his hair: fine, straight, black. “Airplane,” he says. I let go.

In 1957, Landau and Kleffner studied a rare loss of language in children with epilepsy. They suggested that persistent convulsive discharges in brain tissue

largely concerned with language communication result in the functional ablation of these areas. Neurologists think interictal EEG abnormalities in Landau-Kleffner Syndrome underlie a disturbance in cerebral integration or the loss of the ability to process complex auditory signals.

Upon diagnosis, each of my closest friends points out the irony: the child of a poet loses language. I try to wrap my brain around it.

To hear and yet not understand.

“Teşekkür ederim,” says the man queued in front of me at the Turkish Airlines counter.

“Tesh...tesh...” The word I imagine needing most while living in Turkey for the next two years is the longest word I’ve ever heard, and it only means “thank you.” My confidence plummets. Six months ago I donned a cap and gown and wondered what the exact translation of *summa cum laude* meant under my name and degree, “Bachelor of Arts.” I feel defeated before I ever step off the plane, walk into a market, or enter my own classroom.

“E-kür,” he encourages.

“E,” I parrot. The sound feels like a burst of hot air in the back of my throat. “Koooor.” I draw out the round vowel, copying his intonation.

“E-der-im,” he says. Each syllable gets equal play, equal enunciation.

“E-der-im,” I repeat. He claps my shoulder with his open palm. His daughter and wife look proud. The first of my many linguistic successes, I imagine.

A few weeks before first grade starts, Holden’s a pinball rocketing from bumper to bumper, room to room. In his bedroom, he throws over his Guy Bin, Lego Bin, Block Bin, and Train Bin. Batman and Iron Man drown in a mound of Legos; a pile of wooden cubes covers a caboose. In my room, he scoops up a handful of necklaces and throws them against the wall. Beads scatter, a few rolling under the bed. I unleash threats, and magnets on his positive behavior chart disappear one by one. A scene from Helen Keller’s biography pops into my mind: Helen roams the kitchen snatching sausages from her family’s breakfast plates. *Wild, crazy, wrong*, I think. On one course through the kitchen, he grabs a canister of sugar from the

pantry and dumps it onto the living room rug. I have one logical strategy left: removal.

“Time out,” I say, dragging a barstool into the middle of the kitchen and pointing to it.

“Hmmp!” Holden says.

“Now.” My voice is firm, calm.

“No,” he replies, kicking the pile of sugar. Crystals fly through the air and land on the couch, television, piano. I feel the first flush of anger ripple through my body, and the muscles of my arms tense.

I pick him up. His body stiffens, arms at his side, legs straight. I lug him over to the chair but can’t get him to sit.

“Fine. Bedtime. Go to your room.” I half pick up, half push him toward his door.

“No!” he screams. “No! No!” He mutters a stream of garbled sound. I hear the word pajamas. I fish out some navy blue shorts with white sharks from his dresser. “Nuh-huh.” He shakes his head back and forth. Anger settles in my stomach. As I peel off his shorts and t-shirt, he throws himself on the bed. I wave the pajamas in front of him and he runs, naked, into the dining room.

“Why are you doing this? I don’t understand,” I say. The pressure of my breath tightens my chest. I have no words for his destruction, his intensity. I can’t yet piece together these odd, erratic symptoms.

Holden backs up into the corner. My body looms over him, arms planted across my chest. “Why don’t you just get dressed?” I screech.

He yells. I yell back, and it feels good. When I stop, he looks up at me and blinks. Then he aims his penis at the open spot between his legs and urinates.

For two seconds, I’m stunned. The puddle grows. I try to reconcile what I’m seeing to the sweet boy I know, the one who helps his hurt friend on the playground, the one who says “please” and “thank you,” the one who dispenses hugs like sneezes—free and compulsive and strong.

“STOP!” explodes from my mouth. He doesn’t. *Wild, crazy, wrong.*

I grab his arm and turn him around, smacking his butt with my open hand. A faint red outline of my hand appears.

Tears, shocked to the surface, run down both our faces.

Madame Dubois marches across the kitchen and snatches the letter from my hand. I've spent three weeks in her care as an exchange student, hardly enough time for a seventeen-year-old to speak fluent French, and now she hurls it at me. The scene transforms the language I studied from worksheets and films—the language of cream pastries and stained-glass windows—into a frenzy of gauze. Her fingers scissor the air, tips pointed my direction. Wasn't the letter on the kitchen table junk mail? “Non, non, non!” Punches of sound. “Non, non!” The round ends in pressed silence. *Je regrette.* I manage. *Je regrette.*

In LKS, expressive deficits include reduced syntactic complexity, telegraphic speech, word-finding deficits, jargon, neologisms, paraphasias, perseveration, echolalic speech, and mutism. Articulation deficits, apraxia, and voice disorders also have been reported. If aphasia exists for more than two years, complete linguistic recovery is rare.

To know and yet not speak.

“Have you come across Landau-Kleffner Syndrome in your research?” Dr. Jones asks. He cocks his head to the side, and I watch his crystal blue eyes scan the Pediatric Epilepsy Unit and zoom in on Holden, who is missing his fourth week of first grade to be here. My heart tightens as a calendar opens in my mind: eighteen months since I learned Holden's epilepsy entailed more than just obvious seizures; twelve months since I began to distrust his first neurologist's treatment plan; six months since I asked our family doctor for a referral to a proper specialist; three months of searching websites, skimming discussion boards, and slogging through medical articles. I tried to see my son in the jargon, in the matrices of symptoms, in the litanies of medications and side effects. *Wild, crazy, wrong*, I'd thought.

“Yes, I did. But I don't remember much about it,” I say. “It was one of the scary ones.” A flush of shame rises in my cheeks. Dr. Jones turns back to me and takes a deep breath. He does that a lot, a habit I interpret as weighing his words for balance, persuasion.

“Well, the EEG will tell us for sure,” he says. “We'll talk more about it then.”

Two hours later, I find a description of LKS on a website. I say “aphasia” and “agnosia” aloud, as if hearing them will reveal their meaning.

Perched on the stool, Holden pulls his iPad across the counter. One hand slides through his dark-brown hair, tufts standing straight up. The other hand dances across the screen. His eyes dart back and forth as he drags his fingertip down on the slingshot and launches a bird; mid-way across the screen, he touches its yellow chest and it explodes into three smaller birds that sail toward the stacks of green pig faces.

Flocks of syllables enter his perfect ear and activate hammer, anvil, and stirrup. They become absorbed by cilia and then—splat! Words fly. Some hit their targets in his brain’s language center, and walls waver, collapse; some soar way over the intended targets until they disappear altogether, lost.

In Istanbul’s Grand Bazaar, Turkish swells in my ear. “El,” “li,” “lar,” and “lu,” the soft “sh” and occasional “z” create a kaleidoscope of sound that turns the spinning world around me into mystery. Occasionally, I hear “Yes, ma’am,” or “For Sale,” or “Hello! Welcome! Hello!” in a slurry of syllables. When my group disappears in these capillaries of paths, the men who speak English phrases curb my panic. Among work-shirted salesmen and boys hawking tea, I wander this maze of jewelry shops and clothing kiosks, carpet stores and hookah boutiques, trying to ask one question: “How do I get to the ferry platform?” Later, I’ll understand their reactions: a smile, a slight head tilt, a furrowed brow—the strain of piecing words together.

When Holden’s exhausted from the work of understanding or the work of finding words or the work of regulating the cocktail of medications he pops into his mouth twice a day, he weeps. His eyes glaze and focus on a window, book, or screen—anywhere but me. His lids relax. His bottom lip pushes out. His fist rubs out tears. And he cries a long time, sometimes the length of a grocery shopping trip or the length of a shower or the length of a meal of cheese quesadillas and applesauce.

With LKS, Holden's utterances seem like code.

"I want to play mini-ninjas," Holden says, walking out of the bathroom with his jeans around his ankles. I can hear the toilet flushing behind him.

"I want to play mini-ninjas," he says again.

"Pull up—"

"I want to play mini-ninjas." He pulls up his pants. I follow him around the corner. "I want to play mini-ninjas." He sits on the couch and looks around the living room. "I want to play mini-ninjas."

"We don't have that—"

"Mom, I want to play mini-ninjas!" I quick-list and associate: game, play, ninja-game, swords, a video game/any video game, dress-up with ninja costume, Bonzai Blade on iPad, ninja game he plays at his father's house, go to his father's house, see his father, read *Yoshi's Feast* because one character looks like a ninja. Holden wants something. My attention?

He grabs *Green Eggs and Ham* off the floor and opens it. "I want to play mini-ninjas. I want to play mini-ninjas. Oh. Sam I am, that Sam I Am, I do not like green eggs and ham..." He flips through the book. No more ninjas.

"Beş," says Mrs. Bora. She holds up five fingers. On the train from Mersin to Tarsus, we toss Turkish and English between us and stories spin out from our words. Kids run down the crowded aisles dodging the legs of their dressed-up parents, squeals bouncing off the windows. Sometimes they stop near me and stare, the blonde *yabancı* in a short-sleeved shirt.

When words fail, we improvise with our hands.

"Five children," says Pinar, her teenaged daughter, keeping her spot in the dictionary with her finger. "Three brothers." She wears her hair loose; Mrs. Bora, in her early sixties, wears a gauzy headscarf with flowered fringes.

"Mustafa. Aydın," Mrs. Bora says, smiling. Then, she puts her hands together and rests her cheek on them, closing her eyes. "Ali..." She whispers. Her face softens.

"My brother," Pinar says. Her eyes look down when I catch them. She shows me the word "melek." Angel. I connect. Ali is asleep. Ali is an angel. Ali, the third brother, died.

I take Mrs. Bora's hands in mine and hold them. For a moment I'm convinced that words are superfluous.

"Screw Holland!" I say, clicking the document closed. Emily Perl Kingsley concludes her famous piece where she compares the "change of plans" that parents must make when they learn they will raise a disabled child to planning a trip to Italy and landing, unexpectedly, in Holland: "If you spend your life mourning the fact that you didn't get to Italy, you may never be free to enjoy the very special, the very lovely things...about Holland."

Even though she's right, with LKS I arrive in Japan one morning, the next Papua New Guinea. When I think I'm going to Montréal, I wind up in Bangladesh. Sometimes the day starts sipping espresso near the Eiffel Tower and ends on the streets of Bagdad. It'll happen. I'll land somewhere new and won't speak the language. At least Italy and Holland have a similar climate. Just tell me, I beg you, what to pack for this trip.

Continuously abnormal discharges during sleep may also interfere with memory consolidation, and because they occur during a critical time of brain development, they may result in defective synaptogenesis and thalamocortical circuit formation. The potential impact of the persistent interictal discharges on brain plasticity is proposed as a mechanism for the resulting neuropsychologic impairment. Poor daytime alertness due to sleep fragmentation may contribute to the neuropsychologic deficits.

To sleep and yet not renew.

Exhausted from the work of pleasing his teachers or picking up his room or shampooing his hair, Holden sleeps. Tonight, his hands are folded between his cheek and the pillow. Oval, his brown teddy bear, hugs Holden's chin. My son's lips are full, bow-shaped. His rounded nose extends up, flattens out between his bushy eyebrows. I can see the veins in his eyelids, the double rows of lashes curled.

At first, I imagine the spike and waves affecting the language center of his brain as blizzards, flash floods, sandstorms. Chaotic spasms of nature. But now I turn that part of his brain into a warehouse of workers, and the cells

don't sit at their desks in front of computer screens. It's a rave: a frenzy of lasers and liquid punk, tribal beats, neon shirts, glow sticks, vitamin-x tabs tucked under tongues. Find interpretive surfaces in waking life. In aphasia-house parties, dervish-cells spin off ecstatic. Not wild. Not crazy. Not wrong. They're ready for rapture, even if it destroys them.

Incrementally, I'm learning and relearning. Kids queue at the end of Mrs. Stadler's first-grade line on the playground, wiggling under the weight of their Hello Kitty and Spider-Man backpacks. The line leader signals. Two of the six classes stream through the doors, one on the left and one on the right. Once through the double doors, the two lines split; Holden turns the wrong direction. Lily with the Sunshine Hair—what Holden called her before he learned her last name—wraps her arm around his backpack. And now, this girl whom Holden declared his love to in Kindergarten, smiles and steers him toward their classroom in happy silence.